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Reaching out from the archive: minority history and academic method

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At a seminar convened in November 2004 by the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB, now the Arts and Humanities Research Council) on 'Diaspora, Migration and Identities', Tariq Modood, Professor of Sociology, Politics and Public Policy at the University of Bristol, spoke of the need for more historical work to be done on ethnic minorities in Britain. (1) This was heartening to hear from a social theorist not only because of my longstanding interest in this field, (2) but also because Dr Peter Fleming and I are about start a lottery-funded project on the history of immigrants and ethnic minorities in Bristol over the past thousand years. (3)

This paper considers some of the challenges faced by historians when attempting to research the history of ethnic minority communities in Britain. First, what do we mean by 'ethnicity' in this regard? And exactly what 'communities' are we studying? Second, what are some of the tensions and political sensitivities inherent in investigating the history of ethnic minorities? Third, whose history is it anyway? In other words, what is the proper relationship between the academic world and the peoples whose history is to be investigated? And finally, how might such work inform the public understanding of the past? Some of the following reflections are based on my museum and website work on related issues over the past eight years (4) and some are derived from my involvement with two community history projects which have been partly sponsored by the School of History at the University of the West of England, Bristol. Throughout this talk I will argue for an eclectic methodological approach. At times historians need the insights from anthropology, sociology and cultural studies to enable them better to navigate the murky waters between social inclusiveness and academic rigour.

Regarding the question of 'ethnicity', I do not have time to delve deeply into the difficulties of defining 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic minorities', but a few points need to be made before we proceed further. Historians would do well to heed the sociologist Steve Fenton's reminder that one cannot have ethnic minorities without an ethnic majority (5); the two are in constant interaction and neither can be understood in isolation from the other. It is worth noting in this connection that the word 'ethnic' is historically rooted in theological divisions between Christians and 'heathens' a point whose relevance may have taken on a new life after 9/11. (6)

But what of 'ethnic groups' themselves? How are they to be identified and delineated? The broad scholarly consensus in anthropology these days is that ethnic identity is itself a porous, historically constructed concept which rests less on any cultural uniformity (much less any biological uniformity) than one might think. (7) It is always being renegotiated according to the specific historical situation. 'Community' in this context 'is a tricky term'. (8) It implies values in common but historians need to be aware of the many divisions and differences within each 'ethnic minority community' and be mindful too that individuals within each community themselves negotiate their own particular version of ethnic identification. The theoretical context employed by social scientists for understanding ethnic minority populations within Britain has changed considerably over the past half century. The prevailing assimilationist model of the 1950s and 60s gave way to a more 'multi-culturalist' one by the 1970s and 80s. By the late 1980s, the emphasis on racial difference (and the lumping together of Africans and Asians under the politicised rubric of 'blackness') began to be questioned. (9)

Under the increasing influence of post-modernism, cultural difference became more focused upon. Not only did ethnicity rather than race get more and more talked about, but so too did the notions of 'hybridity' and of mixed and multiple identities. (10) And at least since 9/11, as worries about national unity come onto the political agenda, 'ethnic diversity' seems to have replaced 'multi-culturalism' as the analytical focus. (11)

In 2001, thanks to improvements in information gathering, we have a less anecdotal grasp than we did formerly of the way some ethnic groups distribute themselves around cities in the UK. The 2001 census was the first to utilise ethnic monitoring in an extended way, but do statistics about ethnicity obscure or inform us? The answer is perhaps both. Certainly ethnic monitoring on such a sustained scale reveals some interesting patterns – only this week the papers were full of the 'white flight' from the city. But using ethnic categories can also serve to target rather than to understand a group, to render them reified and uniform and also to obscure the identity of some groups altogether.

So if one is attempting the history of ethnic minorities in Britain, on what precisely should one focus? How can one avoid merely chronicling the entry of one group after another? If one answer is to focus on the interaction between these groups and the indigenous majority community, how can this be done without being unduly reductionist? The very concept of the host community implies a parasitical relationship between the minority and majority communities. And the term 'indigenous' community renders invisible the varied origins of the majority group which itself may well be an amalgam of earlier migrant groups. Indeed, why single out ethnic minorities from other migrants in a city? (12)

Most of us are well aware of the sensitivities involved when dealing with groups whose histories have been marked by trauma and dislocation. The identities of many economic migrants as well as those of asylum seekers are so often tied up with cataclysmic happenings such as pogroms, slavery, famine, Holocaust, partition and so-called 'ethnic cleansings'. And behind such events lie communal and individual memories of dislocation and death, rape and shame, betrayal and survival. The delicacy needed when broaching such matters is difficult to get right and contributed to the furore which greeted the reception of Liverpool's and London's maritime museums' portrayals of the middle passage.

What is more, focusing exclusively on such trauma can be depressing and debilitating for those who have experienced it. Attending various fora on black history in Bristol over the past two years, it has become very apparent to me that black parents' anxieties for their children's self-esteem have been caused by the invisibility of black history and the resulting lack of positive black historical role models in schools and the media. This has led many to prefer a mythic celebratory history to one grounded in critical method.

One way to redress this lack of visibility is to widen the historical brief. But it is well known that the history of ethnic minority groups in this country is often undocumented and certainly under-researched. And as feminist historians have found, it may not be enough to recover public figures from obscurity when inequalities of power may have kept many outside the public sphere in the first place. Oral history has of course been celebrated as a way of excavating the unrecorded history of less powerful groups. But oral history, though a valuable resource, often serves functions which have less to do with academic history and more to do with the reinforcement of social identity through the positing of the collective memory.

This leads us to a distinction, which needs to be made between history and collective memory – a distinction rather disingenuously elided during this conference by David Starkey. True though it is that 'History' has a role to play in providing people with a sense of national belonging and a collective identity, we really must distinguish between the notion of history as an intellectual discipline from what Raphael Samuel called the 'theatre of memory' and Pierre Nora

articulated as the realm of memory with its manifold lieux or places that embody it. (13) Collective memory has been defined by the sociologist Iwona Irwin-Zareka, as a set of emotionally charged 'ideas images and feelings about the past' which are located not in the minds of individuals but in the resources they share' which is 'imbued with moral imperatives'. (14) So, whilst the discipline of history is critical, collective memory on the other hand can be celebratory. The two may overlap, but they are, emphatically, not the same. (15) Collective memory feeds on movies, folktales, family stories, songs, pop images, statues and so on, as well as academic history, in order to construct itself. Collective memory frames and edits these inputs in the light of its own moral and emotional agenda. As Irwin-Zareka remarks, 'when people engage in "memory projects", they are trying to secure for posterity certain elements of the past'. (16) They may be trying to justify their own attitudes or action.

In turn, this collective memory reshapes people's understanding of their own individual past. Penny Summerfield, in an article on oral interviews and history, notes that 'ordinary people who have memories that do not fit publicly available accounts [be they academic history or part of the popular collective memory] have difficulty in finding words and concepts with which to compose their memories. If they cannot draw on appropriate public accounts their response is often to seek to … press their memories into alternative frameworks or to be able to express their stories only in fragmentary and deflected accounts'. (17)

These processes of self-construction for posterity, influenced as they often are by certain motifs derived from popular culture, can be seen in the following clip from *Many Rivers to Cross*, a video made by the (mainly female) elders of the Malcolm X Centre in St Paul's Bristol in collaboration with the University of the West of England, Bristol and Bristol City's Community Education Unit. The elders, who were all originally from the Caribbean, were trained in editing and had full editorial control of the content, though historic film footage of the Caribbean was located by the UWE video instructors who worked with them and who assisted them throughout the film-making process. [Video clip shown.]

This video and its accompanying booklet, which was rapturously received by the local Afro-Caribbean community in St Paul's, was ultimately controlled by the Malcolm X Elders' group. Yet despite their formal power, the project was shaped at various points by the professional technicians and academics who assisted the elders. For example, what I do not have time to show you in the video is that, at my behest, the elders were persuaded to include their thoughts on folk remedies and on beliefs about 'duppies' or spirits. They had not originally thought to include such material, thinking it was not an appropriate subject for an oral history. The group was presenting itself through the oral testimonies in the video in a particular way which was itself influenced by dominant notions of propriety.

There had also been some disquiet on the part of some of the elders about reproducing the patois spoken in the video in the final version of the accompanying booklet. Some members of the collective wished to change the spoken patois in the video into 'the Queen's English' for the booklet. Was I, as an historian who had been invited to advise the group, being too controlling and interventionist when I successfully persuaded them to retain the patois? I was certainly exerting my authority. (18) Did the booklet become more their history or less so by keeping to the original patois? Did the inclusion of the material on duppies and folk remedies only serve to exoticise the elders in the eyes of non-Caribbean audiences or did the gasps of delighted if somewhat embarrassed recognition which these passages elicited from their Afro-Caribbean audience justify my intervention?

Whatever the answer to the above questions, the finished video and booklet cannot be said to have constituted a work of analytical scholarship. Its prevailing themes of struggle and endurance, of racism and of nostalgia for an idyllic homeland produce a view of the past too formulaic and too sanitised to qualify as a reflective historical study. Yet its very silences and omissions are of analytical interest to the academic researcher. It is historians who have the time and training to decide 'whether to reveal a silence, or make a silence speak for itself, or unravel silence as a mask of conflicts. Taking silence into account means watching out for the links between forms of power and forms of silence'. (19)

In any case, *Many Rivers to Cross* constitutes a valuable historical resource. It records some events and perspectives which would have been otherwise lost to posterity. It affords young people of Afro-Caribbean origin a chance to understand some of what their grandparents experienced before and just after their arrival in Britain and it conveys these experiences to the wider ethnic majority community in an emotionally engaging way. *Many Rivers to Cross* might also help to inspire younger people of Afro-Caribbean descent to study history as an academic discipline. The collaborative relationship between community groups and the university has in this instance been mutually beneficial and enriching.

The second oral history project supported by UWE's School of History is organised by Munawar Hussein a Pakistani-born former engineer who is now employed by the Asian Languages division of Bristol City Library Service. This is a specifically 'Asian' oral history project. Currently nearing publication, it has employed eight translators and will present some fifty short autobiographical accounts of Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Gujarati, East African Asians, Sikhs, Chinese, Vietnamese, and interestingly given the project's Asian label, Arabs in Bristol. The School of History's role is to comment on the interviewers' questions and on the final draft and to help pay for the booklet's publication.

In fact, our interventions did not hugely affect the questions the interviewers chose to ask. The selection of people to be interviewed was determined by the project leader in consultation with the interviewers themselves. At this stage, it remains to be seen just how representative selected interviewees are of their respective communities. On first glance it does appear that men, and, more particularly, men of higher status, predominate; but more analysis will be needed to confirm this and to see the extent to which other differences – in religious affiliation, caste, occupational status, etc. – have also been accommodated.

The interviews themselves contain much interesting and often moving testimony but generally have a somewhat formulaic quality about them. Many of the first generation male migrants selected for interview were relatively highly educated and enjoyed a good life style in their country of birth, before political upheaval or the wish to continue with their education took them to Britain. The recurring themes are those of struggle in adversity and of success, the latter usually being measured by the educational and professional attainments of the respondents' children and by the charitable activities of the respondents themselves. Here the anthropologist Pnina Werbner's observation about diasporic Pakistanis in contemporary Manchester comes to mind. She points out that as high status positions in the national public sphere were often off-limits to the more activist members of this diasporic group, exercising power and patronage within the minority community became especially way for those individuals to enjoy status and honour. (20)

Each interviewer has also submitted a personal account of the cultural and religious background of their own particular group. These introductions vary in length and content and have yet to be edited into a stylistically consistent format. They generally adapt a celebratory and uncritical tone when discussing their respective religious histories. So whilst they have the virtue of making clear to readers that there are vast tracts of cultural capital which need to be appreciated in order for each group's history to be more fully understood, they will be difficult to incorporate into a conventional historical narrative.

This lack of fit between conventional academic approaches and the presented draft calls to mind some of the insights of the Subaltern Studies group which in the 1970s and 80s re-interrogated the history of the Indian subcontinent and challenged the historical perspectives of both colonialist and indigenous elites. Scholars in the Subaltern Studies group first attempted to excavate the various voices of those peasants and landless people whose agency, views and experiences were usually ignored. They pioneered new methodological approaches to do this which paralleled, albeit at a more theoretically sophisticated level, the community history/oral history movement in Britain of the same era. One wonders how the Bristol Asian Oral History Project would be regarded by the Subaltern Studies Group – would they see it as a democratising historiographical project aimed at recovering the subaltern voice or as an exercise in replicating postcolonial elitism? The answer, I suspect, would be somewhere between the two.

Subaltern Studies also challenged an uncritical acceptance of Western academic rationalist method, as did, of course, the wider movement of post modernism. But one of the group's leading exponents, Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his idea of 'provincialising Europe' rejected the cultural relativism of extreme post modernism.

He does, however, make the point that modernist rationalist discourse may not be quite as unproblematically universalist as had been conventionally assumed, having evolved as a product of a particular time, culture and historico-political context. We must be mindful, as Charkrabarty argues, of 'the ambivalences, the contradictions, the use of force and the tragedies' which have attended the development of modernism and its concomitant epistemology. (21)

As someone who does not wish to throw out the Enlightenment baby with the Imperialist bathwater, Chakrabarty's critique is useful too in making us reconsider repressing narratives which do not fit in with a rationalist and ultimately modernising project. But this leaves us with a challenge. How do we as historians, for example, incorporate and consider accounts of those who, say, believe in miracles or ascribe events to the will of supernatural spirits? At the very least, we need to record these accounts and analyse the social, psychic and bodily needs which such explanations seek to satisfy. The scholar has to listen to all these views, seek to empathise with them and always to contextualise. With these provisos I would aver that a self-critical and globally aware deployment of rational method remains the best way to try to apprehend what people in the past experienced.

A fully-fledged rationalism, then, takes account of the importance of non-rational beliefs. What is more, such rationalist method is no longer the exclusive province of the West, and Western scholars must recognise this. For example, the fine work which Subaltern Studies scholars have done on recent history of the Indian sub-continent has an obvious relevance to understanding the background of those 'South Asians' in Britain today. Western scholars can no longer get away with ignoring the work of their Indian and Pakistani counterparts.

How might academic historical research best inform the public understanding of the past? There are real differences between academic and public history, and between history as an academic discipline and what has been variously called social or collective memory. Nevertheless, good quality collaboration between academic historians and community groups will make a vital contribution towards the construction of a public history that has emotional resonance but which is decent, honest and fair and which does correspond to some baseline of what we tentatively judge to be historical reality. As Ludmilla Jordanova argues:

> The study of the past is indeed inspiring and instructive but it is not a fount of clear unambiguous lessons or recipes. Rather it is an arena for contemplation and thought … Historians do well when they raise awkward questions and unsettle received views. To imagine that the general public could not appreciate these points is patronizing and they should at the very least, be given alternatives to tabloid history. (22)

Notes

1. 'Diaspora, Migration and Identities' was the title of the AHRB's Regional Seminar held in Bristol, 19 November 2004. Back to (1).
2. See by M. Dresser, *Slavery Obscured: The Social History of the Slave Trade in an English Provincial Port c.1698-c.1833* (2001); 'Minority rites: British attitudes towards Jewish circumcision, 1753-c.1900', *Jewish History and Culture* , 1.1 (1998), 72-87; 'Protestants, Catholics and Jews: Religious Difference and Political Status in Bristol 1750-1850' in *The Making of Modern Bristol*, ed. M. Dresser and P. Ollerenshaw (Bristol, 1996), pp. 93-126; 'Sisters and brethren: power propriety and gender amongst the Bristol Moravians 1755-1833', *Social History*, 29, (1996), 72-87; 'Britannia, the History of a National Symbol' in *Patriotism: the Making and Unmaking British National Identity*, (3 vols., 1989), iii. 26-49; *Black and White on the Buses: Bristol's Colour Bar 1963* (Bristol, 1987), abridged and reprinted in *Patriotism: the Making and Unmaking British National Identity*. Back to (2).
3. 'Immigrants, identity and the city: A thousand and one years: immigrants and minorities in Bristol, c.1000-c.2001'. This two-year project is part of the Victoria County History's 'England's Past For Everyone' project, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Its outcomes will be a book and a website. Back to (3).
4. I have worked with the Bristol City Museum Service since 1997 as historical consultant on a variety of projects, including the city's first ever exhibition on 'Bristol and the Transatlantic Slave Trade'. I co-edited the catalogue for this exhibition (*Catalogue of the Bristol and the Atlantic Slave Trade Exhibition*, ed. M. Dresser and S. Giles (Bristol, 1999)), and produced a report on 'The Recent History of Ethnic Minorities in Bristol' (2004) for the projected new Museum of Bristol. I have also served as historical consultant to a number of websites relating to the history of the transatlantic slave trade including PortCities UK , History Footsteps, the Gambia Slave Trade Website and Anti-Slavery. Back to (4).
5. Steve Fenton, *Ethnicity* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 165. Back to (5)
6. Colin Kidd, *British Identities Before Nationalism: Ethnicity and Nationhood in the Atlantic World, 1600-1800* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 9-72. Perhaps the conflation of 'ethnic' with 'non-Christian' partially explains the popular conflation of 'ethnic' with 'the other', as in the widespread use of 'ethnic' to mean 'not English' – as in 'ethnic fashions' or 'ethnic food'. Back to (6).
7. Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *What is Anthropology?* (2004), pp. 158-9; see also the definition of an ethnic group in Richard Berthoud and Tariq Madood and Patten Smith, 'Introduction' in *Ethnic Minorities in Britain: Diversity and Disadvantage: the Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities*, ed. Tariq Modood and Richard Berthoud (1997), p. 9. Back to (7).
8. *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain: Report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* (2000), p. 27. Back to (8).
9. I am grateful to my student Edson Burton for his insights on this issue. His dissertation on 'From assimilationism to anti-racism: the Church of England's response to Afro-Caribbean migration, 1948-1981' has recently been accepted for a PhD at the University of the West of England, Bristol. Back to (9).
10. See Tariq Modood, 'Culture and Identity' in *Ethnic Minorities in Britain*, pp. 290-291; on hybridity see Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: a Critical Introduction*, (Edinburgh, 1998), pp.131-136 and Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe, 'Old Whine, New Vassals: Are Diaspora and Hybridity Postmodern Inventions?' in *New Ethnicities, Old Racisms*, ed. Phil Cohen (London and New York, 1999), pp. 180-204. Back to (10).
11. David Goodhart, 'Too diverse?', *Prospect*, 5 (2004) and the debate his editorial engendered, e.g. Paul Gilroy, 'Multiculture and melancholia', *Open Democracy*, 3 Aug. 2004 [http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article-1-111-2035.jsp, accessed 31 Aug. 2005]; Neil Ascherson, 'From multiculturalism to where?', *Open Democracy*, 19 Aug. 2004, [http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article-1-111-2052.jsp, accessed 31 Aug. 2005]); David Theo Goldberg 'The Space of Multiculturalism', *Open Democracy*, 16 Sept. 2004 [http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article.jsp?id=1&debateId=111&articleId=2097 , accessed 31 August 2005]; and Ali Rattansi, 'New Labour, new assimilationism', *Open Democracy*, 7 Oct. 2004 [http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates /article-1-111-2141.jsp# , accessed 31 Aug. 2005]. Rattansi writes that the 'creation of a national identity that can value cultural diversity, and transnational identifications will require bold, fresh, innovative thinking, not a restatement of selective and pious banalities about British history'. Back to (11).
12. A point raised by Professor Dudley Baines of the London School of Economics at the 15th Annual Workshop of the Economic History Society Women's Committee, 'Migration in Historical Perspective', 12 Nov. 2004. Back to (12).
13. Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of memory, i, Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (1994); Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past, i, Conflicts and Divisions* (English edition ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, New York and Chichester, 1996). Back to (13).
14. Iwona Irwin-Zareka, *Frames of Remembrance: the Dynamics of Collective Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1994), pp. 4, 9. Back to (14).
15. See James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford, 1992). The New York-based Social Science Research Council founded a three-year programme exploring the construction of collective memory in Latin America [http://www.ssrc.org/fellowships/coll_mem/index.page, accessed 31 Aug. 2005]. Back to (15).
16. Irwin-Zareka, *Frames of Remembrance*, pp. 7-8. Back to (16).
17. Penny Summerfield, 'Culture and composure: creating narratives of the gendered self in oral history interviews', *Cultural and Social History*, 1.1 (2004), p. 92. Back to (17).
18. I exploited any deference they felt toward me as a white academic, and I capitalised too on the trust they had in me because of a popular account about the 1963 colour bar in Bristol which I had previously published (see note 2). Back to (18).
19. Luisa Passerini, 'Memories Between Silence and Oblivion" in *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, ed. Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (London and New York, 2003), p. 249. Back to (19).

20. Pnina Werbner, *Imagined Diasporas among Manchester Muslims*, (Oxford and Santa Fe, NM, p. 27). Back to (20).
21. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History' in *A Subaltern Studies Reader 1986-1995*, ed. Ranahit Guha, pp. 286290; Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, (Princeton, NJ, 2000), pp. 172-214. Back to (21).
22. Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice*, (London and New York, 2000), p. 171. Back to (22).