

**Fogging Up Empire**  
**The New York Review of Books obscures the legacy of the British in India**  
By Rishi Nath

“The Pillage of India” by Christopher de Bellaigue [*NYRB*, June 11th] juxtaposes *The Anarchy: The East India Company, Corporate, Violence and the Pillage of an Empire* (Bloomsbury, 2020), by the popular British historian William Dalrymple, with *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India* (Scribe, 2018) by the Indian politician and novelist Shashi Tharoor. *The Anarchy* details how a small London company founded in 1599 by importers and pirates eventually displaced the powerful Mughal Empire and looted India. It is, in Dalrymple’s words, an “ominous warning about tales of abuse of corporate power.” *Inglorious Empire* presents statistical and anecdotal evidence of anti-Indian violence, the squashing of rights, theft, compulsive labor and extractive infrastructure projects to argue against any defense of British colonialism. de Bellaigue extols Dalrymple and dismisses Tharoor. But de Bellaigue has a long history of hiding the point; so does the *NYRB*.

Dalrymple describes the heinous crimes committed by the EIC (he calls the plunder of India the “most supreme act of corporate violence in world history”). Yet he also dedicates time to “contextualizing” those crimes. The “anarchy” in the title--which appears, at first, to indict British behavior--has a second meaning: to suggest that undisciplined Indians in the eighteenth century set the stage for their own demise. Here he is on the consequences of Mughal Delhi surrendering to the Iranian Nader Shah in 1739:

In just a few months, the Mughal Empire, built up over 150 years, shattered and fragmented like a mirror thrown from a first story window, leaving in its place glinting shards of a mosaic of smaller and more vulnerable successor states.

When, in 1799, the British finally overthrew the South Indian warrior-king Tipu Sultan, breaking up and shipping out his collection of jewels (“destroying one of the great wonders of eighteenth century India”), Dalrymple suggests a kind of completion: “...two of the most prominent Company commanders in the campaign...had both been prisoners of Tipu...”

Dalrymple, in a recent interview [*The Telegraph Online*, June 15] complained about the fashion of a “Marxist understanding of history” amongst Indian writers, which pushes “economic and social forces and not individuals.” Social forces, he said, do “not make very readable history.”

*The Anarchy* focuses on individuals: some Mughals, and many Britishers. The trial of former Governor-General Warren Hastings, for example, occupies almost thirty pages of the book. They “had impeached the wrong man” Dalrymple writes, and though “Hastings was no angel; and the EIC under his rule was as extractive as ever...” he was “the most responsible and sympathetic of all the officials.” Why? Because “he had close Indian friends” and “stopped his attendants

treating ordinary Indians roughly.” *The Anarchy* attempts many such individual redemptions, some more readable than others.

“Dalrymple has influenced both the scholarly as well as the popular understanding of South Asian history,” de Bellaigue says. He praises Dalrymple for his previously untranslated Persian sources and punctuates his assessment with a quote from *The Anarchy* that could be taken to suggest the EIC was in fact good for India.

“In comparison with the horrors of the last century,” Dalrymple writes, “the next fifty years would be remembered as the Golden Calm.”

*Inglorious Empire* comes in for little praise. “--Tharoor’s assessment of British conduct is too uniformly negative to do justice to a multifaceted engagement that has lasted well over three centuries,” de Bellaigue says. Though he acknowledges that the arguments in the book reflect “a consensus...on the inequity of colonial rule,” he counters by saying “no Indian empire had ruled as large a territory as the British Raj.” More strangely, he sees virtue in their mercantilism: “As soon as the economic and psychological reasons for keeping up the empire were exhausted, the British simply went home.”

de Bellaigue is an obscurer. His 2001 NYRB essay [“Turkey’s Hidden Past”, March 8] undercounts by many hundreds of thousands the number of Armenians massacred by the Ottomans. A letter by James Roberts Russell, Professor of Armenian Studies at Harvard University, to the Editors of *NYRB* exposed him. Russell asked:

If a reviewer wrote that only a third of the actual number of Jewish victims of the Holocaust had died, or that their deaths came about because they had rioted, or elected to make war against the German government, would you print it?

Afterwards, de Bellaigue attempted to repair his reputation with *Rebel Town: Unraveling the Riddle of History in a Turkish Town*. It received a mixed response. “...can be read as Orientalism,” wrote novelist Joseph O’Neill. A Dwight Garner review summed up the book’s central question as “was it genocide or merely the actions of a few bad men?” Here is de Bellaigue himself:

What is needed is a vaguer description for the events of 1915, avoiding the G-word but clearly connoting criminal acts of slaughter, to which reasonable scholars can subscribe.

Sweeping, lazy statements like this visit his writings in the NYRB. In a review of the *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi [NYRB, June 2004], de Bellaigue wrote “the Iranian people are much more apathetic than Nafisi imagines them to be.” And his conclusion to a review of the

French film *Deepan* [NYRB, June 2016] about Tamil migrants contains this pretzel: “There’s a quandary behind the West’s confused response to the refugee crisis.” Confused response indeed.

Why does this muddling accomplish? It confounds good analysis; it attempts to prick holes in the fabric of important, moral questions so they don’t catch wind. Both de Bellaigue and his NYRB paymasters have, over the last two decades, gone to bizarre and mealy-mouthed lengths to avoid being on the right side of things, especially on matters of the non-West.

But how did a once counterculture journal like *The New York Review of Books*, which, in the sixties and seventies, published Noam Chomsky and other anti-Vietnam War voices become a marching band for Power? A partial answer to this can be found in an essay by Russell Jacoby (“The Graying of the NYRB”, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 2014). Jacoby describes their culture consisting of “insularity, Anglophilism, devotion to New York-based writers, and a love affair with Ivy League-chaired professors.”

The coverage, of course, reflects the interests of the editors. Still, what the *NYRB* did not address over the years is conspicuous. Marxism and the Frankfurt School hardly appeared in its pages. Giants of post-World War II Germany such as Theodor Adorno did not exist—except for discussions about music. Anglo Marxists like Perry Anderson: ignored, except for one review almost 40 years ago. Critical theory, postmodern and recent French thought, which swept the universities: virtually nothing. Conversely, political-legal theorizing anchored at Harvard and Yale: endlessly pursued.

For de Bellaigue, who did his BA and MA in Oriental Studies at the University of Cambridge before jetting off to Turkey and Iran, the NYRB is a snug fit. [“The preponderance of English reviewers remains striking,” Jacoby writes.]

The Marxist historian and geographer Mike Davis also wrote a book on colonial India, which Tharoor cites when discussing the Orissa Famine of 1866 and the 1876-1877 Famine. [It was published in 2001, around the time de Bellaigue was being shredded by Russell.] In the preface, Davis writes that from 1876 to 1902, the number of Indians who died of famine *was no less than* 12.2 million, and *perhaps as high as* 29.6 million. Consider then, from *The Anarchy*, a Britisher’s eye-witness account of the 1770 Bengal Famine (in which 1.2 million died and during which 100 million pounds were sent back to London by the Company).

I have counted from my bed chamber window in the morning forty dead bodies, laying within twenty yards of the wall, besides many hundreds laying in agonies of death for want, bending double, with their stomachs quite close to contracted to their backbones. I have sent my servant to desire those who had strength to remove further off, whilst the poor creatures with their arms extended, have cried out, “Baba! Baba! My father! My father! This affliction comes from the hands of your countrymen, and I am come here to die, if it pleases God, in your presence. I cannot move, do what you will with me.”

By using as a starting point the sheer magnitude of human suffering that was British colonialism, the clarity and decency of Davis’ work remains far above the dissembling fog spread by de

Bellaigue, the *NYRB*, and others. The parameters are set even before the preface, in the very title of his book:

*Late Victorian Holocausts.*