

never *appear*, because it becomes erased or subsumed in 'real fantasy', whiteness or the universal. The second sense of black writing as erasure can be gleaned in the last chapter of *Whither Fanon?* called 'The Abyssal', wherein Marriott undertakes an analysis of Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to a Native Land* through the lenses of Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre. While in an examination of Césaire's poetry via the perspective of Sartre, blackness remains trapped in the first kind of erasure, in reading Césaire's poetry through Fanon blackness emerges as the second kind of erasure which Marriott describes as 'corpsing' or 'an excessive collapse by which the world as sovereignly enjoyed give way to laughter and cruelty.' This denotes both an erasing of blackness (as particular) and the (white) universal such that they are both reinvented, a total blank slate of categories. This does not end up in a 'post-racialism' for Marriott because the very concept of race itself becomes annihilated. Black writing ends up being black erasure. In this sense, black writing is equivalent to a *tabula rasa* in its original Lockean formulation in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* wherein

the mind enters the world as a 'blank slate'. For black writing to be truly invention, truly liberation, however, Marriott argues that this erasure has to be *constant*, an 'endless transvaluation', lest another universal be reinstalled in the former's place, even if it is a black universal. This is why he emphasises the verbal form of Césaire's poetry and argues that blackness has to die a 'racialised death' to be incessantly born as something else, naming this grammar of invention the 'future imperfect' (I will have been doing x). And herein lies the ambitiousness of Marriott's project and its avowed connection to the philosophical. For there is a manner in which *Whither Fanon?* repeats the founding gesture of philosophy in its Platonic mode as skepticism of the given world, although it does not invest in the immortal and transcendental realm of Forms. Rather blackness is philosophy in the sense that it *almost* invests in them, but instead of doing so, instead simply repeats this founding gesture ceaselessly, writing and/as erasing itself, reinventing philosophy anew.

Nicholas Anthony Eppert

The presence of the past

Chris Moffat, *India's Revolutionary Inheritance: Politics and the Promise of Bhagat Singh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). 238pp., £75.00 hb., 978 1 10849 690 2

The twin defeats marked by the disappearance of the dreams of the late 1960s and the demise of the Soviet Union unanchored the Left from much of the certainty that Marxist notions of History and progress had previously provided to sustain the passion and courage of communist partisans. Yet, such defeat has also allowed the Left to re-examine its own repressed archive in which themes such as courage, shame, hope and utopian vision were as indispensable to political action as any positivist analysis of the movement of History. Recent scholarship has focused on this subterranean undercurrent in communist thought, which emphasises rupture, departure and untimeliness as essential elements of politics over the scientific certainties of Marxist orthodoxy.

Chris Moffat's Book *India's Revolutionary Inheritance* is a welcome addition to the list of works that seek to overcome the tropes of failure and defeat. The main interlocutor of the book is the legendary Indian anti-colonial

fighter, Bhagat Singh, who was hanged by the colonial state at the young age of 23; a stage in life that would be more appropriate for the palatable practices of 'student politics' than for playing a foundational role in the development of a nationalism adhered to by over a billion people today. His life also presents a genealogy of Indian nationalism that sharply differs from the 'non-violence' associated with a Gandhian politics in the West.

Moffat begins with a fascinating examination of Colonial Punjab to which the protagonist belonged. The province was known in official circles as the heart of imperial rule for the heavy recruitment of military personnel into the British Indian Army, as well as for the loyalty of the province's elite to the colonial administration. The book demonstrates how, beyond the apparent calm of authoritarian rule, Punjab was also the centre of some of the most militant upheavals against colonialism. From periodic attempts to incite revolt within

the military to the formation of militant groups such as the Ghadr Party, the province, as Maia Ramnath's *Haj to Utopia* (2011) describes, remained a hotbed for anti-state activities. This subterranean resistance came to the fore in perhaps the most notorious cruelty of colonial rule in India, the Amritsar Massacre in 1919, in which a battalion led by General Dyer opened fire on crowds gathered for the Spring festival of Basakhi in Punjab's Amritsar district. The killing of over 300 people was followed by a number of repressive measures aimed at humiliating and subjugating the people of the province.

The political subject in Punjab remained split between excessive loyalty and equally excessive irreverence towards power. Moffat locates this split in the social structure of Punjab's cosmopolitan urban centres, particularly Lahore. Apart from being the centre of colonial administration, the city was also home to some of the most vibrant colleges and universities, making it a distinctively young city. This network of educational institutions provided an opportunity to young people to reinvent their identities away from the burden of their familial pasts, pointing to an urban environment that facilitated departures from normative social codes.

The purpose of colonial education was part of the larger civilisational mission. In the words of Lord Thomas Macaulay, the nineteenth-century architect of Western education in India, the aim was to create a 'class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect'. This purported servility induced by Indian education led reformers to begin their counter-pedagogic projects in Lahore. The struggle to create a 'national education' that could inculcate a sense of pride and critical thinking in Indian students is vividly captured by Moffat, in particular through the efforts of Lajpat Rai who began a 'Tilak School of Education' to teach students the taboo subjects of politics and sociology.

Lajpat Rai is a second major interlocutor in this story, who participated in recurrent protests against colonial excesses. One such demonstration was organised against the arrival of the hated Simon Commission in Lahore, which was supposed to propose a plan for Indian representation in government but ironically had no Indian representation on it. The police reaction was unexpectedly violent, with the revered 63-year-old Lajpat Rai becoming a victim of ruthless baton charges. A month

later, he succumbed to his injuries and died, leaving India stunned.

This incident triggered Bhagat Singh and his comrades in a little known underground organisation, the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army, to seek revenge for Rai's death. They orchestrated an attack on police officials in Lahore, killing a British officer (Saunders) and an Indian constable. After an unsuccessful national effort to hunt down the killers, the group offered themselves up for arrest in a spectacular manner. They intervened in the Legislative Assembly session in Delhi, lofted a bomb in an unused corner (intended to avoid casualties) and threw pamphlets that read 'It takes a Loud Voice to Make the Deaf Hear'. Bhagat Singh was arrested at the site, setting the stage for one of the most iconic court cases in colonial history.

Moffat reads this act of 'surrender' as exemplifying the Greek virtue of *Parrhesia*, where an individual is able to speak truth from a vulnerable position, irrespective of the consequences. By permitting their arrests, Bhagat Singh did not aim to defend himself but rather to question the legitimacy of colonial law. During the court proceedings, Bhagat Singh and his comrades raised anti-colonial slogans in the courtroom and were often dragged outside for their acts, rendering visible the colonial violence beyond the norms and politeness of legal discourse. The court proceedings soon became part of a national theatre as hundreds of supporters began arriving to garland the accused with flowers and to watch their spectacular defiance of the feared colonial judges.

This section of the book is indebted to Jacques Rancière's theory of dissensus, a moment that undermines the figment of consensus promoted by the ruling order. The mocking of colonial courts, the decision to undergo voluntary suffering and to engage with a wider public beyond the confines of the prison meant the accused managed to disrupt the places assigned to them by law. The case is best exemplified by the widespread support across India for these prisoners, transforming prisons from disciplining institutions into sites producing political celebrities, a legacy that continues to shape postcolonial politics in the region. Singh and his group were able to dislocate the routine workings of a court, creating a discrepancy that opened up a gap in the symbolic order and signaled new political possibilities for the future.

Singh and his comrades were hanged early in the

morning on the 23rd of March, 1931 in Lahore. Their bodies were secretly taken to the banks of the Sutlej River, where they were burnt to deny them a mass funeral procession. Their deaths only furthered the sense of incompleteness that marked their lives, inciting unexpected but spectacular afterlives for the revolutionary.

To comprehend the presence and trajectory of these afterlives, Moffat takes a position against 'Rankean concerns' of history in which the past is completely separated from the present. Such narratives render the past as a passive object open to exploration and inquiry by historians in the present. Figures such as Bhagat Singh, however, make such neat temporal separations impossible, with the present always haunted by the spectral presence of the past.

We are now familiar with critiques of linear notions of history borrowed from notions of progress cemented by enlightenment thought. In twentieth-century Marxism, revolutionary upheavals in the non-European world forced thinkers to situate political subjectivity against the flow of History, rather than in sync with it. Walter Benjamin's work on the subterranean persistence of the dreams of the past resonate with Moffat's intervention, as the past intrudes into the present to dislocate it from within, undermining the stability of the status quo in the process.

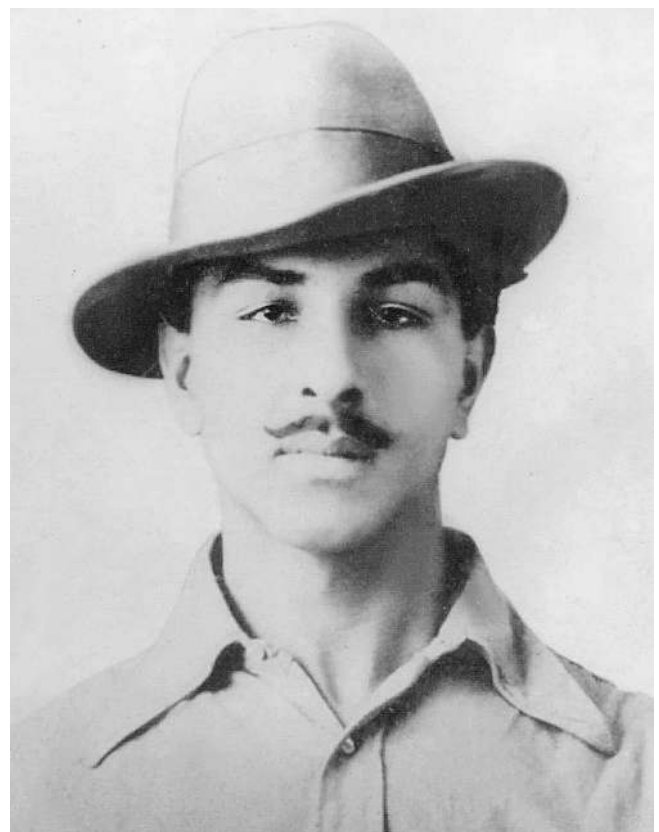
Such conceptions of non-linear time can approach politics as a contingent process rather than something that can be deduced through sociological laws. Alain Badiou, for example, considers politics to be a condition of philosophy rather than dependent on it, an assumption that runs through Moffat's work as he demonstrates the capacity of historical figures to undermine existing categories of political thought.

Yet, Moffat makes an even stronger intervention regarding the relationship between the past and the present. He argues that figures such as Bhagat Singh continue making demands on the living after their deaths. In his words:

This invocation of shame and, indeed, contemporaneity – that we are still 'in Bhagat Singh's company' – helps to emphasise the weight of an inheritance, the seriousness of this responsibility to the dead.

This responsibility turns into a call to action in the present. More than being a figure from a finished past,

Bhagat Singh continues to be invoked in the present day to escalate struggles against the status quo. Moffat also discusses Bhagat Singh's own writings, disagreeing with the tendency of historians to examine his corpus to identify his exact ideological orientation. Such works often ask whether he was a nationalist, anarchist, Narodnik or Marxist. But attempts to confine Bhagat Singh to a neat conceptual box miss the intellectual promiscuity that shaped the inter-war period in the colonial world. More importantly, they undermine the challenge posed by the interrupted life of Bhagat Singh – not only to display courage in facing the enemy but also to bravely interrogate the certainties of one's own politics. To place Singh in a teleological story of Indian nationalism or communism would be akin to sanitising his image, transforming him from someone who perpetually undermines the dominant order to someone assimilated into its structures and routines.



Moffat discusses the intense debates on appropriating the revolutionary from across the political landscape. Maoist rebels (known as Naxals) justify their armed struggle in the name of Bhagat Singh's sacrifice, while student leaders emulate him as an ideal for today's alienated youth. Even Sikh and Hindu nationalists at-

tempt to place him within their genealogy, signifying the contested futures represented by Bhagat Singh.

Moffat uses these heterogeneous interpretations of Bhagat Singh's story to discuss the politics of monuments devoted to him. Different political groups have tried resurrecting statues of the revolutionary in order to display their public devotion to his sacrifice. At the same time, there are recurrent accusations made against this official eulogisation for undermining the sanctity of his cause. For example, the Congress government was criticised for unveiling a statue of Bhagat Singh at the Indian Parliament in 2014, with critics claiming that the revolutionary would have preferred fighting against the corruption of the contemporary government rather than being used as a tool to justify it. Through such examples, Moffat shows that monuments can be used to contain the excess that threatens the stability of the existing order. In a paradoxical way, then, monuments can end up playing a conservative role in the present, even if they aspire to pay homage to a revolutionary.

Against the fixation with monuments in India's official political culture, Moffat points out the vernacular ways in which Bhagat Singh's image continues to circulate. In particular, his discussion of street theatre, in which actors intermingle with the crowds in public spaces, is closer to the dissensual tradition where the spectre of Bhagat Singh belongs. Instead of being encapsulated in a static monument, Moffat approvingly quotes a number of activists and artists who believe that a real homage to the revolutionary would entail taking up his cause in the present.

This insistence on understanding Bhagat Singh's legacy as a work in progress places Moffat's work in conjunction with Jacques Derrida's deliberations on the subject of spectres. Derrida asserts that inheritance 'is never given, it is a task'. Throughout the book Moffat teases out this task of thinking through the multiple and often contradictory trajectories of Bhagat Singh's many afterlives. In this spirit, one can argue that Moffat himself receives the inheritance of Bhagat Singh by rethinking his place in history away from the historicism and ideological rigidity too often bestowed upon him, and posits Singh as a figure who undermines the certainties of both political actors and academics.

India's Revolutionary Inheritance can be read as a reflection on time in modernity. Against notions of an

apolitical and homogenous time in sync with the logic of Capital, we are confronted with a world where untimeliness is central to producing political antagonisms. Thus the focus is on sudden departures and unexpected arrivals that characterise the life, death and multiple afterlives of Bhagat Singh, with each reiteration producing a rupture within the flow of time. On this point, the book is indebted to a plethora of Indian thinkers who have challenged the universalising narratives of colonial modernity. In particular, Moffat engages with the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty, one of the founders of the Subaltern Studies Collective who challenged historicism by identifying the multiple temporalities that structure postcolonial societies. Capital is unable to subsume disparate local histories, as experiences of religious and mythical pasts continue to interrupt linear time to produce a peculiar modern public space. Shruti Kapila further radicalises this position by demonstrating how the political in India was formed through contingent decisions taken in the midst of the anti-colonial struggle, with ruptural violence displacing sociological deduction as the motor of History.

This work challenges the Left to unanchor itself from a rigid understanding of historical development and political possibilities. Such a rethinking is underway in the subcontinent, where attempts to situate Bhagat Singh in the teleologies of Marxism have been replaced by rethinking him as someone whose defiance 'made communism possible in India'. In other words, the spirit of departure and sacrifice rather than fidelity to a cold 'science' of Marxism allowed for the actualisation of the idea of communism in concrete historical circumstances.

Yet Moffat at times pushes the argument against strategic and programmatic thinking to its extreme, citing the following example to demonstrate the teleological thinking that his book aims to confront:

This sense that Bhagat Singh and his comrades did not go far enough to warrant the name 'Marxist' persists in many leftist histories of the movement ... Bipan Chandra, as we have seen, recognised that Bhagat Singh was a hero of great significance but chastised the HSRA for its failure to become more than an urban phenomenon ... P. M. S. Grewal ... [notes] Bhagat Singh's 'most striking weakness' was his failure to analyze feudal landlordism in India and, indeed, to properly comprehend the nature of gender oppression and the integral role of women in political struggle.

Moffat dismisses these interventions as misrecognitions of the challenge posed by spectral figures such as Bhagat Singh. But if pushed too far, refusal to engage with the programmatic and strategic decisions made by individuals and organisations can induce paralysis in rethinking politics in the present. In *The Actuality of Communism* Bruno Bosteels has noted that much of the Left's crisis today stems from its desire to become what Hegel called a 'Beautiful soul', a condition in which the quest for purity results in the inability to actualise itself in History.

Moffat's book at times also seems to be afflicted with such a melancholic attachment to a dead martyr with little patience to engage with critical appraisals of the revolutionary's actions and the ideologies that guided him. After all, heroism and sacrifice can equally be prevalent among fascist elements. This is why an engagement with debates on Singh's ideas and, if I dare say, even criticising aspects of his politics is important if we are to build strategic horizons adequate to the present. Otherwise, we may remain excessively attached to tragedies from the past without doing the necessary analytical labour to make the Left politically operative in today's historical conjuncture.

One of the greatest strengths of the book is the sheer passion with which the provocative thesis is presented. Take the example of the launch event for this book in

Lahore that I attended in April 2019. The city where Bhagat Singh was hanged is now part of Pakistan, a country that refuses to acknowledge his legacy because of his religious denomination. The event was held in the famous Bradlaugh Hall, a meeting place for anti-colonial activists and a site frequented by Bhagat Singh himself. The decrepit colonial building was opened especially for the occasion and was filled by people eager to learn about the forgotten figure. When Moffat read an excerpt from the book, depicting a riveting account of the last moments of the revolutionary's life, there was pin drop silence in the hall. Details of his heroic embracing of death, the mystery of his missing body, and his massive funeral procession conjured up a lost past with a palpable intensity.

The narration vividly evoked images of a different Lahore and in the process opened up possibilities of what the city could be, a conversation that continues among the city's youth interested in Bhagat Singh's ideas. It is a remarkable achievement for a book on afterlives to bring to life a repressed past and play a role in shaping the trajectory of the protagonist's legacy in the city where the most dramatic moments of his life took place. Moffat's book is then not only a challenge to intellectual orthodoxies in History, but is also a political intervention in our possible futures.

Ammar Ali Jan

Decolonisation and deconstruction

Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Plural Maghreb: Writings on Postcolonialism*, trans. P. Burcu Yalim (London: Bloomsbury, 2019). 197pp., £24.29 pb. 978 1 35005 395 3

Abdelkebir Khatibi's collection of essays was first published in French in 1983 as *Maghreb Pluriel*. It comprises six essays originally published between (roughly) 1970 and 1982 in various venues. The first three essays of the collection – 'Other-Thought', 'Double Critique' and 'Disoriented Orientalism' – are the best-known, and, as Françoise Lionnet has noted, have long been out of print. From this perspective, the English translation is certainly welcome, if not without its problems. It is not clear, for example, why the editors of Bloomsbury's series 'Suspensions', or perhaps the book's translator, felt the need to add the subtitle 'Writings on Postcolonialism', which

does not appear in the original. Why the need to attach Khatibi to a corpus he never clearly acknowledged in his writings? For two decades after the publication of *Maghreb Pluriel*, critics have lamented that Khatibi was never included alongside the likes of Said, Fanon, Césaire and Memmi in the canon of postcolonial thought. But little justification has been offered as to why that should have been the case – does any intellectual who thinks about and hails from a formerly colonised space need to be part of postcolonial thought?

Although the six essays function as fairly discrete pieces, the common theme that runs through them is