Dispossessing Memory: Adivasi Oral Histories from the Margins of Pachmarhi Biosphere Reserve, Central India

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This book sheds new light on the dynamics of the colonial encounter between Britain and India. It highlights how various analytical approaches to this encounter can be creatively mobilised to rethink entanglements of memory and identity emerging from British rule in the subcontinent. This volume reevaluates central, long-standing debates about the historical impact of the British Raj by deviating from hegemonic and top-down civilizational perspectives. It focuses on interactions, relations and underlying meanings of the colonial experience. The narratives of memory, identity and the legacy of the colonial encounter are woven together in a diverse range of essays on subjects such as colonial and nationalist memorials; British, Eurasian, Dalit and Adivasi identities; regional political configurations; and state initiatives and patterns of control.

By drawing on empirically rich, regional and chronological historical studies, this book will be essential reading for students and researchers of history, political science, colonial studies, cultural studies and South Asian studies.

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Essays in Honour of Peter Robb

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Since at least 1864 when Bori was established as the first reserve forest in India, the Pachmarhi area of the Satpura Mountains in what is today Madhya Pradesh has been the recurrent site of both conservation and development-induced displacement for Gond and Korku-Mewasi Adivasis (so-called ‘tribal’ or ‘indigenous’ peoples). But this history of dispossession is hardly ever remembered, even by the dispossessed. Paradoxically, while archival sources are clear that forest-dwelling residents of the Central Indian highlands were being removed, sedentarised, turned into forest labourers and peasantry already by the mid-19th century, in a large number of oral histories collected in the Pachmarhi area, Adivasis almost universally remembered the pre-1947 period as a time of relatively unrestricted use of the forest in contrast to the independence period, which they describe as a time of increasing restrictions on their forest-based ways of life and livelihoods. The reasons for this seeming lapse in Adivasi historical memory will be explored in this chapter.

In 2009, Pachmarhi was declared a Biosphere Reserve under the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation’s (UNESCO) Man and Biosphere Programme, a decade after the government of India designated the area as a Biosphere Reserve in 1999. According to the UNESCO definition, a Biosphere Reserve is intended to conserve ecological and cultural heritage side by side. Biosphere Reserves are defined as ‘special environments for both people and nature . . . living examples of how human beings and nature can co-exist while respecting each other’s needs’. Their mission is ‘to ensure environmental, economic and social (including cultural and spiritual) sustainability’. Yet in naming this region a Biosphere Reserve, conservationists also seem to have forgotten Pachmarhi’s past.

Pachmarhi Biosphere Reserve is the consolidation of three contiguous protected areas: the Bori Wildlife Sanctuary (est. 1977), the Pachmarhi Wildlife Sanctuary, and Satpura National Park (both est. 1981) (see the
map in Figure 7.1). Since the 1970s, both conservation and development-induced displacement have only increased their impact in the region. The Tawa Reservoir defines the northwest border of the Pachmarhi Biosphere Reserve. In 1974, when the Tawa Dam was built, 44 villages were submerged by the reservoir, and some 3,000 families were displaced. "Two

Figure 7.1 Map of the Pachmarhi Biosphere Reserve within Madhya Pradesh and India.

Source: Prepared by Sharon Lindenfeld.
years later, 25 villages were displaced by the Army Proof Range Establishment. An ordnance factory in the region displaced nine villages. In terms of conservation-induced displacement, ‘After the declaration of Satpura National Park in 1981, two villages were displaced. Forest department officials harassed five families of [a] village that refused to move out; the officials burned their homes to ashes’. Since the designation of biosphere status by the Indian Government in 1999, efforts to resettle villagers outside the park have only intensified. By 2005, approximately 50 of the 60 villages located inside the reserve were being slated for relocation. As of 2013 it was reported that, ‘currently, officials are talking of relocating between 13 and 16 villages’.

Following Coetzer, Witkowski and Erasmus, this article argues that to a large extent the biosphere designation for Pachmarhi has proven to be a meaningless bureaucratic label. Naming Pachmarhi a Biosphere Reserve not only elides the long and bitter history of interventions by the colonial and postcolonial state in the region, it also ignores the continuing hardships faced by resident populations, and their continuing removal from the reserve. To quote UNESCO literature back at itself, since the establishment of Pachmarhi, the Biosphere Reserve has hardly sought to ‘foster the harmonious integration of people and nature for sustainable development’, or to ‘integrate cultural and biological diversity, especially the role of traditional knowledge in ecosystem management’. ‘Direct Beneficiaries of the Biosphere Reserves’ are said to be ‘the local people and the ecological resources’, whereas ‘indirect beneficiaries’ are said to be ‘scientists, government decision makers and the world community’. Thus, biosphere reserves are intended to ‘explicitly acknowledge humans, and human interests in the conservation landscape’. It is entirely unclear how such high-minded ideals are today being implemented or achieved in Pachmarhi.

In seeking to understand how Adivasis make sense of their own history, and in particular their personal experiences of being removed from the hills and forests of the Satpuras, this article situates the voices of Gond and Korku residents of Pachmarhi in dialogue with the colonial record and professional historians’ and activists’ accounts of the region’s history. In summer 2011, and in repeated return trips to the Satpuras since then, I video recorded extensive oral history interviews, primarily in local dialects of Hindi, with, among others, about 100 individuals living in villages in various stages of resettlement from the Pachmarhi Biosphere Reserve. This included interviews in several villages already resettled outside of the reserve, in two villages currently being removed from the reserve and resettled near a market town approximately 50 kilometres away, as well as with a family living in an isolated mango orchard inside of the reserve that was also in the process of being evicted, and with about 10 residents of a
village inside the reserve, who all expressed a strong desire for resettlement. Between 2012 and 2014, that village then went through the process of resettlement. In addition to this, I also recorded oral history interviews in several villages displaced by the Tawa Dam, with several activists working in the region, and in three villages inside the reserve where residents were resisting pressure to resettle elsewhere. Although specific village names have appeared in numerous other publications, in order to protect the interviewees, all oral history materials presented here have been anonymised, with both individual and village names redacted.¹³

Central India enters modern India

Historians have often identified three main waves of impact in the modern era on those identified as ‘tribal’ or Adivasi in Central India – a process moving towards the utter destitution of many communities of the region by the late 19th to early 20th century, and culminating in the near eradication of forest-based ways of life and livelihoods by the late 20th century.¹⁴ In oral history interviews, residents of Pachmarhi rarely reduced their history to these terms. Still, it will be useful to review this grand narrative in order to contrast it with Adivasis’ own accounts.

According to the standard historical narrative, then, the first wave of modern impact in Central India began in the 1600s. Previous to the incursions of Rajputs, Marathas and Mughals, much of the region today known as Madhya Pradesh had long been an ambiguously defined area known as Gondwana. For hundreds of years, from at least the 12th to the 18th centuries, a series of Gond kingdoms reigned over the area. Gond rulers had built architecturally splendid palaces and forts throughout their kingdoms, and even founded several cities (e.g. the founding of the city of Nagpur, for instance, is attributed to the Gond Raja Bakht Buland Shah of Devagad in the year 1702. Nagpur fell to the Marathas in 1742). By the late 1700s, Raj Gond power had been all but supplanted by the Marathas. The anthropologist Stephen Fuchs, for example, describes: ‘In 1781 the last Gond ruler of Mandla, Narhar Shah, was tortured to death by the Maratha general Moraji, and Mandla became a dependency of the Saugor Marathas. In 1799 Mandla fell to the Bhonsla king of Nagpur, till in 1818 the British took over and assumed the rule also over Mandla’.¹⁵ It is in this period that many of the Gonds and other independent peoples of Central India began their retreat into the forests and hills as a means of escape and resistance. As A.C. Lyall described in the 1867 Gazetteer of the Central Provinces, ‘the wild original tribes . . . had begun to recede before the more skilful and superior settlers’. Lyall recorded that, ‘In Bukht Boolund’s time (A.D. 1700) the bulk of the population was undoubtedly Gond; but . . . The Gonds are now as 1 to 18 of the strictly Hindoo population’.¹⁶
In the second wave of impact, by the late 1800s at the height of the colonial era, the Gonds, past their political prime as rulers of Central India, were now also being dispossessed of their forests. Colonial administrators in the 19th century viewed the Central Indian highlands as a ‘great natural fastness’ for the ‘aboriginal tribes’, who were said to have retreated there to escape the impact of ‘more powerful and highly organised races’. In the new political ecology, hills and forests no longer provided safety from intrusion, and these areas became shrinking vacuums of power within a totalising and enveloping colonial state formation. Sedentarisation and the conversion of forest communities into agriculturalists was a major thrust of the policy. By the turn of the 20th century Russell and Hira Lal in their *Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces* could report:

The Gonds are mainly engaged in agriculture, and the great bulk of them are farm servants and labourers. In the hilly tracts, however, there is a substantial Gond tenantry, and a small number of proprietors remain, though the majority have been ousted by Hindu moneylenders and liquor-sellers.

The third and latest wave of displacement affecting the Gonds, Korkus and other Adivasis of Madhya Pradesh is that induced by conservation and development programmes since the 20th century. This most recent wave is obviously the most tangible to contemporary residents of Pachmarhi, and dominates their narratives as related in the oral history interviews I recorded; this wave of impact is of primary relevance because it is still ongoing.

**Oral histories**

There is nothing factually incorrect when it comes to the chronicle of major events in the narrative outlined above. Yet the very act of interpreting and ordering Adivasi history from the privileged perspective of the archive and the academy without consulting contemporary Adivasis about their own experience, at best, leads to a simplistic interpretation of the past that denies already deeply marginalised people agency in their own history making. Historical constructions of Adivasi pasts, for example, have far too often been reduced to overarching meta-narratives of either ‘cultural endangerment’ or ‘progress’, pigeonholing all changes affecting Adivasis of Central India either as tragic decline on the one hand, or as improvement away from primitivity and towards civilisation on the other. Interviewees, in contrast, rarely, if ever, spoke in such sweeping terms about historical processes, and instead tended to remain firmly focused on their own life histories and struggles.
One of the most fascinating contradictions between the oral histories collected from residents of Pachmarhi and the standard historical narrative is the fact that they tend to describe the colonial era in wholly different terms. Older villagers nearly universally remembered their own lives as a period of ecological, cultural and material decline, a time of vanishing forests and forest rights, and spoke of the past as a halcyon time of unrestricted access to the forest. Discussing the pre-independence period, elderly interviewees repeatedly reminisced about a sort of ‘freedom of the forest’ (echoing Verrier Elwin’s phrase) unparalleled in today’s world dominated by, according to them, the forest department. As one elderly gentleman now living in a resettlement colony expressed: ‘We used to like those days, because in the British day we used to get lots of work and they took care of us . . . the British never harassed us the way the forest department did in recent years’. Another elder, still living in a forest village, recounted of his youth in the pre-independence era: ‘Life was much better back then’. Explaining this with reference to his present predicament of being the head of a family of landless labourers, increasingly restricted access to forests and rising prices, he complained ‘aaj kal pura bekhar hai’ – ‘these days are completely profitless’.

An octogenarian woman from one of the original villages pushed out of the national park, who vividly recalled the moment in the 1980s when the forest department burned down several homes in the process of evicting her village, had particularly rosy memories of the British era. ‘Everything was lovely then’ – ‘Sab bat ki sukhi thi!’ (sic), she exclaimed. ‘We could cut fields in the forest and plant millets (kodon and kutki). And since the park came, nothing’. Finding this somewhat unbelievable, I asked ‘But the British, didn’t they collect taxes?’ Her response was that, ‘They did, from farmers, but they let us hunt everything. If you went hunting with them they would give you everything. They would feed you too’. Asking her to say more about her opinion of Satpura National Park, she replied: ‘What can I say? They’ve put a fence right there. There’s a fence by my field. There’s a boundary, so the meaning of the park is if you go here we’ll catch you, and we’ll take your axe. If not, we’ll file a report. There’s a boy of mine in jail now just for collecting firewood . . . Look, look at our houses. If they’re falling apart we need wood’.

In large measure this selective nostalgia about the colonial past must be understood in relation to the current conservation regime. Memories of hunting, of dhaya cultivation and of unrestricted access to the forest were a dominant feature of numerous oral history interviewees’ descriptions of the early 20th century. Interviewees described a history over the last several generations of progressive whittling away of forest rights. Rules against collecting firewood, against harvesting non-timber forest produce
and against distillation and sale of *mahua* liquor particularly bothered residents of Pachmarhi. They also especially bemoaned the village boundaries established by the forest department in 1977. With the exception of one village, which lost only 91.9 per cent of its land in 1977, in all of the villages in the core area of the reserve for which statistics are available, between 97.7 and 98.9 per cent of all village land was taken away by the government of Madhya Pradesh without any compensation.19 Villages remaining in the Biosphere Reserve have become tiny isolated islands in a sea of forest green. The fact that residents of Pachmarhi almost universally refer to the forest department officials in English as the ‘forest log’ or ‘forest people’ (as in ‘forest log bahut takhleef dete hai’ – ‘the forest people give us lots of trouble’) also speaks of their alienation from the park, which they view as a foreign intrusion in their jungles.

 Nearly all interviewees expressed resentment towards the forest department and biosphere reserve (or ‘park’ as they referred to it, using the English term).20 This situation parallels the experience reported in other biosphere reserves in India, such as Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve, where multiple studies have found overwhelmingly ‘negative attitude among local people towards [biosphere reserve] management, mainly because of restricted access to the forest resources for their livelihood’.21 In two quantitative studies, whereas around 85 per cent of residents of biosphere reserves supported the concept of conservation of forest resources, 75 per cent of respondents also reported negative attitudes towards the reserves, and 90 per cent experienced a deterioration of the rural economy since the establishment of the reserve.22

The selective memory that paints the colonial era as better than the present must also be understood in terms of the current lack of development, sustainable or otherwise, within the reserve. The forest villages presently have limited or no electricity (some villages began being equipped with solar panels in the late 2000s). Running water in the form of plumbing was universally absent. Interviewees repeatedly complained of schools that existed only on paper. In one case, residents claimed that the government built half a school building, only to abandon the construction project midway (‘two three years earlier they were building a school, but they didn’t finish and the whole thing fell down’). In another village, it was reported that the government teacher came only once every few weeks, and only for a few hours at a time, if at all. None of the villages in the core of the reserve, with the exception of one, had a road. To reach the closest market town, Pachmarhi, villagers from some areas had to hike uphill some 10 kilometres on extremely steep forest paths that could become particularly dangerous in the monsoon season, especially considering the near universal lack of footwear beyond thonged sandals.
The experience of conservation or development-induced displacement occupies a central place in the vast majority of personal narratives recorded, and deeply informs people’s views of the past. For many in the older generation, the move from the forest was experienced as trauma. As one evictee from the Tawa Dam submergence zone put it, ‘You can never imagine what it is like to lose your home and your land and never be able to see it again. This is something most people can never dream, but we have experienced’. Still, the vast majority residents of forest villages, young and old alike, expressed willingness to leave the conservation area. Asked if her family was ready to leave their home, one female interviewee in her mid-fifties responded, ‘We are ready. The people from the next village went. Now they live next to the bazaar’. Her husband chimed in, ‘If we leave this land, it will be for our children. If the government gives us money and land to farm, then we are ready to leave’. Many in the younger generation, especially, expressed eagerness to escape the forest. ‘The government is giving everyone 10 lakh rupees and five acres of land. There is nothing for us here’, said one young man living in a village where a resettlement offer was on the table and who seemed particularly keen to take the government’s offer.

It is in this situation, then, that Adivasis of the Satpuras remember, imagine and sometimes long for a past where they had more access to forest resources. When it is longing, it is a longing for a lost place and time, but not necessarily a colonial place and time. There is a strong sense among residents of Pachmarhi that they were the original inhabitants of the forests of the Satpuras, and that the national park and biosphere reserve are outside impositions. ‘Ham pahle yaha the’ – ‘we were here first’, was an oft repeated claim. Many interviewees insisted, ‘ye zamin hamara tha, ye hamara jangal hai’ – ‘this was our land, this is our jungle’, along with other similar slogans. ‘It was taken away from us’. Yet there was often also a sense of confusion expressed as to how and when the forests were lost, and how the people became increasingly marginalised over time. How their communities were first sedentarised into forest villages in the late 19th century is as much a mystery to interviewees as why they are being evicted from those same villages now. Asked why gathering non-timber forest products was now banned, one interviewee answered rhetorically, ‘how should I know why it’s banned?’ Similarly, asked, ‘why is the forest department asking you to leave?’ another elderly respondent answered sardonically, ‘How am I supposed to know why?’

In Donald Ritchie’s words, ‘Interviewees all tell their stories from their own subjective points of view . . . not everyone has a clear view of what happened or a comprehensive understanding of what it meant. Generals in the rear may know the broad sweep of the battle plan, but foot soldiers will have a different view of the action on the battlefield’. Yet this position,
which relegates people equivalent to mere pawns in the grand scheme of history, seemingly eschews the possibility that local or subaltern historical memory might hold significant analytical value. I would argue emphatically that it is not mere ignorance that leads to the contrast between historians’ accounts and Adivasis’, but rather their positionality.

It is certainly not only lack of historical awareness that makes so many residents of Pachmarhi look at the past through rose-tinted glasses. Instead, their descriptions of the past need to be understood as part of a rhetoric of suffering that imagines the past as better than the present as a part of a critique of the present. Working in rural Indonesia, James Scott described this sort of idealisation of the past a ‘weapon of the weak’:

They have collectively created a remembered village and a remembered economy that served as an effective ideological backdrop against which to deplore the present . . . Their memory focuses precisely on those beneficial aspects of tenure and labor relations that have been eroded or swept away . . . That they do not dwell upon other, less favorable, features of the old order is hardly surprising, for those features do not contribute to the argument they wish to make today.24

There is of course also the performative aspect of the interviews to consider. Most interviewees were extremely eager to speak with a foreigner who could understand their language and who seemed eager to understand their situation. Many saw this as an opportunity to vent their grievances and express their frustrations with the forest department and the resettlement programme. Thus, it would not be particularly surprising if some were resorting to describing the past as better than the present in order to drive home their grievances about present suffering.

Ajay Skaria, in his work on oral histories in Western India, describes a similar situation when he reports that Adivasis in the Dangs tend towards a historical periodisation that divides time between moglai and mandini, with moglai being equivalent to a precolonial golden age where the Bhils of the Dangs were kings of the forest, a period characterised by ‘the aesthetics and politics of wildness’. In contrast, mandini is felt to be a time of subsequent decline in the colonial and independence eras, a sort of kali yuga.25 Ann Gold and Bojur Gujar in their fieldwork in Ajmer, Rajasthan, also found that villagers of that region tended to divide time between the azadi or independence period and the ‘time of trees and sorrow’, an era when kings ruled and villagers lived in dire poverty. Thus, the case in Ajmer significantly differs from Pachmarhi, where residents of Ajmer and many other rural farming districts simultaneously describe environmental decline and an improved quality of life in the independence era.26 Both Skaria’s and
Gold’s formulations contrast with the oral history footage I recorded in Pachmarhi, which suggests that the residents of Pachmarhi actually remember the British Raj as a kind of colonial moglai.\(^{27}\) Although many interviewees generally agreed that the British had a mixed legacy overall, with more than one saying that they did ‘some good, some bad’ for India as a whole, one interviewee put it particularly eloquently when he said, ‘Ham azadi ke bad bhi koi azadi nahi mili’ – ‘after India’s independence, we still haven’t received our freedom’.

**Archival histories of dispossession in Pachmarhi**

The story most commonly told about the founding of Pachmarhi as the summer capital of the British Central Provinces is that Captain James Forsyth discovered the plateau in 1862. Forsyth’s ‘discovery’ is well established in popular memory among the Indian middle classes, especially since his famous Bison Lodge is now a museum and ticket office for entry into the neighbouring national park. Yet, as in the case of Columbus Day in the United States, even school children now question the notion of celebrating a European’s ‘discovery’ of an inhabited landscape. Delving deeper than the usual tourist histories of the area, the archives tell us not only that this region was inhabited before the British arrival, but also that a whole array of British officers had ascended to Pachmarhi before Forsyth. In 1819, following the Third Anglo-Maratha War, the British sent an expedition to Pachmarhi in pursuit of their enemy Appa Sahib, and in 1832 one Captain Ouseley led a geological and botanical expedition there. This was followed by a good number of official excursions to the hills through the 1850s. The point that it wasn’t Forsyth at all who discovered Pachmarhi is noteworthy here, primarily to show how dearly lacking in understanding the popular narrative can be.\(^{28}\)

Most of the accounts of Pachmarhi that lionise Forsyth, for instance, also largely neglect Adivasi history. They tell the commemorative story of establishing a hill station, a sanitarium, an army cantonment, the British summer capital of the Central Provinces, and even the first reserve forest in India, but few bother to remember the inhabitants of these hills. The removal of the Gond and Korku Adivasis from their forests is a less pleasant, and more often than not forgotten or ignored, aspect of Pachmarhi’s past.

The first British foray into the Pachmarhi region was in an attempt to destroy a resistance that had already been driven into the hills from the plains and cities they had previously controlled.\(^{29}\) In 1819, following the British establishment of the Saugor and Nerudda Territories over the areas the Maratha Chief Appa Sahib Bhonsle had come to control in 1816, Appa Sahib escaped arrest by the British and took to the hills as a staging
ground for resistance to the British incursion. One of the first references to Pachmarhi appearing in the colonial record relates this incident:

After the expulsion of Appa Saheb . . . he sought refuge among the wild Gond tribes of the Mahadeo hills, which brought on the temporary occupation of the elevated plain of Puchmurr, a commanding and central position, both with regard to the Gond hills and to the British territories on the Nerbudda, in which these tribes were in the habit of making predatory incursions . . . The success of the British troops caused most of the Gond chiefs voluntarily to surrender, and the British government at last managed to suppress the system of plunder and devastation so long habitual to the inhabitants of the Mahadeo hills . . .

In the war of 1857, as the final Raj Gond kingdoms of Central India fell to the British, Pachmarhi again became a last bastion of resistance. During the war, the rebel Tantia Topi fled into the area that is today the Pachmarhi Biosphere Reserve and formed an alliance with a Korku chief who locals still refer affectionately to as Raja Bhabhut Singh. While Tantia Topi himself was captured and executed in 1859, Bhabhut Singh, ‘with his ragtag tola of matchlockmen’ used the Satpura Mountains to continue the rebellion, launching raids against British positions in the plains below. Singh was not captured and executed until 1860, some three years after the mutiny died down nearly everywhere else. This defeat of the proprietor of large tracts of the Mahadeo Hills section of the Satpuras gave the British perfect excuse they needed to move into possession of these forest tracts. As the 1897 Working Plan of the Bori Forest, located in the Madhya Pradesh State Archives in Bhopal describes:

Old Bori . . . belonged originally to Thakur Bhabut Singh, from whom it was confiscated . . . on account of his rebellion, and it was taken up by the Forest Department, only then just organised in 1862. At that time there was a considerable local population of aboriginal tribes who practised dahya. . . and with the exception of the villagers of Jolli and Harapala, who were kept back to supply labour to the forest work, the population was induced to settle elsewhere . . . The forests were at the same time closed to grazing, except for the few head of cattle remaining in Jolli and Harapala until these villages were deserted in 1871.

Thus, the issue of dispossession of the forests, the same issue that contemporary residents are facing today in the Pachmarhi Biosphere Reserve, is by no means new. The British entry into Central India’s interior begins a clearly documented history of dispossession in the hills of the region.
The town of Pachmarhi itself, which was at Forsyth’s time just a small village of about 30 Adivasi Korku huts mixed with those of a few traders from the plains, quickly evolved into a British cantonment and the summer capital of colonial India’s Central Provinces, fondly known as the Queen of the Satpuras. Displacement, induced by both development and conservation, has been a problem for the forest dwellers of the region almost from the very moment of the colonial encounter. In 1862, Forsyth’s orders were to build a forest lodge at Pachmarhi. This unsurprisingly met with local resistance. As Forsyth records:

I found I was likely to have a good deal of trouble in getting the wild hill people to help in building our lodge... Truth was, I saw the chief himself and his advisers hated our intrusion. With some truth they feared we were come to break up their much-beloved seclusion, and untramelled barbarism; their rich harvest from the taxation of pilgrims to Mahadeo’s shrine they thought was in danger; and they would have none of us.33

Local fears were realised when the first reserve forest in colonial India was established at Bori in 1864, and the people who lived on this land were removed in the name of scientific conservation.34 Of course the land of Pachmarhi Plateau, where the town would eventually be situated, needed to be sorted out as well. This land was first designated to be an army sanitarium and as one officer exclaimed: ‘It does seem to be remarkable that we cannot locate 200 convalescents on the top of a hill without taking up the whole country round as a cantonment and evicting the country-folk’.35 In documents I unearthed in the National Archives of India in Delhi we find that one Thakur Gharab Singh was to be compensated Rs 23,916 and one anna for the entire plateau, which was said to measure 14,580 acres ‘allowing for contour and little outside pieces’ (less than 1.7 Rupees per acre). The Thakur was clearly unhappy with the meagre payment offered, and begged the court instead for an equivalent piece of land.36 One official baulked at the Thakur’s request writing: ‘I am quite satisfied myself that no injustice is done to the Thaqur’, saying that a fair price for the site of London two thousand years ago would be ‘two swords and a shield’.37 As another officer later reflected, ‘I know Pachmarhi very well, having reported on it in 1864, when a little Gond chieftan [sic] actually considered himself proprietor of the plateau; probably his cattle drank the waters. But I suppose he has been staved off, or has been indemnified, though I should like to know whether these jungle wastes were marked off by the Settlement as unoccupied’.38
Now with the plateau in the hands of the army for building a sanitarium and cantonment, an early Sanitation Department report outlines how already in 1869 Pachmarhi was also being sanitised of its native residents:

About half a mile to the south-west is the native village of Pachmarhi, the only assemblage of human beings on the entire plateau; it is very much the same as all Native villages, a collection of squalid huts of all sizes and shapes, set down without the faintest idea at regularity, inhabited indiscriminately by men, women, children and cattle, and reeking with the vilest odours not only in the interior of the huts but also around the precincts of the village, where collections of filth in every stage of decomposition are far from uncommon.

This village is most unfortunately situated with regard to the new sanitarium, being only about quarter mile from the stream which runs through the cantonment, and on a higher level, the ground sloping steadily from the village down to the stream; the filth therefore just referred to can hardly escape being washed into the stream, thus exercising a very deleterious effect on the quality of the water contained in it.

It has been recommended that the village should be removed to some more distant site; the removal, it is said, will be comparatively inexpensive from the inferior nature of the huts. This recommendation I consider a most sound one, and one that hardly admits of delay, for in its present position the village is a standing menace to the health of the neighbouring sanitarium . . .

Gond and Korku land use and settlement patterns were also severely impacted by colonial rule. Previously, small populations spread over relatively vast forest tracts practised a form of shifting cultivation called dhaya, where forest communities grew kodon, kutki and other local crops in what was most likely a sustainable manner. The colonial forest department, which was one of the most powerful departments of government in the Central Provinces, progressively worked to prohibit shifting cultivation because it was seen as a threat to forests generally and timber revenues in particular. As the Central Provinces Administration Report of 1862–1863 put it:

[I]t is unfortunate that the best ground for this peculiar cultivation is precisely that where the finest timber trees like to grow. The damage thus done during ages is incalculable; but to stop this cultivation now would be a serious, indeed a lamentable undertaking. It may be hoped
that by degrees these Hill people will learn a better mode of cultivation. But to prohibit the Dhuya cultivation altogether would be to drive this widely scattered population to despair.41

And Forsyth explained:

The abandoned dhya clearings are speedily covered again. . . In such a thicket no timber tree can ever force its way into daylight; and a second growth of timber on such land can never be expected if left to nature. . . Stand on any hill-top on the Puchmurree or other high range, and look over the valleys below you – the dhya clearings can be easily distinguished from tree jungle – and you will see that for one acre left of the latter, thousands have been levelled by the axe of the Gond and the Korku.42

Along with working to ban dhaya cultivation and to transition the population to sedentary agriculture, the colonial regime also created several official categories of villages, viz. forest villages, revenue villages, etc. where the Adivasis would be sedentarised. The variety of evanescent, heterogeneous community types and livelihood formations that previously existed in the region thus dissolved, and all of the villages currently remaining in the biosphere reserve can be identified on district planning maps dating back to the 1870s.

Flouting the Forest Rights Act

In 2003, a new Tiger Taskforce was formed in India with its goal being to strengthen the nation’s wildlife conservation measures. The taskforce broke with the traditional model of human-free national parks to propose ‘a new wildlife management paradigm that shares concerns of conservation with the public at large’.43 In this spirit, a new bill was brought before the Indian Parliament, the Lok Sabha. The Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act of 2006 was written with the premise of addressing the ‘historical injustice to these forest dwelling Scheduled Tribes who are integral to the very survival and sustainability of the forest ecosystem’.44 The Forest Rights Act (or FRA), as it was popularly referred to, promised forest dwellers the right to remain in any forest, including protected areas such as national parks and biosphere reserves, if they could show that they had historically occupied that land. It also asserted that the ‘scheduled tribes’ have traditional rights, defined as including ‘responsibilities and authority for sustainable use, conservation of biodiversity and maintenance of ecological balance. . . thereby strengthening the conservation regime of the
Dispossessing memory 165

forests while ensuring livelihood and food security’. In one fell swoop, the Forest Rights Act thus appeared to reverse over 30 years of conservation legislation in India, and some hundred years of colonial forest policy before that, which had been aimed at removing people from forests.

Unsurprisingly, the Forest Rights Act was met with vociferous objections from dyed-in-the-wool conservationists. Even within the Tiger Taskforce itself there was no unanimity, with Valmik Thapar, one of India’s preeminent tiger experts, issuing a strongly worded note of dissent. Thapar’s main argument, and the argument of many staid conservation biologists, was that ‘tigers have to be saved in undisturbed, inviolate landscapes . . . You can either create landscapes that are undisturbed, or you don’t save tigers. As far as I’m concerned, tigers and human beings – forest dwellers or tribal peoples – cannot co-exist’.

Given this failure to reach consensus, while the Forest Rights Act was a major milestone for conservation legislation in India, it has also been completely flouted in many cases. One particularly damning study found that ‘all of the key features of this legislation have been undermined by a combination of apathy and sabotage during the process of implementation. In the current situation the rights of the majority of tribals and other traditional forest dwellers are being denied and the purpose of the legislation is being defeated’. Madhya Pradesh has been particularly notorious in its refusal to implement the Forest Rights Act, and as of March 2010, the state rejected 71 per cent of claims filed under the act. In 2010, the state also passed an amendment to the Madhya Pradesh Forest Act ‘which makes activities such as grazing and collection of any forest produce from any reserved forest an offence punishable with a fine of Rs 15,000, or one year’s imprisonment or both, thereby effectively nullifying the recognition of minor forest produce and other forest rights under the FRA’.

In Pachmarhi, it is clear that important portions of the Forest Rights Act have not been implemented. For example, the Act ‘grants the right of ownership, access to collect, use and dispose of minor forest produce (which includes all non-timber forest produce of plant origin), which has been traditionally collected within or outside village boundaries, even in protected areas’. But interviewees universally denied seeing any improvement in forest rights since the passage of the act. In the words of one forest village resident: ‘The forest department gives us lots of trouble. We go to the forest to collect wood, mohua flowers, pickle, different kinds of leaves, jaributi [medicinal herbs], but the forest department has banned all that. They’ve only started giving us this kind of trouble in recent years. The old folks never had this kind of trouble. Now they’ve banned all this, but what can we do without work? In the past, we used to make dhaya (slash and burn) fields in the forest. About 10 years ago we
tried doing this and there was a complaint. So we were sent to jail for over a week. My husband, uncle, etc. Everybody was making the field, but 10 old men went to jail’.

The number of people being resettled outside the Pachmarhi Biosphere Reserve has only accelerated since 2006, and as of 2015 the large majority residents I interviewed reported that they were willing to leave their land. Overall, what most people want and demand at this point is simply adequate resettlement. In the case of eviction from Satpura National Park, Pachmarhi Wildlife Sanctuary and Bori Wildlife Sanctuary, i.e. Pachmarhi Biosphere Reserve, people’s willingness to accept resettlement seemed mostly to stem from what they perceive to be nearly 40 years of increasingly vigorous harassment at the hands of the forest department, coupled with the failure of the state to provide even the most basic of services in their forest villages, e.g. electricity, safe drinking water, roads, schools, medical care and job opportunities. The young and middle-aged, in particular, complained bitterly about the lack of development within the reserve, and expressed the desire to live near town where there would be access to these key forms of development.

Thus, the pervasive prejudice that indigenous people around the world are universally keen to resist resettlement and desire to stay in their ancestral forests and villages needs to be challenged. This popular myth, largely based on the romantic image of primitive and isolated tribal people living in harmony with nature, crumbles away under any form of closer inspection. More than one interviewee now living in resettlement expressed the sentiment: ‘Ye sab khatam hai. Jangal khatam hai, jangal ke jivan bhi khatam hai’ – ‘That’s all finished. The jungles are finished, life in the jungle is finished too’.

Yet calling these people’s choice to leave the forest ‘self-determination’ also obscures the harsh realities that underlie such a decision. Deciding whether to stay in the reserve or to leave is not a simple matter of free will. For residents of Pachmarhi, the choice to resettle outside the reserve is vexed, complicated and often tragic. As one young man, age 20, living in a village about to undergo resettlement in 2011, put it when asked why he wanted to leave: ‘1000 reasons. We only have a little land here, one acre each. There’s a road where cars can get in, but no electricity, just from a few solar panels. The school’s been closed . . . I’ve always lived in this house, since childhood. But we want to leave’. For this young man, as with many others, the decision to leave his birthplace was clearly bound up with the large number of problems that he and his fellow villagers face in their daily lives in the biosphere reserve. It was also, of course, predicated on the tempting offer of a resettlement package, which may not have
truly appeared as much of a choice. As another man in the same household described,

The forest people (‘forest wale’) came and told us to clear out (‘khali karne ke liye bola’), so we have to clear out. But not until after the rains, it won’t happen in the rains. They’re giving money to everyone, 10 lakh rupees per family [equivalent to about £14,000 in 2011]. We didn’t get the money yet, but they say they will give us five acres of land each, and money for building houses. They’ve promised everything, but nothing is certain. Once we get this land, only then will we leave the village. Until we get that land, and build our houses, we won’t move.

Considering all this, I asked him how he feels about this impending move. ‘Of course we are sad, but what other choice do we really have?’ he replied.

**Conclusion**

This essay should be read neither as an argument for the removal of Adivasis from Pachmarhi nor as an argument for their continuation within the biosphere reserve. The right to make an informed decision as to whether to stay in or leave the Pachmarhi Biosphere Reserve is now legally in the hands of the project-affected people themselves, and not up to academics, conservationists, the forest department or other administrators. According to the Forests Rights Act of 2006, forest dwellers themselves are legally entitled to make their own decisions, and relocations are to proceed only after free, prior, informed consent is given (though of course it is important to recognise that this is simply the *de jure* rather than the *de facto* state of affairs). So, rather than making an argument for either removal from or continuation within the reserve, my goal has been to draw attention to the historical complexities and deep-seated problems underlying the contemporary conservation regime in India today.

While a good amount of space in this chapter has been devoted to tracing the long history of dispossession faced by Adivasis of Pachmarhi, elsewhere I have published a global overview of the history of the idea, dating back at least to the 1830s, that indigenous peoples should be protected in national parks and other conservation areas. Elsewhere, I have also explored the long and problematic history of overlapping discourses of biological and cultural diversity conservation that imagine the Gonds, Korkus and other Adivasis of Central India in the mould of ‘endangered species’ in need of protection. So, now, the residents of Pachmarhi are caught between
two problematic ideologies and their attendant structures of power: one of human-free wilderness and the other of human-inhabited wilderness. The problem with the Man and Biosphere model is not only that it is grounded in a long-standing discourse that has perceived indigenous groups as in danger of extinction, and therefore paternalistically projects them as in need of top-down protection. It is also that Adivasis, who have long suffered dehumanising animal analogies, are now envisioned as endangered, like wildlife, and in need of cultural conservation in biosphere reserves.

Whereas this essay has largely focused on the concerning parallels between historical and contemporary forms of displacement affecting Adivasi communities, there are also similar parallels between historical and contemporary ideas about protecting Adivasi cultures in parks. In Central India in the 1930s, for example, Verrier Elwin called for the restoration of the ‘freedom of the forest’ to ‘tribal’ peoples in ‘a sort of National Park, in which not only the Baiga, but the thousands of simple Gond in their neighbourhood might take refuge’.52 This park was to be established in a ‘“wild and largely inaccessible” part of the country, under the direct control of a Tribes Commissioner . . . Inside this area, the administration was to allow the tribesmen to live their lives with the “utmost possible happiness and freedom”.53

Contrast this to January 2015, when Survival International, an organisation which bills itself as ‘the global movement for tribal peoples’ rights’, published an article on its website, ‘Tribespeople illegally evicted from “Jungle Book” tiger reserve’. Illustrating the Adivasis of Kanha as a cartoon Disney character, a poster for the Survival’s campaign ‘Parks Need Peoples’ announced: ‘Mowgli’s been kicked out. His jungle is now a tiger reserve. But tourists are welcome’. The article went on with the blanket claims that ‘progress can kill’ and that tribes ‘face a desperate future without their forests’.54 In contrast to this simplistic message, which Survival International (formerly the Primitive Peoples’ Fund) promotes, in fact it is not at all clear in most instances what the best options for these communities are at present – i.e. whether to stay in the forest or accept resettlement. Yet most residents of Pachmarhi interviewed do opt for resettlement, as long as they are adequately compensated monetarily and the resettlement colonies come with enough land and water for farming, along with other basic amenities such as roads, electricity, access to education, healthcare, etc.

Does displacement exacerbate the problem of ‘survival’? Despite all the rhetoric that claims that the very question of ‘survival is at stake’ for these peoples, according to the 1991 census, there were some 6.7 million Gonds in Madhya Pradesh alone.55 Thus, the Gonds are by no means in danger of physical, biological, ‘extinction’.56 While some argue that life-expectancy
rates are likely to increase when people move out of an area without access to roads, schools, proper sanitation and healthcare, and into an area with all of these amenities, other studies have shown that, especially in earlier waves of displacement where adequate resettlement has not been provided, displacement ‘caused impoverishment, social disarticulation and political disempowerment’.57

Some have argued that displacement has engendered various sorts of existential crises beyond mere physical ‘survival’. There is the ubiquitous viewpoint that links Adivasi identity with forests, and therefore projects not only Adivasi forest-based ways of life and livelihoods as endangered, but also envisions Adivasi communities and cultures themselves as in danger of extinction due to their removal from forests, for instance. This is, by no means, a new perspective, and this assessment can be found expressed repeatedly in English-medium and other European language publications, dating back to the very outset of the colonial encounter. Nirad C. Chaudhuri expressed this attitude well in 1965 when he wrote:

In an industrialised India the destruction of the aboriginal’s life is as inevitable as the submergence of the Egyptian temples caused by the dams of the Nile. . . . As things are going there can be no grandeur in the primitive’s end. It will not be even simple extinction, which is not the worst of human destinies. It is to be feared that the aboriginal’s last act will be squalid, instead of being tragic. What will be seen with most regret will be, not his disappearance, but his enslavement and degradation.58

The idea that Adivasi culture is endangered by their removal from forests has recently been carried forward by G.N. Devy, an Adivasi activist and educator, among others. Devy argues that, ‘In the case of the Adivasi, the future is the enemy of the past. The forces of modernisation are rapidly wiping out Adivasi cultural tradition’. Asking repeatedly, ‘is there a relation between depletion of forests and voicelessness? . . . Is there a connection between dwindling of plant species and voicelessness?’, Devy argues that ‘If a community loses its resource base, its ability to voice is also curtailed. Both bhashas [languages] and forest resources are dwindling in our time’.59

Here, Devy makes the interesting link between ecological decline and voicelessness, or what he calls ‘aphasia’, a medical term meaning inability to speak.60 What I would argue is that in the case of Pachmarhi there is neither aphasia nor amnesia. Both speech and memory are not so much ‘threatened’ as Devy argues, as being wilfully shaped by Adivasis ‘for life’.61 We ought not to medicalise Adivasi use of speech and memory. Consider that whereas in the early 20th century even nostalgia was viewed as a medical
disease or a psychiatric disorder, recent work in clinical psychology has found that nostalgia can act as a psychological buffer against existential threat. In all of the villages both in the biosphere reserve and in resettlements where I conducted interviews, the vast majority of people speak only Hindi, though often with a dialect. While some claimed that ‘we have always spoken Hindi’ and insisted that ‘No, we have never spoken anything else’, others clearly remembered a time not more than a couple of generations ago when Gondi and Korku languages were widely spoken, and indeed some elderly interviewees still speak these languages. While on the one hand it might be reasonable to mourn this as linguistic endangerment, it might also be useful to look for the pragmatic reasons for this language shift. Much as in the case of the one woman I spoke with who defined the meaning Adivasi as Hindu (‘Adivasi matlab Hindu’, she said), this act of denying or forgetting one’s ancestral language, and embracing the language of the surrounding society, seemed to me to indicate an intentional incorporation of the Adivasi community into the wider public sphere of the (‘Hindu’) nation. In a Hindu-right (BJP-controlled) state such as Madhya Pradesh in 2011–2015, it seems only natural that Adivasis would want to project themselves as Hindi speaking and Hindu. Through these acts of self-definition, Pachmarhi’s residents seem to say that they are integrated into the state and the nation, and have as much right to be recipients of benefits from the state, such as aid, development and adequate resettlement, as their caste Hindu neighbours in the plains.

Whether academics and other outside observers want Adivasis to maintain their forest-based ecological and cultural traditions or not, in 2011 the majority of Adivasis in Pachmarhi were voting with their feet for a life in resettlement, hopefully somewhere not too far from a decent town; yet some also desperately clung to their old life in the forest. Though it may be easy to paint this choice as a matter of self-determination, or at least free prior informed consent, the decision as to whether or not to vacate one’s home is never a simple one. And there are no guarantees the decision will prove to be the right one, either way. By 2016, feelings were deeply divided about the outcomes of resettlement. This may be the kind of situation known in policy circles as a ‘wicked problem’ – one where there is no clear solution that makes everybody happy, for when it comes to public policy there is no ‘objective definition of equity’ and no ‘undisputed good’.

Notes

1 There is a relatively vast literature that considers the stakes in naming these communities. For problems with the term ‘tribe’, see, for example,
André Béteille, ‘The Concept of Tribe with Special Reference to India’, European Journal of Sociology, 1986, 27: 296–318. For problems with the term ‘indigenous’, see Adam Kuper, ‘The Return of the Native’, Current Anthropology, 2003, 44(3): 389–402. For problems with the term ‘Adi-vasi’, see Gail Omvedt, ‘Are “Adavasis” Subaltern?’, Economic and Political Weekly, 1988, 23(39): 2001. I choose to use ‘Adavasi’ here largely because this is the term which interviewees used to refer to themselves. There was, however, a wide range of meanings ascribed to the word. While some interviewees said it meant ‘we were here first’, others said it meant ‘we used to live in the jungle’, and one interviewee interestingly responded ‘Adavasi matlab Hindu’—‘Adavasi [just] means Hindu’.


5 The Government of India (hereafter GOI) had notified Pachmarhi as a Biosphere Reserve a decade earlier than UNESCO, in 1999. In August 2000, all three protected areas were also declared a Project Tiger Reserve.


Unless otherwise indicated, interviews were recorded between May and August 2011. Video clips from these interviews have been presented at various conferences and seminars (e.g. the University of Wisconsin–Madison Annual Conference on South Asia 2012, and the SOAS South Asian History Seminar Series 2013). Special thanks to Rakesh and family for the incredible help in making these oral histories possible.


Very few, if any, villagers had actually ever heard of the term ‘biosphere reserve’. In keeping with local usage, I thus also occasionally refer to the ‘reserve’ as a ‘park’ within these pages.


Personal communication, Uday Chandra, 2012.

‘In 1832, Captain Ouseley, Assistant Agent at Hoshangabad, climbed to Pachmarhi and collected geological and botanical specimens, probably for
the first time. Dr Jerdon, a surgeon, visited the plateau in 1852. But it was not until after 1854 – when the entire territory of Nagpur escheated to the Crown – that British officers started visiting Pachmarhi more frequently. Major Snow, Deputy Commissioner of Chhindwara, walked across the hills to Pachmarhi from Delakhari in April of 1856; Snow was followed soon after by J.E. Medlicott, a geological surveyor who also reported (not very favourably) about the suitability of Pachmarhi for establishing a sanitarium for British troops’. All this is worth chronicling only to correct the completely mistaken notion that Captain James Forsyth in 1862 was the first British officer to visit Pachmarhi. He went there in 1862, and he was far from being the first. Pradip Krishen, ‘The Satpura National Park’, unpublished report, 2011, p. 15.

In the early nineteenth century, the Pachmarhi region also became a refuge for the Pindaris, so-called bandits, who were a scourge to the British in their early forays into establishing dominance over Central India. As the EPCO, ‘the Nodal Agency on behalf of Govt of Madhya Pradesh for Implementation of Management Action Plan’ for Pachmarhi Biosphere Reserve, describes: ‘This land was racked by much unrest due to the tensions between Marathas and Moguls and was ransacked by Pindaris and renegade soldiers. Around 1818, with the advent of British rule and administration, the Pindaris were liquidated’. The EPCO also states that ‘BRs are . . . special environments for both people and the nature [sic] and are living examples of how human beings and nature can co-exist while respecting each others’ needs’. EPCO, ‘Projects: Domestic projects – Biosphere Reserves’, 2011. www.epco.in/epco_projects_domestic_biosphere.php.


When the British executed the Gond Raja of Jabalpore by cannon for his part in the ‘mutiny’ in September 1857, the annexation of Central India was nearly complete. This Raj Gond kingdom in Jabulpore, said to have been founded by *kshatriyas* who married with local ‘aborigines’, had survived from 1180 to 1857. Lyall, *Gazetteer*, p. 216; Henry H. Presler, ‘Patronage for Public Religious Institutions in India’, *Numen*, 1973, 20(2): 116–124.


‘Transfer of certain Lands to Thakur Gharab Singh in exchange for the Pachmarhi Plateau’. Home, Jud (B), July 1874, no. 191. NAI. Question By Court: ‘You quite understand that I can make no promise about this, that I can only tender Rs. 23,916 and 1 anna, and you accept that tender in full compensation of all your rights, titles and interests in the land included within the boundary line painted red on the map now made over to you
which we both agree is to be held by the measurement as made under the Act to contain 14,580 acres'.

Reply: ‘I am quite content with the tender in rupees, all I ask is that as a favour, I may get the land instead’. The Thakur did eventually receive non-contiguous and far less valuable land in the plains of Hoshangabad.

37 Home, Jud (B), July 1874, S of AOH 23/6. NAI. Said Mr Ellis of the R&A dept: ‘The place is worthless now if it becomes valuable, it would be the result of our expending capital on it. Had I lived 2000 years ago, I should have had no hesitation in purchasing even with my present knowledge, the site of London, from a British Chief for 2 swords and a shield. I should have seen no injustice in this. I quite agree with Mr Bayley that the terms are not too liberal, but I am unable to adopt Mr Howell’s view of the moral iniquity. I mean inequity, involved in the transaction. I expect that from his point of view the Thaqur has got a precious good bargain’.

38 NAI, Home, Jud (A), July 1874, no. 81–88, ‘Proposals in connection with the proposed appointment of cantonment magistrate at Pachmarhi’.


44 GOI, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, New Delhi, No. 17014/4/2005-S7M (Pt.) of 03.06.2005, p. 3 (my emphasis).


49 In terms of Free Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) for resettlement, along with other similar studies in the region my work has found that while, since 2006, consent to move has been mostly freely given, villagers have not always been fully informed. Furthermore, as Sekar writes, ‘forest villagers in favor of relocation emphasized how the social and economic costs of remaining in the forest had become greater due to the relocation of neighboring villages’ as well as because of mounting pressure to relocate. Nitin Sekar, ‘Tigers, Tribes, and Bureaucrats: The Voluntariness and Socioeconomic Consequences of Village Relocations From Melghat Tiger Reserve, India’, *Regional Environmental Change*, August 2016, 16(1): 111.
Dispossessing memory


56 Even when putting aside for the moment all of the thorny questions of how to assess the criteria by which to measure the threat of extinction for a human population, the Gond population by all measures is presently expanding, not contracting.


60 Ibid., p. 95.

61 Here I borrow the idea of history in the service of life from Nietzsche’s 1878 essay ‘On the Uses and Abuses of History for Life’ where he writes, ‘To be sure, we need history. But we need it in a manner different from the way in which the spoilt idler in the garden of knowledge uses it, no matter how elegantly he may look down on our coarse and graceless needs and distresses. That is, we need it for life and action, not for a comfortable turning away from life and action or merely for glossing over the egotistical life and the cowardly bad act. We wish to use history only insofar as it serves living’. Friedrich Nietzsche, Untimely Meditation (trans. R.J. Hollingdale), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

