

Satia, Priya *Time's Monster: How History Makes History*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020. 363. Softcover, \$19.95.

I've long been a student of history. I was captured by the phenomenon of revolution in my undergraduate studies leading to a master's thesis on the Cuban Revolution. Mid-career I served as the Mayor of Fayette, Missouri. To better govern and promote the community, I studied its published histories. Recently I have researched Indo-Pak reconciliation, which involves reading biographies, histories, and memoirs. Reading history is a favorite pass time. Because of my interest in history, I was excited to review this book.

In *Time's Monster: How History Makes History*, Priya Satia examines the ways in which history, particularly British history, contributes to and/or sustains individual and collective action. It is a "twinning history of empire and the history of history" (p. 2). For Satia, British historians presented the conquest and exploitation of India as liberal imperialism. The work pairs an examination of the evolution of history with evolving conceptions of agency and self.

In her chapter "The Progress of War," Satia outlines how war became accepted as a tool to advance civilization. History vindicated action. History was "linear" (p. 18) and Christian thought envisioned history as progressive. Capitalism was understood as an expression of Protestant calling. Marx's historical materialism and Social Darwinism make British imperial enterprises inevitable if not acceptable, the latter "quieted qualms about the annihilation of a particular people in the name of evolutionary progress" (p. 53). Historians creating narratives of their times "...engage in a political act that *makes* history itself" (p. 59).

In the chapter "Progress as Penance, Satia examines how narratives of liberal empire spoke of "The idea of selflessly liberating people in bondage" (p. 68). Here the West represents freedom and the East despotism. For John Stuart Mills, the British are "the custodians of international morality (p. 79). Policy makers and historians "twisted (British) violence into a

moral sacrifice” (p 85). British errors were “strivings after good” (p 103). “Progress meant eradication of the weak and those meant to be subjugated” (p. 106).

In “Progress of Elimination,” Satia explores how the British narrative changes in face of Indian rebellion and acts of resistance. Indians no longer possess the same capacity as Europeans, needing only time and paternalistic care to assimilate civilization. Instead, “New notions of permanent difference infused imperial expansion” (p. 107). Imperial rule becomes a “historical burden” (p. 109). Regardless of its cruelties, British rule was portrayed “as an act of magnanimity” to the British public and the world (p. 123). In a society enamored by thoughts of biological superiority and inferiority “violent elimination of certain categories of people was evolutionary progress” (p. 133).

In “The Redemption of Progress,” Satia examines how European angst with the routinized life of the industrial age opens yearnings for occult understandings of life. Perceptions of Middle Eastern occultism stirred British interest in the area coinciding with their WWI engagement in the region. These give rise to the action by and belief in individuals with “occult agency” (p. 149), e.g., T. E. Lawrence. Arabia became a “refuge” (p. 155) for those weary of Modernism. In Arabia, aerial bombardment is used to terrorize populations into submission. “The violence was a temporary birthing pain-a rite of passage necessitated by history” (p. 168). Arabia, portrayed as a timeless place, necessitated the engagement of actors “whose knowledge depended on genius, rather than intensive study” (p. 184-5) itself an occult belief.

In “The Division of Progress,” Satia discusses the end of Britain’s Asian empire. The violence of partition (the result of British incompetence), supported the narrative that British control had suppressed violence in a volatile region. Satia portrays partition as “another instance

of great men attempting to exercise godlike authority in determining the fate of millions” (p. 198). Partition fit into European thinking that nations were the natural outcome of civilizational progress, not the reality of many of Britain’s post-colonial creations where “Many...continued to nurture hopes of moving *beyond* nationalism” (p. 233).

In the last section, “The Past and Future of History,” Satia leaves us to ponder new ways of conceiving history and environmental engagement. If we understand humanity in the long duree, in geological time, in cosmological time, “as a plurality of times existing together” (p. 296), might we understand that “the struggle to renew humanity, is an end in itself” (p. 298).

As a history of history, *Time’s Monster* lays bare the role historians (captured by the sensibilities of their times) play in framing events that pardons the unpardonable. If our understanding of our world, our government and ourselves are products of the histories we consume and elevate our actions, past and present, we become complicit in the continuation of social injustice. As a history of the British Empire, *Time’s Monster* lays bare the atrocities of an empire for those who are willing to see. It is an indictment of the sustained feelings of superiority and the moral justifications of lootings, massacres, and environmental destruction, that threatens the existence of life on Earth. It also makes Brexit more understandable as a last gasp expression of “imperial nostalgia” (p. 243).

This is an excellent book. It is a complicated piece of scholarship. It is well written, well documented and a timely call to action. Satia incorporates the work of economists, literary critics, philosophers, poets, politicians, political scientists and sociologists in the text. It is appropriate for graduate courses on the History of History, the Sociology of Knowledge and seminars on the History of the British Empire. It is a must-read for scholars of Europe and South

Asia. It is also relevant to students of the World Wars and would have some interest to those studying the Caribbean. Priya Satia, well done!

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