# Retrieving the Lost Worlds of the Past:
# The Case for an Ontological Turn

Our discipline's grand historicist project, its commitment to producing a kind of cumulative biography of our species, imposes strict limits on the kinds of stories we can tell about the past. Most immediately, our histories must locate all of humanity's diverse lifeworlds within the bounds of a single, universal "real world" of time, space, and experience. To do this, they must render experiences in all those past lifeworlds duly commensurable and mutually intelligible. And to do this, our histories must use certain commonly accepted models and categories, techniques and methods. The fundamental problem here is that all of these tools of our practice presuppose a knowledge of experience that is far from universal, as postcolonial theorists and historians like Dipesh Chakrabarty have so well observed. In effect, these devices require us to "translate" the experiences of all past lifeworlds into the experiences of just one lifeworld, namely those of a post-Enlightenment "Europe," the world of our own secular, capitalist modernity. In so doing, they actively limit our ability to represent the past's many non-secular, non-capitalist, non-modern "ways of being human."[1]

To be sure, historicism's cultural turn of the last thirty or more years has helped sensitize us to the alterities of non-modern experiences.[2] No doubt, our

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[1] For Chakrabarty, "Europe" is in the end an "imaginary" figure, a "somewhat indeterminate" domain of experience, one that would prevail wherever life is broadly governed by western, post-Enlightenment principles. And so long as our historicism deems only this "European" mode of being to be "theoretically knowable," "Europe" will always be the ultimate "sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories." See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000), esp. 3-113. Important aligned works of postcolonial critique would include: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Gary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, Ill., 1988), 271-313; Gyan Prakash, "Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism," *American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1475-1490; Gurminder K. Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (Basingstoke, 2007).

[2] On the genesis, gains, and limitations of the cultural turn, see e.g., William H. Sewell, Jr., *The Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago, 2005), 22-80; Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "Introduction," in Gabrielle M. Spiegel, ed., *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn* (New York, 2005), 1-31.

ongoing preoccupations with meanings, discourses, ideologies, imaginaries, and the like have allowed us to move beyond the more explicitly modernist, materialist concerns of our predecessors with the fortunes of states, societies, and economies. No doubt, cultural history has helped us to see that our non-modern subjects knew their worlds otherwise. But in its mainstream forms, it still presupposes a peculiarly "European" knowledge of experience, one that takes for granted a primordial divide between matter and meaning, between a pregiven material reality and the culture one uses to make sense of that reality. Like materialist histories, it is still a historicist device that obliges us to translate the experiences of peoples unlike ourselves.[3]

To substantiate the point, consider a well-known example cited by Chakrabarty himself. When the Santal, a tribal people of Bengal and Bihar, rebelled against British forces and local landlords in 1855, they were, by their own account, simply acting on the orders of their "Lord," the god Thakur. Yet as soon as one attempts to historicize this event, to tell a story in the ways prescribed by our discipline's "European" codes and protocols, one loses the ability to express the central role played here by Thakur. The best one can do within the limits of our historicism is to resort to the ways and means of cultural history, to "anthropologize" Thakur's divine agency, rationalizing it as the "religious belief" of his human devotees, who can be the only "real," material agents. Thus, even the most sensitive efforts to write a "good" subaltern history of the Santal revolt, one that restores full agency to a historically oppressed people, will end up denying the truth of the event as it was actually experienced by the Santal themselves. By reducing the superhuman

[3] Cf. Barbara Weinstein's important observation that mainstream (i.e., "anthropological") cultural histories tend to presuppose rather than disturb established causal, materialist grand narratives, which thus continue to serve as "the historian's 'common sense'." See Barbara Weinstein, "History without a Cause? Grand Narratives, World History, and the Postcolonial Dilemma," *International Review of Social History* 50 (2005): esp. 72-78. On the other hand, more radical, anti-materialist forms of cultural history would appear to want to reduce all reality to an artifact of language or discourse. See e.g., Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991): 773-97; Elizabeth D. Ermarth, "Agency in the Discursive Condition," *History and Theory* 40 (2001): 34-58. But to date the discipline's embrace of this "discursive history" has been at best selective, perhaps because it remains unexplained how one might reconcile the ontological premises of any such "history" with those of historicism in general.

lord of their lifeworld to an artifact of "culture," to a mere construction of discourse or prescientific belief, it will end up "Europeanizing" their real, lived past. It will translate that past into the past of another lifeworld altogether, namely our own.[4]

Given that the vast majority of past peoples, including all those of the premodern "West," inhabited lifeworlds that were partially or wholly untouched by the European Enlightenment, the postcolonial critique of mainstream historicism has far-reaching implications for our entire disciplinary enterprise, as growing numbers of historians have come to recognize.[5] So long as the production of historical knowledge requires us to deracinate non-modern experiences by rendering them all into modern terms, the essential heterogeneities of countless human pasts will remain forever lost in translation. But what exactly is the alternative?

To date, scholarly efforts have focused largely on confronting historicism's epistemological and methodological limitations, but a consensus alternative has yet to emerge.[6] In the current paper, I argue that our more urgent task should be to confront historicism's ontological limitations, which seem to be altogether more

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[4] For the Santal case and its historiography, see Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 97-113. A similar case, where the historiography of the practice of *sati* systemically "silences" the subaltern widow, is discussed in Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" esp. 299-307.

[5] See e.g., the recent roundtable on "Historians and the Question of Modernity" in *American Historical Review* 116, no. 3 (June, 2011), especially the contributions by Symes, Bhambra, Wolin, Benite, and Chakrabarty himself. Among historians of the premodern "West," medievalists have been particularly receptive to the possibilities raised by postcolonial critique. Thus, some have claimed that modernity has used historicism to "colonize" the Middle Ages as its subaltern "other," thereby preventing historians from analysing medieval experience on its own terms. See e.g., John Dagenais and Margaret R. Greer, "Decolonizing the Middle Ages: Introduction," *Decolonizing the Middle Ages,* Special Issue, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30, no. 3 (2000): 431-48; Carol Symes, "When We Talk about Modernity," *American Historical Review* 116, no. 3 (2011): 715-26.

[6] Gabrielle Spiegel has observed that "postmodernism" in general has taught us to recognize that the past "has to be understood within the terms of the conditions of possibility that shaped it [at] any given time." See Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "Épater les médiévistes," *History and Theory* 39, no. 2 (2000): 250. Yet the new modes of practice that might yield such "understanding" remain all too unclear. Among suggested possibilities, Chakrabarty himself (*Provincializing Europe*, 93) would challenge historicism's methodological and epistemological limits by counterposing other, non-modern "forms of memory," the aim being to offer "at least a glimpse" of historicism's "finitude," to view it from a kind of non-European "outside." Alternatively, building on the insights of others, Carol Symes ("When We Talk about Modernity") has argued that we need to develop new ways to periodize the past if we are ever to liberate non-modern experiences from their "subordination to modernity." Cf., Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia, 2008). By contrast, Richard Wolin insists that making our "Eurocentrist" historicism somehow more "enlightened" and "self-critical" will allow us to produce more ethical histories while avoiding a chaos of "cultural relativism." See Richard Wolin, "'Modernity': The Peregrinations of a Contested Historiographical Concept," *American Historical Review* 116, no. 3 (2011): 741-51.

fundamental. Before we can rethink our conventional ways of knowing and representing non-modern realities, we need to reconsider the way we define realness itself. For if we are ever to retrieve all those lost worlds of the past, we need a historicism that can understand every non-modern lifeworld as a distinct real world in its own right. In short, we need to take an ontological turn in our practice.

As we shall see in the pages that follow, historical and ethnographic records attest to considerable ontological diversity across human experience. Every past way of life presupposed its own particular ontology, its own prevailing account of the givens of existence, its own particular forms of subjectivity and sociality, agency and authority, freedom and equality, temporality and spatiality, rationality, ideality, materiality, vitality, and so forth. Yet our conventional historicist models, categories, and protocols do not allow us to historicize past experiences all the way down to the ontological level. Instead they require us to analyse non-modern lifeworlds as if all were experienced within one and the same real world, within a single, universal reality governed by "Europe's" objectivist standards of truth and realness, a reality where only modernity's materialist, secularist, anthropocentrist, and individualist givens of existence can prevail. The net result is a disciplinary practice that effectively modernizes the very fabrics of non-modern being, thereby denying past peoples the power to determine the truths of their own experience.

But as we shall also see, the "European" standards of truth and realness which sustain the whole edifice of our historicism have been directly and indirectly questioned by leading authorities in a wide array of fields, from philosophy and critical theory to science studies and quantum physics. And this general line of critique suggests the possibility of an alternative historicism, one that sees realness itself in an entirely new way, not as an objective, pregiven material condition but as a process, as an ongoing effect produced by the dynamic entanglement of thought and materiality. Hence, this alternative historicism would require us to make sense of

each past lifeworld on its own ontological terms, because whatever our non-modern subjects collectively believed was always already there in their worlds would be an active ingredient of whatever was really there at the time.[7] As I go on to show, an ontological turn along these lines can help us to produce histories that are not only more philosophically robust, but also more ethical and more historically meaningful. Though still conceptually "European," these histories would no longer seek to "translate" heterogeneous non-modern "ways of being human," to modernize them at the ontological level.

To give the argument more concrete form and to show how an ontological turn might work in practice, the paper uses classical Athens, my own area of specialist interest, as a case study. But before turning to Greek antiquity, let us first consider the ontological diversity of past lifeworlds in general terms.

Every historical way of life at once presupposes and realizes a set of ontological commitments. In order to act in and upon the world as a group, the members of any given historical community must know that world as a group. They must share a general, common sense knowledge of what is really there, of the basic objects, relations, and processes of which that world self-evidently consists. They must share a way of objectifying the phenomena that form the metaphysical foundations and essences of their common experience, phenomena like those we would call

[7] Hence too this alternative would be distinctly different from recent attempts to formulate some kind of hybrid material-cultural history, which would retain historicism's conventional, primordial distinction between material and cultural phenomena, while somehow regarding both as equally real. See e.g., Geoff Eley, "Is All the World a Text? From Social History to the History of Society Two Decades Later," in Terence J. MacDonald, ed., *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1996), 193-244; Roger Chartier, *On the Edge of the Cliff: History, Language, and Practices* (Baltimore, 1997); William H. Sewell, Jr., "The Concept(s) of Culture," in Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *History Beyond the Cultural Turn*, (Berkeley, 1999), 35-61.; Richard Biernacki, "Language and the Shift from signs to practices in cultural inquiry," *History and Theory* 39 (2000): 289-310; Tony Bennett and Patrick Joyce, eds., *Material Powers: Cultural Studies, History and the Material Turn* (London, 2010). My own approach would be more closely aligned with recent cases made for an "ontological turn" in anthropology, which I have learned of only since beginning work on this project. See e.g., Morten A. Pedersen, "Common Nonsense: A Review of Certain Recent Reviews of the Ontological Turn," *Anthropology of this Century* 5 (2012): http://aotcpress.com/articles/common_nonsense/.

personhood and subjectivity, kinship and sociality, freedom and authority, humanity and divinity, and the sources, means, and ends of life itself. And they will accordingly premise their shared ways of acting in the world, all their norms, their stories, and their practices, upon the realness of such *a priori* foundations and essences. In other words, every community, past and present, takes for granted, acts upon, and thereby summons to material life its own particular ontology, its own account of what it deems to be the real world. Which is to say, there have been innumerable real worlds in history, not just one.

To illustrate this variablity, we might briefly consider the kind of ontology which anchors our own liberal capitalist modernity, noting how four of its core commitments all depart radically from the commitments of non-modern ontologies.

First and perhaps most fundamentally, modernity's prevailing ontology is uncompromisingly materialist. The states, economies, and other essential structures upon which modern western social being is staked all presuppose a thoroughly disenchanted real world, a world which grants true realness only to those materially self-evident phenomena which comply with our scientifically established "laws" of physics and nature. As such, our real world has no place for what it regards as purely imaginary or ideational objects, relations, and processes. It is thus a world entirely devoid of all the gods and monsters, demons and angels, spirits and ghosts, and the myriad other "supernatural" beings that have variously governed, nurtured, energized, and terrorized all other historical realities for millennia. It is a world where physical death is final extinction, a world emptied of heavens and hells, reincarnations, and all those mortal agencies, from Christian saints to the Igbo *egwugwu*, whose powers continue to radiate and condition life from beyond the grave. It is a world that has summarily extinguished all those "magical" vital forces that once animated entire

ecologies and civilizations, like Polynesian *mana*, Hindu *shakti*, and Chinese *chi*. It is a world without *anima* or *atman*, *psyche* or soul.[8]

From this rather literal materialism, it of course follows that modern liberal ontology is also thoroughly secular. In so far as it recognizes the possibility of divinity at all, it objectifies gods as effects of the thoughts and beliefs of human beings, as artifacts of human faith, prayer, and ritual, not as independently existing, "magical" agencies in their own right. It thus feels comfortable relegating all gods and the beliefs that produce them to a second-order realm of experience called "religion," a sacred space or sphere that is rationally disaggregated from the rest of social life. This idea of a detached, abstract realm of "religion" may well make sense to those who have come to think of divinity itself as a detached, abstract object of belief, like the god of protestant Christianity. But it would have made no sense at all in most premodern or non-western formations, where divinity was somehow immanent in all life's processes, where life itself would have ceased altogether if the gods who self-evidently controlled it were somehow relieved of their responsibilities. Religion is a category that makes sense only in our modern, western world, a world that is already secular, a world where gods have been turned from subjects into objects, because humans already presume they have the know-how and the wherewithal to take charge of life itself.[9]

And this brings us to the third essential commitment of modern liberal ontology, which is its unapologetic anthropocentrism. Humans who presume

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[8] This ontological materialism somehow persists even though quantum physicists long ago abandoned classical Newtonian ideas of material quiddity. See e.g., Paul Davies and John Gribbin, *The Matter Myth: Dramatic Discoveries that Challenge our Understanding of Physical Reality* (New York, 1992); Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC, 2007).

[9] For the apparent paradox that the category "religion" is a product of the modern, secular world, see especially Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, Md., 1993); *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Palo Alto, Ca., 2003). On the historical antipathy of protestant Christianity to all things "magical," see Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (London, 1971). On the birth of a modern "biopolitics," which authorizes humans to "take charge" of the wellsprings of life, see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction,* Volume 1 (New York, 1990), 135-59; *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the College de France, 1978-79* (Basingstoke, 2008), 1-73.

themselves capable of confining the actions of God Himself within a designated field of religion, a marginal, socially inessential realm of their own making, will obviously have little compunction imposing their self-evidently rational dominion upon the rest of His creation. Modern capitalist ecology is predicated upon an assumption of manifest species exceptionalism. The entangled mess of experience is thus categorically sundered into two mutually exclusive objects, whereby an intrinsically human order of knowledge and reason, agency and subjectivity, appears to be self-evidently distinct from a non-human order of "nature," from a mere "environment" of inert "resources," subject-less "processes," and enclosable "property."[10] And with this act of cosmic dichotomy, moderns have also sundered their world forever from most if not all non-modern worlds. They have irrevocably distanced themselves from peoples whose modes of being were governed by the unchanging annual rhythms of the seasons and the heavenly bodies, by the life cycles of animals and plants, from peoples who knew the lands that nurtured them in some sense as their parents or ancestors, from peoples who took it for granted that countless non-human agents and subjects were always out there, immanent in earth, sky, rivers, and seas, making all human life possible.[11]

But perhaps the modern ontological cuts that would be most unfathomable to non-modern peoples would be those we make between ourselves and other persons. Here we come to the fourth and last of the core ontological commitments that sustain liberal capitalist reality, namely our individualism, our common sense assumption that all human beings are naturally autonomous, self-interested, presocial subjects.

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[10] See e.g., Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004).
[11] See e.g., Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (Chicago, 2013). For the claim that we now live in an "anthropocene" era, in which humankind has assumed the status of a geological agency, see e.g., Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, *Love Your Monsters: Postenvironmentalism and the Anthropocene* (Oakland, Ca., 2011). Cf. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 197-222.

This ontological individualism would have been scarcely intelligible to, say, the inhabitants of precolonial Bali or Hawai'i, where the divine king or chief, the visible incarnation of the god Lono, was "the condition of possibility of the community," and thus "encompasse[d] the people in his own person, as a projection of his own being," such that his subjects were all "particular instances of the chief's existence."[12] It would have been barely imaginable, for that matter, in the world of medieval Europe, where conventional wisdom proverbially figured sovereign and subjects as the head and limbs of a single, primordial "body politic" or *corpus mysticum*.[13] And the idea of a natural, presocial individual would be wholly confounding to, say, traditional Hindus and the Hagen people of Papua New Guinea, who objectify all persons as permeable, partible "dividuals" or "social microcosms," as provisional embodiments of all the actions, gifts, and accomplishments of others that have made their lives possible.[14]

We alone in the modern capitalist west, it seems, regard individuality as the true, primordial estate of the human person. We alone believe that humans are always already unitary, integrated selves, all born with a natural, presocial disposition to pursue a rationally calculated self-interest and act competitively upon our no less natural, no less presocial rights to life, liberty, and private property. We alone are thus inclined to see forms of sociality, like relations of kinship, nationality, ritual,

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[12] Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton, 1980), esp. 128-29; Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago, 1985), 36; "Hierarchy and Humanity in Polynesia," in Antony Hooper and Judith Huntsman, eds., *Transformations of Polynesian Culture* (Auckland, 1985), 207, 214.

[13] This figure can be found in the works of numerous intellectual luminaries of the age, from Thomas Aquinas and Dante to Christine de Pizan and Jean Gerson. See Otto von Gierke, *Political Theories of the Middle Age* (Cambridge, 1927), 22-30; Anton-Hermann Chroust, "The Corporate Idea and the Body Politic in the Middle Ages," *Review of Politics* 9, no. 4 (1947), 423-52; Antony Black, *Political Thought in Europe, 1250-1450* (New York, 1992), 14-41. On the self-evident interdependence of human beings, see e.g., Aquinas, *Commentary on the Ethics of Aristotle*, 1.1.4. "Body politic" as *corpus mysticum*: Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, 1957), 193-272.

[14] See especially McKim Marriott, "Hindu Transactions: Diversity without Dualism," in Bruce Kapferer, ed., *Transaction and Meaning: Directions in the Anthropology of Change and Symbolic Behavior* (Philadelphia, 1976), 109-42; "Constructing an Indian Ethnosociology," in McKim Marriott, ed., *India through Hindu Categories* (New Delhi, 1990), 1-39; Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley, Ca., 1988); cf. Mark Mosko, "Motherless Sons: 'Divine Kings' and 'Partible Persons' in Melanesia and Polynesia," *Man* 27 (1992): 697-717; Annette B. Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping while Giving* (Berkeley, Ca., 1992).

class, and so forth, as somehow contingent, exogenous phenomena, not as essential constituents of our very subjectivity, of who or what we really are as beings. And we alone believe that social being exists to serve individual being, rather than the other way round. Because we alone imagine that individual humans are free-standing units in the first place, "unsocially sociable" beings who ontologically precede whatever "society" our self-interest prompts us to form at any given time.[15]

Accordingly, the logic of liberal individualism mandates a separation between this self-sustaining "(civil) society" of free individuals and any corresponding state. While "government" may be necessary to safeguard and enforce rights, especially the right to accumulate property, it is also by definition a "necessary evil," since it entails alienating one's natural freedom to rule oneself to other self-interested individuals, who will inevitably rule for themselves.[16] Hence government's powers must be expressly constrained by mechanisms like elections and term limits. Hence too, because the "wealth of nations" ultimately depends on the unencumbered liberty of individuals to act on their innate dispositions to "improve" themselves, a free realm of "private" life must be protected from the realm of "public" power by devices like bills of rights.[17] And hence in our modern world alone it seems entirely natural that rulers should not manage the basic means of existence, that what we call the "market

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[15] The classic statement of this account of human subjectivity and sociality is John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, edited by C. B. Macpherson (Indianapolis, 1980), 52-65. On humanity's "unsocial sociability," see e.g., Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent," in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays, on Politics, History, and Morals* (Indianapolis, 1983), 31-32. Attempts to argue for the presence of individualism in non-modern worlds tend to mistake behavioral individualism for ontological individualism. See e.g., Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism: The Family, Property and Social Transition* (Oxford, 1978). While instances of egoism and self-interested behavior may be more or less ubiquitous in history, I know of no non-modern lifeworld which objectified itself as the creation of natural, presocial human individuals. Ontological individualism, as we know it, can only be realized in a "European" lifeworld, in an environment that is already conditioned by other consonant, uniquely modern metaphysical commitments, like those to materialism, secularism, and anthropocentrism.

[16] E.g., Thomas Paine, "Common Sense," in *Thomas Paine: Political Writings* (Cambridge, 2000), 3. On the protection of property rights as the primary purpose of government, e.g., Locke, *Second Treatise*, 29.

[17] On how the individual disposition to accumulate produces national wealth, see e.g., Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations,* Books I-III (Harmondsworth, 1986), 446. This is the proverbial "invisible hand" mechanism, first mentioned at Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments,* Volume I (Oxford, 1976), 184.

processes" of our "economy" should be free from any governmental control.[18] In our world alone, it seems, human individuals are presumed to possess the capacity to secure all of life's basic necessities for themselves.[19]

How, then, do we historians deal with the manifest ontological variability of human experience? To answer this question, we can now turn to the case of classical Athens, looking first at the distinctly non-modern real world of the Athenians themselves, then at how mainstream historicist scholarship treats that ontology.

One should say up front that antiquity has left us no explicit, comprehensive accounts of what the Athenians took to be the real world. Unlike ourselves, the Athenians did not need armies of scientific experts to tell them what was really there and what was not. Their ontology was implicit in the stories they told about themselves and in all their shared practices, and it was far less complex and convoluted than our own. Briefly stated, their real world was premised upon just three essential metaphysical foundations.[20]

First and foremost, there were the gods. There were two populations in the land of Attica, not just one. The Athenians coexisted with innumerable deities and other numinous beings. Their *polis* was "totally suffused" with "the gods and their

[18] On the invention of "the economy" as a metrological device in the 1930s, see Timothy Mitchell, "Rethinking Economy," *Geoforum* 39 (2008): 1116-21.
[19] On liberal market freedom and its formation, see e.g., Bernard E. Harcourt, *The Illusions of Free Markets: Punishment and the Myth of Natural Order* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011); Eric MacGilvray, *The Invention of Market Freedom* (New York, 2011).
[20] To my knowledge, the following account represents the first attempt by a modern historian to specify the contents of the ontology upon which the Athenian *politeia* was premised. An important qualification should duly be noted. Like any other ontology, the Athenian instance is in the end what we would call a "working model" of the givens of existence in a particular lifeworld, albeit a model whose truth was continually presupposed and reproduced in the thought and practice of everyday life. As a contingent, ultimately provisional human construct, it can thus help us account for the general, prevailing patterns of thought and action in Athens. But it could not in itself rule out the possibility of heterodox thought and action at the time. Accordingly, in Athenian antiquity as in liberal modernity, one can readily find cases of individual thought and behavior which might seem to contradict prevailing ontological presuppositions. And it is even possible to find alternative "models" of the foundations of social being in the work of certain heterodox thinkers, e.g., Plato.

concerns."[21] These gods were not just effects of human ideas or beliefs. They were real, independent subjects and agents in the world of time and space, who ultimately controlled all of life's processes and outcomes.[22] Hence, the most costly, conspicuous buildings in Athens were not political structures or philosophical schools. They were temples, suitably opulent residences for the divine overlords of the *polis*. Hence too, time itself in Athens was organized around the annual performance of dozens of festivals, local and national. And hence prayers, oaths, and offerings to gods accompanied almost every human activity and event, from farming, trading, decision-making, and warfare to marriage and childbirth itself. While the Athenians convened *en masse* to produce binding assembly decisions on just forty or so days each year, their engagements with divinity were ubiquitous and continuous, requiring a vast, ongoing outlay of precious resources. Ritual action in Athens was not merely a matter of showing piety or reverence to higher powers. It was above all about inducing those powers to manage and secure the vitality of *polis* as a whole.[23]

The second foundation of Athenian social being was the land of Attica itself. In the eyes of the Athenians, Attica was not some generic territorial tract or abstract reserve of enclosable property. It was a land like no other, a singular, living organism that was at once their "nurse and fatherland and mother."[24] To begin with, since the Athenians claimed to be an authochthonous or indigenous people who had inhabited Attica since time immemorial, the land was understood to be a patrilineal, family inheritance, a means of life passed down to them by their fathers.[25] But they also simultaneously gendered their land as female, as a generative body or agency with

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[21] Loren J. Samons, *Empire of the Owl: Athenian Imperial Finance* (Stuttgart, 2000), 326-27. Over 200 different gods are attested in Athens. On this unusually large number, see Robert Garland, *Introducing New Gods: The Politics of Athenian Religion* (Ithaca, NY, 1992), 14; Robert Parker, *Polytheism and Society at Athens* (Oxford, 2005), 397; cf. Xenophon, *Constitution of the Athenians* 3.2; Pausanias 1.17.1; 1.24.3.
[22] On the more important gods of the Athenians and their respective life-sustaining functions, see Parker, *Polytheism and Society*, 387-451; cf. Jon D. Mikalson, *Athenian Popular Religion* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1983), 18-26.
[23] For the Athenians' lavish expenditures on festivals, see e.g., Demosthenes 4.35-36.
[24] Isocrates 4.24-5.
[25] E.g., Demosthenes 60.4; Herodotus 1.56.2; 7.161.3; Lysias 2.17; Thucydides 1.2.5; 2.36.1.

whom they shared an essential consanguinity. Mother Attica, they said, had physically given birth to the first Athenians, ancestral kings like Cecrops and Erechtheus, who were born literally from her soil.[26] As the first land on earth to provide life-sustaining crops of grain and olives, she had also nourished these first humans.[27] She had introduced gods to her domain to serve as "rulers and teachers," to instruct Athenians in all the basic "skills" (*tekhnai*) necessary to maintain their fledgling *polis*.[28] And just as she had served them ever since, as "the very nurse of their existence," so too the Athenians had "cherished her as fondly as the best of children cherish their fathers and mothers," by defending her, cultivating her, and protecting her from harm of all kinds.[29]

These same children of Attica of course duly formed the third essence of the *polis*. But they did not do so as a mere aggregate of pregiven individuals. Rather, like their counterparts in, say, precolonial Hawai'i and medieval Europe, they took their place in the world as a single, corporate person, a person they called simply *Demos*, "the People of the Athenians." As the human face or person of the *polis* itself, this unitary Demos was a kind of ageless, primordial superorganism that had been continually present in Attica since the time of those first earth-born kings. It thus existed prior to and apart from the particular living, breathing persons who happened to comprise and embody it at any given time.[30] So membership of this Demos was not a matter of abstract, legalistic "citizenship." It was about "having a share of" (*metekhein*) the life of a free social body, a *polis* life or *politeia* without which

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[26] E.g., Euripides, *Ion* 1163-4; Herodotus 8.55; Homer, *Iliad* 5.47-8; cf. Pindar, *Isthmian* 2.19.
[27] E.g., Demosthenes 60.4-5; Plato, *Menexenus* 237d-238a.
[28] Plato, *Menexenus* 238a-b.
[29] Isocrates 12.125.
[30] Greg Anderson, "The Personality of the Greek State," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 129 (2009): 1-21. Demos was typically figured as a single, mature, male figure. For a catalogue and discussion of over thirty attested Demos images, see Amy C. Smith, "Athenian Political Art from the Fifth and Fourth Centuries: Images of Political Personifications," in C. Blackwell, ed., *Demos: Classical Athenian Democracy* [www.stoa.org] (2003), 14-23. Cf., Aristophanes, *Knights*; Pausanias 1.3.3; *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* 12.87.

an individual life would have been unfree and unthinkable.[31] Prevailing assumptions about the essentially corporate, primordial nature of Greek *polis* communities are well expressed by Aristotle:

> The *polis* is by nature clearly prior to the household and the individual, since the whole is of necessity prior to the part; for example, if the whole body is destroyed, there will be no foot or hand, except in the equivocal sense that we might speak of a stone hand; for when destroyed the hand will be no better than that ... The proof that the *polis* is a creation of nature and prior to the individual is that the individual, when isolated, is not self-sufficing; and therefore he is like a part in relation to the whole. But he who is unable to live in society, or has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god; he is no part of the *polis*.[32]

For Greeks, in other words, human life beyond a bare, animal existence was always already social, and social life was always already what we would call political.[33]

No less alien to modern sensibilities, the constituent elements of the Athenian social body were not individuals but households or *oikoi*.[34] Between them, these households shared responsibility for extracting the means of existence from the land of Attica, which, as we have seen, was conceptualized as a life source for all, not as "private property."[35] Like the cells of a human body, Athenian households subsisted as discrete entities by maintaining a symbiotic relationship with the compound organism which they collectively comprised. And nature had apparently designed males and females to play different, but complementary and equally essential roles in this socially reproductive symbiosis. While males, as the titular

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[31] On the differences between *polis* membership and modern citizenship, see Martin Ostwald, "Shares and Rights: 'Citizenship' Greek Style and American Style," in Josiah Ober and Charles W. Hedrick, eds., *Demokratia: A Conversation on Democracies, Ancient and Modern* (Princeton, 1996), 49-61.
[32] *Politics* 1253a19-29. For a more extended comparison of the *polis* to a human body, see *Politics* 1302b34-1303a2.
[33] In the Greek mind, the idea of a "society" of presocial individuals would have evoked images of the lawless anti-*polis* of the anti-social, man-eating Cyclopes (Homer, *Odyssey* 9.105-30).
[34] On the "centrality" of the *oikos* to Athenian life, see e.g., H. J. Wolff, "Marriage Law and Family Organization in Ancient Athens," *Traditio* 2 (1944): 43-95; S. C. Todd, *The Shape of Athenian Law* (Oxford, 1993), 201-31; Edward E. Cohen, *The Athenian Nation* (Princeton, 2000), esp. 32-48.
[35] On Athenian ideas about land "ownership" and how they differed from modern, liberal suppositions, see Lin Foxhall, "Household, Gender and Property in Classical Athens," *Classical Quarterly* 39 (1989): 22-44; Alison Burford, *Land and Labor in the Greek World* (Baltimore, 1993), 15-55.

heads of households, were duly assigned responsibility for administering and protecting the life of the social body as a whole, women contributed to the reproduction of that same body by nourishing and managing life within its constituent *oikoi*.[36] Hence, simply being born within Athenian territory did not make one an Athenian. Under normal circumstances, what made one an Athenian was being born into the body of Demos through an Athenian household, through parents who were themselves at once products and producers of the life of the *polis*.[37]

So how exactly did the Athenians objectify personhood and selfhood? Again, the prevailing notions were distinctly non-modern. Indeed, it may be helpful to think of each Athenian, whether male or female, as a "dividual" or plural self. Most immediately, each one was simultaneously both a *polites*, a constituent or expression of the social body or Demos, and an *idiotes*, a constituent or expression of a particular *oikos*.[38] In our modern terms, it is as if they were all two different people or beings at the same time, each one with its own distinct form of personality or subjectivity. And both forms of subjectivity were relational.[39] That is to say, Athenians never stood just for themselves as disaggregated individuals, as singular instantiations of a universal personhood. They always confronted the world as constituents of a particular, pregiven group or body larger than themselves, as human materializations of the *polis* and the household that made their lives free and possible in the first place.

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[36] On the vital roles played by women in the reproduction of *polis* and *oikos*, see e.g., Virginia Hunter, *Policing Athens: Social Control in the Attic Lawsuits, 420-320 B.C.* (Princeton, 1994); Cynthia Patterson, "The Case Against Neaira and the Public Ideology of the Athenian Family," in Alan Boegehold and Adele Scafuro, eds., *Athenian Identity and Civic Ideology* (Baltimore, 1994), 199-211; *The Family in Greek History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); Cohen, *Athenian Nation*, 32-48. On the "natural" complementarity of gender roles, see e.g., Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* 7.1-43, where the wife/mother figure is cast as the "queen bee" of the *oikos*.

[37] Generally, "aliens" (*xenoi*) could only become Athenians if they had made some extraordinary contribution to the well-being of the Athenian *polis*.

[38] On the *polites/idiotes* distinction, e.g., Lene Rubinstein, "The Athenian Political Perception of the *idiotes*," in Paul Cartledge et al., eds., *Kosmos: Essays in Order, Conflict, and Community in Classical Athens* (Cambridge, 1998), 125-43. Feminine equivalents of these distinct personalities (*politis*, *idiotis*) are attested, though not commonly so.

[39] Cf. the similar emphasis on relational selfhood in Christopher Gill, *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy: The Self in Dialogue* (Oxford, 1996).

*Oikos* and *polis* were what they were, the very stuff that they were made of, making an Athenian essentially different from all other persons, Greek and non-Greek.[40]

In sum, the real world of the Athenians came down to an essentially simple interdependence between three elements, a cosmic ecology of gods, land, and people. If the gods' role in this ecology was to reproduce the basic conditions of existence for land and people, the role of mother Attica was to furnish the essential means of material life for people and gods. The people's role, meanwhile, was to harness and distribute these means in such a way that the land would always be cultivated and defended, that the gods would always be honored appropriately, and that they themselves would remain a healthy, united Demos, thereby ensuring the orderly perpetuation of the ecology as a whole. And they organized themselves accordingly.

This mode of organization is what they called their *politeia*, their *demokratia*. It had nothing to do with "democracy" as we understand the term. It was whatever Demos had to do to ensure its own continued vitality in its particular environment, where life itself depended upon preserving symbiotic relations with mysterious, non-human agencies in the face of more or less constant threats from other human communities elsewhere. In short, *demokratia* was wherever the constituents of Demos, male and female, acted in and upon the world to preserve the life of the *polis*. This might be in their homes or neighborhoods. Or it might be in the assembly, in law courts, at festivals, on the battlefield, or wherever else Athenians convened to act as one in the unitary person of the *polis* itself. When so gathered, they would in effect shed their personal selves as *idiotai*, or household members, and assume their other social personae, as *politai* (male) or *politides* (female), as generic, interchangeable incarnations of Demos, the human essence of the *polis*.[41] As such, these Athenian

[40] For a recent argument that a distinctly "racial" (rather than legalistic) model of "citizenship" prevailed in Athens, see Susan Lape, *Race and Citizen Identity in the Classical Athenian Democracy* (New York, 2010).
[41] For more on the realization of Demos in practice, see Anderson, "Personality of the Greek State," 10-17.

"civilians" freely and continually ruled themselves, with no need for complex administrative systems, a police apparatus, or specialist, professional leaders of any kind.[42] This, it seems, is what *demokratia* meant in classical Athens.

Yet it is not what *demokratia* seems to mean to specialists today. Greek historians are of course fully aware that the Athenians lived according to their own world-making truths, including all those just described. But when we historicize their *politeia*, we are instead obliged to use modern, universalizing models and categories, tools which actively refashion this non-modern lifeworld to fit our own modern ontological presuppositions.

These standard tools commit us, first of all, to a peculiarly modern form of ontological materialism. They lead us to believe that the essences of Athens, like the essences of all complex societies, are to be found in a material substrate of self-evidently distinct fields or structures, like the political, the social, and the economic.

For example, they predispose us to think that the Athenian assembly, courts, and other decision-making bodies instantiated a free-standing field of "government" or "state," an intrinsically "political" agency or space that was somehow detached from a separate object called Athenian "society." Never mind that neither of these two mutually exclusive categories correspond to phenomena in ancient experience. We seldom question their utility, even when it is pointed out that, say, Athenian "government" was run entirely by civilian volunteers, by members of Athenian "society." Instead, we simply infer that the *polis* of Athens must have been some kind of unusual blurring or fusion of state and society, even though the logic which causes us to see these two components as discrete, mutually exclusive objects in the

[42] On self-policing by male and female Athenians, see Hunter, *Policing Athens*.

first place, the liberal logic of protecting a free "privacy" from government's "necessary evil," would have been entirely meaningless to the Athenians.[43]

Likewise, our science leads us to presume that activities like farming, trading, and money-lending must have together constituted something called an "economy." Never mind the fact that the Athenians could not have imagined such a system, because theirs was a world where there were no abstract "markets," capitalist-style corporations, or private property as such, a world where each individual *oikos* was its own, self-sustaining, miniature life "system," where free people by definition worked only for themselves. Again, for historians, ancient obliviousness to the presence of a modern social object like an economy does not mean that said object was not really there in antiquity. It means only that its presence must have been somehow blurred, hidden, or "embedded" elsewhere in experience.[44]

In short, when we historicize the *politeia* of classical Athens, our accounts invariably translate the evidence of non-modern experience into modern social objects like government, society, and economy. While we presume these accounts to be god's-eye, "etic" (outsider) representations of objectively real, material phenomena, the objects in question would have been wholly unintelligible to the Athenians. They remain materially self-evident only to ourselves, not least because it is the very tools of our practice that are causing us to see them there in the first place,

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[43] See e.g., Robin Osborne, *Demos: The Discovery of Classical Attika* (Cambridge, 1985), 7-8; Ian Morris, *Burial and Ancient Society: The Rise of the Greek City-State* (Cambridge, 1987), 5; Christian Meier, *The Greek Discovery of Politics* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), esp. 20-22; Josiah Ober, "The *polis* as a Society: Aristotle, John Rawls and the Athenian Social Contract," in Mogens Hansen, ed., *The Ancient Greek City-State* (Copenhagen, 1993), 129.

[44] "Market economy" in Athens: e.g., Edmund M. Burke, "The Economy of Athens in the Classical Era: Some Adjustments to the Primitivist Model," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 122 (1992): 199-226; Edward E. Cohen, *Athenian Economy and Society: A Banking Perspective* (Princeton, 1993). The "ancient economy" as an "embedded" or "partially embedded" phenomenon: e.g., M. I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (Berkeley, Ca., 1999); Daryl T. Engen, *Honor and Profit: Athenian Trade Policy and the Economy and Society of Greece, 415-307 BCE* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2010). For all his well-intended efforts to question liberal presuppositions about humankind's innate propensity for competitive economic acquisition, Karl Polanyi's familiar claim that economic life in premodern societies was "submerged" or "embedded" in "social relations" still perpetuates the peculiarly modern idea that "economies" themselves are quasi-natural objects, phenomena which occur more or less inevitably across all human experience, even if their presence remains unobserved at the time. See *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of our Time* (New York, 1944), esp. 43-55.

by imposing modern ontological presuppositions upon the ancient data. As for the Athenians' own ontology, the non-modern ontology which actually conditioned their *politeia*, our historicist tools would have us reduce this to a body of insubstantial, free-standing ideas, to a prescientific, "emic" (insider) account of the material world we ourselves have been busy constructing. As such, like all the gods, myths, and other "imaginary" or "ideological" phenomena which seemed all too true and real at the time, the contents of this ancient ontology obviously have no place in history proper. They belong instead to the separate ambit of "cultural history," along with all the other non-modern figments of the Athenian mind.[45]

Next, by authorizing us to divest Athenian reality of its constituent "culture" in this way, our historicist tools of course require us to secularize Athens. As mere cultural constructions or representations, as self-evidently unreal objects rather than real subjects, Athenian divinities can be summarily excised from the world they once ruled. It matters not at all, apparently, that the Athenians premised their entire *politeia* upon the assumption that gods controlled the outcomes of most if not all human activities, devoting huge quantities of their social resources to the cause of maintaining the divine favor upon which their entire ecology depended. Our historicism presumes we can only make meaningful sense of this *politeia* if we study it as an essentially disenchanted construct, as if the Athenians were really just there all by themselves. It thus encourages us to abstract their vital engagements with divinity from the rest of their experience, which is thereby effectively secularized. And it bids us to bundle all their non-secular beliefs and rituals conveniently together in a field we call "religion," which it inclines us to regard as a phenomenon of minor,

[45] Seminal works on Athenian imaginaries and ideologies that have helped to define and perpetuate this analytical dichotomy include: Nicole Loraux, *The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986); Josiah Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People* (Princeton, 1989); Alan Boegehold and Adele Scafuro, eds., *Athenian Identity and Civic Ideology* (Baltimore, 1994).

largely antiquarian interest, an unfathomably irrational backdrop to the real business of history that was going on elsewhere.[46]

And then the anthropocentrist premises of our historicism oblige us to dismantle the ecology of the *polis* still further, to sunder the Athenians from their ancestral land, from mother Attica herself. Where they saw a loving parent who actively and continually nurtured and sustained them, making them whatever they were, we tend to see only a passive "environment," an assemblage of landscape, livestock, and climate that existed to be exploited by aquisitive individuals. Where they saw a consanguineous communion of land and people, we see only division, the primordial cleavage that our historicist science requires us to inscribe between a human realm and a non-human "nature." Accordingly, we write the history of their *polis* as if they were its only agents and subjects, as if they imagined themselves the masters of their world, rather than its grateful products. As for the contributions to this story made by mother Attica and all the other non-human agents and subjects in this ancient life system, these must be demystified and studied under the specialist rubric of "environmental history," if they are to be studied at all.[47]

Finally, after encouraging us to strip Athenian reality of its gods, its Attic motherland, and its "culture," our historicism would have us complete the disintegration of the Athanians' ecology by insisting that we dismember Demos itself, the human essence of the *polis*. Simply put, the individualist premises of our models and categories cannot accept the reality of a natural social body or self. So they force us instead to reduce a perpetual, pregiven corporate subject, a free superorganism of households, to an ever-changing aggregate of pregiven individual subjects, turning it

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[46] For an attempt to write a history of Athenian "religion," see Robert Parker, *Athenian Religion: A History* (Oxford, 1996). For an influential, specialist treatment of religion as the "central ideology" of the *polis*, see Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, "What is *polis* Religion?" in Oswyn Murray and Simon Price, eds., *The Greek City from Homer to Alexander* (Oxford, 1990), 295-322.

[47] Even nuanced studies of Greek ecology still take for granted modern ontological divides between, say, "humankind" and "nature," "population" and "environment." See e.g., J. Donald Hughes, "Ecology in Ancient Greece," *Inquiry* 18 (1975): 115-125; Robert Sallares, *The Ecology of the Ancient Greek World* (Ithaca, NY, 1991).

into a male-only, quasi-liberal association of free "citizens." And of course these free, rational, quasi-modern subjects seem entirely at home in the world which our categories have made for them, a disenchanted world of quasi-modern social objects.

The net outcome of all our mainstream, historicist efforts to render the Athenian way of life intelligible is thus a distinctly materialist, secularist, anthropocentrist, and individualist account, a consensus account that we might call "democratic Athens." Here, the Athenian *politeia* is summarily reduced to a specialist "political" system or field of "government." Because liberal presuppositions associate "the political" with power and "the social" with freedom, this "government" is invariably seen as a kind of central command structure from which all order in Athens duly radiated. And because the Athenians knew their *politeia* as *demokratia*, we invariably call this structure "democracy" and naturally assume that it was premised upon much the same individualist, egalitarian principles as inform our own liberal governments today. In other words, the primary essence of Athens was not a social body of households that was intent on preserving its life-sustaining ecology with the gods and land of Attica, as the Athenians themselves believed. It was rather a power structure managed by self-interested male equals.[48]

As I see it, this orthodox, historicist "democratic Athens" account is troubling for at least three fundamental reasons.

First, on a basic ethical level, there is something deeply troubling about a historicism that would reengineer non-modern social being to fit our modern ontological presuppositions. As the Athenian instance well demonstrates, our conventional practice is hardly the innocent exercise in impartial, god's-eye analysis that it takes itself to be. It is altogether more like a thought experiment. In its well-intentioned

[48] See especially Ober, *Mass and Elite*; "The Nature of Athenian Democracy," in *The Athenian Revolution: Essays on Ancient Greek Democracy and Political Theory* (Princeton, 1996), 107-22.

efforts to render past worlds commensurable and mutually intelligible, it ends up homogenizing the very contents of all past experience along modern ontological lines. It systematically isolates its historical subjects from all the conditions of their existence, divesting them of their thought, their gods, their ecologies, and what they took to be their real selves. It then reprograms their subjectivities along individualist lines, inserts them in a world of our making, one that presupposes their individuality, and then tries to explain how they themselves might once have created and sustained such a world. The end result of all this is a strange kind of counterfactual history, an "as if" or "what if?" form of history, one that will always end up figuring past worlds as imperfect premonitions of our own.[49]

In other words, our standard mode of history-making authorizes us to engage in a kind of retrospective political violence, a historicist imperialism that would forcefully impose the realities of our liberal capitalist present upon peoples who can no longer speak for themselves. To a point, of course, this kind of imperialism is inevitable in any form of modern historical practice. But our current practice comes at far too high a price for our subjects, effectively depriving them of the power to determine the essential truth of who and what they really were at the time.[50]

Presumably, the most immediate justification for this ethically dubious practice would be that it at least produces accounts that are genuinely "historical." And this brings us to the second problem with the consensus account of classical Athens. For the closer one looks at the "democratic Athens" of our textbooks and scholarship, the more historically questionable it seems to be. Even when taken on its own historicist terms, it is an account that seems to be riddled with improbable paradoxes and contradictions.

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[49] Cf. Chakrabarty's point that "European" histories of non-modern experiences will always be stories of "incompleteness," "absence," and "lack." See *Provincializing Europe*, esp. 27-46.
[50] Cf. Carol Symes' observation that modern historicism's "colonization" of the Middle Ages means that "there is no way to study 'medieval' people for their own sake or on their own terms." See Symes, "When We Talk about Modernity," 716.

For example, if the Athenians ordered their world according to something like egalitarian, post-Enlightenment principles, how could they have denied native-born, adult females their civil right of self-determination and excluded them from political life? Can we even speak meaningfully of female "citizens" in Athens at all? For that matter, why did male Athenians never apparently question the pronounced inequalities of wealth among themselves? Why did they simply accept the fact that a tiny minority (ca. 1%) of super-rich citizens were hundreds if not thousands of times wealthier than the average, allowing them effectively to monopolize all positions of influence and leadership within the *polis*?[51] More obviously, if they were such idealistic democrats, how could the Athenians have possibly tolerated the importation of slaves into Attica from non-Greek regions like Thrace, Scythia, and Anatolia? How could they have accepted the open exploitation of as many as 80,000 unfree workers in their midst at any given time?[52] And what exactly are we to make of the empire that the Athenians established in the Aegean basin in ca. 454-404 BC, a ruthless, imperialist project which required dominating and extorting vast revenues from around 170 other Greek city-states?[53]

Needless to say, specialists are hardly unaware of these and other such issues. All are routinely seen as "problems," as the "contradictions," "anomalies," or "exceptions to the rule" that are allegedly endemic in any complex society.[54] But at what point do the sheer number and significance of these "anomalies" cause us to question whether any such "rule" was really there in the first place? Was Athens really so improbably conflicted, so continually at odds with the "democratic" essence of its social being?

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[51] On the incomes, expenditures, and influence of this super-wealthy minority, see J. K. Davies, *Wealth and the Power of Wealth in Classical Athens* (Salem, NH, 1981).
[52] For a good general introduction to the topic of slavery in Greece, see M. I. Finley, *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece* (Harmondsworth, 1981), 97-195.
[53] For a thorough overview of the subject, see Russell Meiggs, *The Athenian Empire* (Oxford, 1972).
[54] E.g., Cohen, *Athenian Nation*, 191.

More serious still is a basic problem of evidence. The ontological conditions for this strangely self-conflicted Athens are simply missing. There is no evidence that the Athenians knew any precise equivalents of our state-society divide, our free-standing systems of government and economy, our public and private spheres, our sacred and secular realms, our rights, our citizenship, our natural individuality, or any of the other essential phenomena that are presupposed by a proto-liberal order. And in the absence of such conditions, I submit, our consensus "democratic Athens" is simply not historically credible or meaningful.

To this, one may respond that it is ultimately immaterial whether the Athenians themselves were aware of the presence of such phenomena in their world. All that matters in the end is that we moderns can see these phenomena, even if we ourselves must actively construct them from the data of a lifeworld which knew itself otherwise. We know these phenomena are there, because they are invariably there, always and everywhere, in every complex social environment. Our modern, scientific devices tell us so. And in the end, the ontology presupposed by our historicist science is more true and real than all others, because it rests on genuinely objective standards of truth and real-ness. But does it, though? This brings us to the third basic problem with "democratic Athens," namely its philosophically questionable premises.

To begin with, it is far from self-evident where any independent confirmation of our modern western ontological truths might come from. Obviously, it cannot come from the evidence of our own everyday experience, since that experience is already itself conditioned by precisely the same modern western truths. A phenomenon like our essential individuality as subjects will inevitably seem to possess the truth of its own material self-evidence in our real world, in a liberal capitalist lifeworld that is filled with phenomena like rights, privacy, democracy, and a free market economy which all continually presuppose and reproduce the truth of

that same individuality. Nor can this confirmation come from our mainstream modern science, since that science also already takes the truth of our prevailing ontology entirely for granted. A knowledge-producing apparatus that draws categorical distinctions between "natural" and "human" sciences, and one that divides human experience into distinct political, social, economic, and psychological fields, has already made its own basic ontological commitments all too clear. Nor, for that matter, can any confirmation come from any appeal to some transcendent, objective truth standard, since such a standard likewise only has purchase and meaning within a modern materialist ontology, one that is already inscribed with that Cartesian line in the sand which would forever distinguish thought from matter.

If one then looks beyond the confines of orthodox modernist science, to the thought of those who do not take modernity's ontological truths for granted, the picture becomes still less reassuring. Indeed, one will find a disconcerting number of authorities across many disciplines who have all somehow challenged the universal truth status of modernity's prevailing account of what is really there in the world.

To begin with, for the better part of a century now theoretical physicists have recognized that classical Newtonian materialism cannot adequately account for all the phenomenal contents of nature. Its inadequacies are most readily visible at the quantum level, where phenomena like light or electrons do not possess fixed, intrinsic properties as objectively knowable or observable things-in-themselves. Light, for example, will reveal itself as particles under some experimental conditions, and as waves under others. So in either case, experimenters are not scientifically seeing or knowing a quantum-level object as a mind-independent entity. All they are really seeing or knowing is a quantum effect, an effect produced by the interaction between an observed materiality and their own apparatus of observation. All quantum-level phenomena, like particulate light, are thus materio-cultural effects of

this kind. They are "whole phenomena," inextricable entanglements of thought and matter.[55]

And one could argue that this vein of post-Cartesian analysis has effectively been extended from the quantum up to the social level by another group of heterodox thinkers. Influenced by the likes of Marx, Gramsci, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, a formidable array of prominent contemporary theorists have directly or indirectly challenged the very philosophical foundations of liberal modernity's human sciences.[56]

For example, thinkers from Marx himself to Foucault, along with many of their disciples, would fundamentally question the self-evidence of the natural, presocial individual, the proposition upon which all our prevailing social truths ultimately depend. Together, one could say, they have shown at length and in detail how this particular species of human subjectivity is a historical artifact, a novel product of ongoing interactions between modern, liberal social knowledge and the materialities of modern capitalist experience.[57] Along similar lines, others have questioned the material self-evidence of other modern essences, like state, society, and economy, revealing them instead to be complex, historically contingent entanglements of thought and materiality.[58] And postcolonial theorists have

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[55] On "whole phenomena" and Bohrian epistemology, see Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 194-98.
[56] The epistemological implications of some of this "postmodernist" critique for our disciplinary enterprise have been debated quite widely. See e.g., John E. Toews, "Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience," *American Historical Review* 92, no. 4 (1987): 879-907; Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia, 1990); Keith Jenkins, ed., *The Postmodern History Reader* (London, 1997), 242-73, 277-312, 315-83. But I would argue that the discipline has not yet fully confronted postmodernism's ontological implications, which seem to be no less consequential.
[57] E.g., Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, translated by M. Nicolaus (Harmondsworth, 1993), esp. 83-85; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, 1977); *History of Sexuality*, 135-59; *Birth of Biopolitics*, 1-73; Graham Burchell et al., eds., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago, 1991); Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge, 1999).
[58] E.g., Timothy Mitchell, "Society, Economy, and the State Effect" in George Steinmetz, ed., *State/Culture* (Chicago, 1999), 76-97; "Rethinking Economy," 116-21; Bob Jessop, *State Power: A Strategic-Relational Approach* (Cambridge, 2008); Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York, 2010).

repeatedly drawn attention to the unacknowledged Eurocentrism of mainstream social scientific categories and devices, from religion to historicism itself.[59]

More generally, posthumanist theorists have documented the implicit anthropocentrism of modern knowledge production, just as theorists of gender, sexuality, and the body have sought ways to move beyond the essentializing materialism of this same knowledge.[60] More generally still, historians and sociologists of science have variously demonstrated the contingent, conditional status of the ostensibly objective truths produced by scientific research,[61] just as leading heterodox philosophers have on various grounds dismissed the very possibility of any truly objective, truly scientific knowledge altogether.[62]

It may be helpful to think of all these thinkers collectively as anthropologists of our modernity, as ethnographers of the present. Scrutinizing our modern, western experience as if from outside, they variously present us with a critical counter-knowledge of our real world from a kind of epistemological elsewhere. Taken together, they are not suggesting that there is some other more truly real world lying undiscovered somewhere "out there." On the contrary, they are critiquing the ways we conventionally think about the very nature of realness itself, inviting us to see it as something that is always simultaneously "out there" and "in here," so that one can never definitively say where a subjective inside ends and an objective outside begins. Diverse as their concerns may seem, all thus in some way problematize the

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[59] E.g., Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*; *Formations of the Secular*; Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity*.

[60] E.g., Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990); *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, 1993); Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York, 1991); *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis, 2008); Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*; Vicki Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large* (Durham, NC, 2011).

[61] E.g., Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (London, 1958); Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962); Mary Hesse, *The Structure of Scientific Inference* (Berkeley, Ca., 1974); Andrew Pickering, *Constructing Quarks: A Sociological History of Particle Physics* (Chicago, 1984); Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton, 1986); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York, 2005).

[62] See especially Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, 1979); *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, 1989); Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge* (Minneapolis, 1975); Gianni Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth* (New York, 2011).

primordial, Cartesian distinction between mind and matter, between knowing and being, the epistemological and the ontological, that makes modernity's objective standards of truth and realness possible in the first place. And they do this by showing us again and again how the contents of a real world cannot ultimately be disentangled from the contents of the minds of those for whom that world is real, even if those contents happen to include the belief that the two can in fact be separated.

In so doing, the ethnographers of the present encourage us to look past the seemingly fixed, stable ontological framework or architecture of our real world and see the essential fluidity, plasticity, and provisionality of its constitution. Like quantum physicists of human experience, they help us to apprehend this constitution on a kind of sub-atomic level. They help us to sense the complex, microphysical ways in which dynamic observed materialities (practices, institutions, bodies, etc.) combine as reagents with ever-changing "apparatuses of observation" (truth regimes, subjectivities, etc.) to produce quantum materio-cultural effects, whole phenomena like states, economies, and individuals, that appear to be self-evidently there. They thereby help us to see that realness is a process, not a fixed state or condition. And they also help us to see how our knowledge is inextricably and constitutively woven into the very fabric of being, how materialist science, natural and social, actively determines where the ontological cuts in this fabric should fall, and thus how science itself helps to produce the very reality that it purports to be merely describing.[63]

If we are prepared to accept this alternative quantum vision, it then becomes altogether easier to understand why our conventional historicist practice is so seriously problematic. If every human lifeworld is the net product of an inextricable, mutually constitutive entanglement between its prevailing body of social knowledge and its particular materialities, one cannot make meaningful sense of one such world

[63] For a much more fully elaborated account along these lines, proposing an "agential realist" alternative to scientific realism and social constructivism, see Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

with the social knowledge of another. For whenever we use modern terms and categories to "translate" a non-modern lifeworld, converting a "*polis* of the Athenians" into a "democratic Athens," we are in effect replacing our subjects' standards of truth and realness with our own, thereby fundamentally altering what was truly and really there at the time. We are modernizing that world, reconditioning it at the ontological level. Which is to say, we are in fact fashioning an entirely new, hypothetical lifeworld in the metaphysical image of our own, a strange kind of never-never-world, where the data we selectively abstract from non-modern experience entangles with our own "apparatuses of observation" to produce phenomena like economies and individuals, culture and discourse that are real only to ourselves.

At the same time, the new quantum vision also helps us to see that a more ethically responsible historicism, one that grants non-modern peoples more power to determine the truths of their own experience, will also be a more philosophically and historically defensible form of historicism. For in order to produce more theoretically robust, more historically meaningful accounts of each vanished lifeworld, we precisely need to suspend our own standards of truth and realness and build those accounts around whatever our subjects took to be the pregiven conditions of their existence. Instead of seeing their ontological presuppositions as free-standing beliefs, ideas, or discourses that existed independent of the "real" contents of their world, separated off by some Cartesian mind-matter divide, we need to reintegrate them into the phenomenal fabric of that world, to see how they continually interacted with prevailing materialities to produce the effect of that world's realness. And by taking an ontological turn in our practice along these lines, we should then be far better equipped to recognize and represent the irreducible heterogeneities of human experience.

To conclude the paper, we can briefly consider how this turn to ontological history might significantly change our understanding of life in classical Athens.

First and foremost, an ontological history of Athens would have no place for the phenomenon we call "religion." It would not dichotomize the Athenian lifeworld into entirely distinct sacred and secular realms of experience, each one governed by its own sovereign truths, norms, and logics. For all analytical purposes, it would have to objectify the *polis* as the Athenians objectified it, seeing it instead as a single realm of experience inhabited by two entirely distinct populations, the human and the divine. And it would have to objectify the rest of the contents of the *polis* in similarly Athenian terms, carefully distinguishing what belonged to one population from what belonged to the other, whether these were things which the Athenians considered to be theirs to use and dispose (*ta hosia*), or things which they had consecrated to the gods with whom they coexisted (*ta hiera*).[64]

Needless to say, viewing the *polis* in this new way would profoundly change how we see its mode of life as a whole. Perhaps above all, it would cause us to radically alter the way we think about the work of "government" in Attica in the broadest sense. For we would have to recognize that a very large portion of this work was assumed to be performed by divine agencies. Well over two hundred different such agencies were acknowledged in Athens during the period, and between them they governed all of life's essential conditions, processes, and outcomes, from weather patterns and land fertility to wealth creation and battlefield fortunes, from human health and reproduction to assembly and courtroom resolutions. And once we start to take seriously the reality in Athens of all this

[64] On this fundamental distinction, see now Josine Blok, "A 'Covenant' Between Gods and Men: *hiera kai hosia* and the Greek Polis," in Claudia Rapp, ed., *The City in the Classical and Post-Classical World: Changing Contexts of Power and Identity* (Cambridge, 2014), 14-37.

ongoing divine governance, we would likewise then have to recognize that the most crucial human contribution to the management of lives and livelihoods in Attica was not in fact the business transacted by the Athenians in the assembly, council, and other ostensibly "governmental" institutions. It was rather the business they transacted continually at a multitude of shrines and sanctuaries, the business of transforming *hosia* into consecrated *hiera*, the endless, essential business of offering gifts that might induce the gods to secure and perpetuate the vitality of the *polis* as a whole.

Second, this turn to ontological history would require us to abandon all talk of an "economy" in Athens. The category makes no sense in a world where largely mysterious, unmeasurable, non-human forces ultimately determined the conditions of all production, distribution, and exchange, where the land was a shared birthright which actively nurtured human vitality, and where the basic sources of daily livelihood were all patrilineal *oikoi*, households whose members as a rule worked only for themselves, extracting the means of their existence from whatever portion of land fortune and tradition had assigned to their ancestors. Even if the Athenians could have somehow imagined the essential components of an "economy," whether abstractions like "labor," "capital," and "market forces" or aggregates and averages like "growth rates" or a "gross domestic product," they would surely have found these metrics to be all but useless for their purposes. What mattered to them in the end was not some theoretical net or mean prosperity, but the actual well-being of every actual *oikos* which comprised the *polis*, and the ultimate sources of this well-being were not fully knowable or measurable.

But again a more meaningful account becomes possible if we choose to see the Athenian lifeworld in Athenian terms, as an altogether more inclusive, undifferentiated ecology or biosystem, an ongoing circulation of vital resources between gods, land, and people, and between the *oikoi* that comprised that people.

Again, this turn in our practice would yield fresh insights about the Athenian mode of social being.

For example, this move would help us to see that the most essential "exchanges" in the *polis* were those transacted between the human and the divine populations, whereby sacrifices, libations, votives, temples, and the like were "traded" for life-sustaining resources like sunshine, rainfall, agricultural fertility, bodily health, and effective decision-making. Gifts to the gods were like taxes rendered to maintain the infrastructure of the cosmos. At the same time, this move would help us to foreground the many crucial contributions made by females to Athenian social being, not least their roles as the primary binding agents within the human community, with the transfer of their vital reproductive and family-managing capacities from one patrilineal *oikos* to another through marriage. And it would also help us to see even more clearly than before how the the life of the social body as a whole came to depend upon the surplus resources produced by the tiny minority of super-wealthy *oikoi*.[65] As the most conspicuous beneficiaries of the *polis* ecology, members of these affluent households were obliged to assume a proportionately large responsibility for its perpetuation, to use their superior wealth, leisure, and education to advise, lead, and if necessary fund the actions of Demos on a consistent basis.[66] And with elites duly discharging such duties, there was no need for Demos itself to generate large revenues, levy regular taxes, or educate its constituents.[67]

In turn, this enhanced recognition of the contributions of females and elites to the welfare of the *polis* should encourage us to abandon any use of the modern "state-society" and "public-private" binaries in our accounts of the Athenian *politeia*.

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[65] On the extensive resources and outlays of these families, see Davies, *Wealth and the Power of Wealth*.
[66] The principal societal obligations of elites included paying the *eisphora,* a monetary levy for wartime emergencies, and performing "liturgies," major sevices to the *polis*, such as funding costly triremes and festival choruses. See Matthew R. Christ, *The Bad Citizen in Classical Athens* (Cambridge, 2006), 143-204. On the critical role played by elite "advisers" in the Athenian assembly, see e.g., M. I. Finley, "Athenian Demagogues," in *Studies in Ancient Society* (London, 1974), 1-25.
[67] On the limited "public property" of the *polis*, see e.g., D. M. Lewis, "Public Property in the City," in Oswyn Murray and Simon Price, eds., *The Greek City: From Homer to Alexander* (Oxford, 1990), 245-263; Nikolaos Papazarkadas, *Sacred and Public Land in Ancient Athens* (Oxford, 2011).

Instead, I suggest, we need to recognize that Athenian *demokratia* presupposed an essential interdependency between the corporate self of Demos and its member households, between the life of the social body and the lives of its constituent "cells."

Seeing the *politeia* in this new way would then help us to understand, for example, why so much of what we regard as "public" business in Athens was transacted by *oikoi* and neighborhoods, from basic necessities of education and healthcare to ritual activity, marriage recognition, police work, and even admissions to membership of Demos, which were managed by local household associations ("demes"), not by any "central government."[68] It would also help us to understand why the Athenians saw no need to preserve any realm of "privacy" by devices like a bill of rights. In Athens, it would have been ontologically nonsensical to insulate households from the social body upon which they all depended and which they all collectively comprised and sustained. Likewise, this essential mutual dependence would help us to understand why behavior which threatened the "private" well-being of a particular *oikos*, like squandering a family inheritance, mistreating one's parents, laziness, and adultery, was seen as a legally actionable threat to the well-being of the *polis* as a whole.[69] And it would help us to explain why the prosecutors and judges in these and all other court cases, along with all those who performed "public" services in assembly, council, and elsewhere, were "ordinary civilians" by our standards, mere representatives of Athenian households not professional administrative specialists.

If there was a dividing line in Athens between a human rule-making agency and the subjects of its rule, it was thus not a cleavage in the very fabric of experience between any bounded realms of state and society. It was a line inscribed within the very subjectivity of each Athenian, between a *polites* personality and an *idiotes* personality, a line that allowed that same Athenian to be in different circumstances

[68] On these demes and their many local functions, see David Whitehead, *The Demes of Attica, 508/7-ca. 250 B.C.: A Political and Social Study* (Princeton, 1986).
[69] For a list of attested *graphe* ("indictment [for harming the *polis*]") procedures, including those mentioned, see Todd, *Shape of Athenian Law*, 105-9.

both a particular member of a particular *oikos* and a generic incarnation of the sovereign Demos itself.

Finally, if we are prepared to accept that Athenian *demokratia* had nothing to do with modern-style individualist freedoms and equalities, and everything to do with corporate self-management by a social body of households, our accounts could safely dispense altogether with various other stock, modern categories, like "democracy," "rights," and "citizenship." And if we abandon such categories and instead try to make sense of the Athenian *politeia* on its own terms, we can then see that all those notorious, alleged contradictions of "democratic Athens" are really problems of our own making.

First, while Athenian females may not look like full members of the *polis* to us, because of our own narrowly politicized, individualist notion of "citizenship," their full, integral membership of Demos in Athens would surely have seemed self-evident to any Athenian. As binding agents between the lineages of Attica, as enforcers of behavioral norms in families and neighborhoods, as regular ritual actors, and of course as wives and mothers who managed and reproduced the household cells of the social body itself, female Athenians were quite obviously as essential to the life of Demos as their male counterparts, even if nature had decreed that their respective contributions to that vitality should be complementary, not identical.[70]

Second, there was no contradiction between the great wealth disparities among *oikoi* and *demokratia* as the Athenians understood the term. As noted above, this *demokratia* presupposed the presence in Attica of families who possessed the resources and know-how to, say, "advise" Demos and recommend courses of action in the assembly, to prosecute fellow Athenians in the courts, to serve as military

[70] Other works that variously make a case for female "citizenship" include: Marilyn Katz, "Ideology and the "Status of Women" in Ancient Greece," *History and Theory* 31 (1992): 70-97; "Women and Democracy in Ancient Greece," in Thomas M. Falkner et al., eds., *Contextualizing Classics: Ideology, Performance, Dialogue* (Lanham, Md., 1999), 41-68.; Hunter, *Policing Athens*; Patterson, "The Case Against Neaira"; *The Family in Greek History*; Cohen, *Athenian Nation*, 30-48.

commanders and maintain ships and horses for navy and cavalry, and to maintain and fund the traditional cults of Athens. Which is to say, *demokratia* was entirely unthinkable without those few hundred super-wealthy families, who alone possessed the means to make such contributions. So long as the contributions of elites to the life of Demos were commensurate with their resources, material inequalities were unproblematic. Athens and its *demokratia* were *sustained* by these inequalities, not threatened by them.

Third and last, if Athenian *demokratia* was in fact a pragmatic exercise in corporate self-preservation, not an idealistic exercise in political egalitarianism, the Athenians' exploitation of non-Athenians like slaves and imperial subjects becomes somewhat easier to apprehend. In an environment where citizens generally worked for themselves, not for each other, the exploitation of persons outside the social body was the only way of accumulating a significant surplus in classical Athens. Thus, without slave labor, there would have been few if any rich households. And without rich households, as we have seen, Athens would have lacked many of the material and cultural resources necessary to sustain *demokratia*. The only feasible alternative was to extract the necessary surplus from the social bodies of other *poleis* using the coercive mechanisms of empire, which is precisely what the Athenians did in the latter half of the fifth century. Either way, the reproduction of "free" Athens, Athens as we know it, was unthinkable without the exploitation of non-Athenians.[71]

Of course, this proposed alternative to translating lifeworlds would come at a certain price. Most obviously, an ontological turn would require us to relinquish our conventional historicism, along with its reassuring sense of continuities and/or

[71] It is quite commonly argued by specialists that the presence of non-Athenian slaves helped sustain a kind of equality among rich and poor Athenians. See e.g., Robin Osborne, "The Economics and Politics of Slavery at Athens," in Anton Powell, ed., *The Greek World* (London, 1995), 27-43. But one could also fairly make the opposite case.

commensurabilities between human lifeworlds, its sense of a unitary species experience lived in a single spatio-temporal dispensation. Among other things, it would in turn mean severing forever the proverbial umbilical cord which has hitherto bound the Greeks, the Romans, and other extinct "predecessor" peoples to ourselves. That said, this alternative practice would still permit other, more nuanced, more qualified forms of intermundane comparison, especially between the heterogeneous ontological materials from which different real worlds have been made, between the past's many personhoods, human natures, modes of freedom and authority, meanings of life, and so forth. And if this is the price that we have to pay for histories that are at once more ethical, more philosophically robust, and more historically meaningful, then it seems to be one that is well worth paying.

No less important, this alternative historicism should also yield more valuable "lessons of the past" for our present. A western academic discipline which takes seriously the ontological variabilities and heterogeneities of human experience would hopefully help nuture greater sensitivity to the alterities of surviving non-western lifeworlds, worlds that have not yet fully embraced the secular capitalist conditions of our own. And in so doing, such a discipline just might encourage us to think more critically about the ontological commitments of that same secular capitalist lifeworld, perhaps even helping us to imagine more just, more sustainable, less exploitative worlds of the future.