Comment on Thomas R. Trautmann’s “The Past in the Present”

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At some risk to my scholarly gravitas, let me go so far outside my own limits of knowledge as to quote from the textual domains where Tom Trautmann serves as expert guide. A prophecy from the Vishnu Purana (ca. 100 BCE–400 CE):

Wealth and piety will decrease day by day, until the world will be wholly depraved. Then property alone will confer rank; wealth will be the only source of devotion; passion will be the sole bond of union between the sexes; falsehood will be the only means of success in litigation; and women will be objects merely of sensual gratification. Earth will be venerated but for its mineral treasures. . . . When the practices taught by the Vedas and the institutes of law shall nearly have ceased, and the close of the Kali age shall be nigh. . . . [Brahma] will, then, reestablish righteousness upon earth; and the minds of those who live at the end of the Kali age shall be awakened, and shall be as pellucid as crystal. The men who are, thus, changed by virtue of that peculiar time shall be as the seeds of human beings, and shall give birth to a race who shall follow the laws of the Krita age (or age of purity). As it is said: “When the sun and moon, and (the lunar asterism) Tishya, and the planet Jupiter are in one mansion, the Krita age shall return.” (Wilson 1840: 483–84)

This digression originates precisely from my ignorance of ancient history. I was intrigued by an unfamiliar reference in the essay to “lunar asterism,” and my philistine online search produced information on the still-living practice of Nakshatra, or Vedic astrology, and this fragment from an ancient text, translated by the Orientalist H. H. Wilson in 1840. The passage reads like Nostradamus anticipating Marx or Veblen, or like culturally conservative Indians rallying against the moral corruption of consumerism in the late twentieth century (Mazzarella and Kaur 2009). It suggests that the past reverberates down into the present, due not only to vestigial, unhelmed knowledge formations (such as the Sanskrit phonology Trautmann tracks) but due to a will on the part of past actors to imagine and shape the future through omens, authoritative proscriptions of tradition, the systemization of knowledge, and self-fulfilling prophecies of the cyclical nature of history.

In quick order, the essay sweeps through an intellectual history with a longer durée than any of Braudel’s examples, from 2400 BCE Indus script to Said in 1978. Trautmann points not to environmental causes for long
term patterns and continuities, but to human ingenuity. As Trautmann rightly argues, much of this history is “hidden” from historiography or even from the language experts who may today be deploying ancient theories and linguistic methodologies. He says, “The spread of higher-order effects of human mind across regions, and of the perpetuation of the past in the present, is a phenomenon that is systematically obscured by modernism, by Eurocentrism and by postcolonial theory.” It is sometimes unclear whether the “human mind” in Trautmann’s essay is a Jungian type of collective unconscious or is embodied in particular (if sometimes hard to name and date) ancient thinkers. But in either case, whether abstract or concrete, this ancient “human mind” has its effects on the present. The story of Sanskrit phonology presents a case not of a contingent “structure of the conjuncture” (Sahlins 1985) but of an ancient agency responsible for laying seeds and building deep systems, with foresight of the repetitive conjunctures they might enable. This view of antiquity intentionally and successfully messing with the contemporary world, rather than being inert and “theory-dead,” is one of Trautmann’s most tantalizing suggestions that could be developed further.

His is an unabashedly diffusionist argument, but one meant to counter Hegelian erasures caused by West/Rest and Ancient/Modern dichotomies. While addressing the former has been a major aim of postcolonial revisionism, the latter clumsy divide is rarely tackled. Trautmann’s essay lays out a specific empirical pathway for such a challenge to temporal othering. I do wonder, however, about the assertions that ancient history is shrinking and being marginalized by studies of the modern. While I do not doubt Trautmann’s greater familiarity with the field and its disciplinary health in academe, the ideology of modernity would not survive without its foil, antiquity (Dawdy 2010). So if the study of ancient history is being marginalized or erased further by contemporary historiography, this trend may in fact signal the end of Hegelian cartographies rather than their perpetuation. But it may be that the study of antiquity, with many ancient texts now translated and published, is simply shifting evidentiary ground to the art historical and archaeological. In fact, two new (and very well endowed) centers for the study of the ancient world have been established in the U.S. within the last seven years—the Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology and the Ancient World at Brown University (est. 2004) and the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World at New York University (est. 2007). This development suggests that the study of antiquity is alive and well, although the study of ancient texts may need interventions such as Trautmann’s to reassert its relevance. Such a newly imagined historiography would emphasize continuities and parallels between recent and ancient histories, rather than the reliquary fetishization of exotic old things via archaeology.
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Ancient history as imagined by Trautmann could, in other words, be an important tool in finally dismantling not only Orientalism, but the temporal ideology of modernity that cherishes the exceptionalism of the post-1450 era of European expansion. Most intriguing and sweetly disturbing, however, would be to find that the ancients planned on their own intervention in our present. Or that, “the minds of those who live at the end of the Kali age shall be awakened, and shall be as pellucid as crystal. The men who are, thus, changed by virtue of that peculiar time shall be as the seeds of human beings.”

Works Cited


