

Communications to the Editor

On a Review of *Caste Conflict and Elite Formation*

I wish to comment on Frank Conlon's review of *Caste Conflict and Elite Formation* (JAS 44 [November 1984]:238–39). The review is genial in style and as such provides all the more reason for the sense of disquiet that its positivistic empiricism generates in my mind. This is a general issue of relevance to the state of the social sciences.

Conlon's review is distinguished by its failure to refer to, or indicate a grasp of, the concept of "structural marginality," which was an important analytical tool in my work. The structural relations within which the Karava lived, as they (the relations) altered over time, were central to the entrepreneurial successes of some Karava and are equally critical to our understanding of the forces that *would have* supported Karava identity and solidarity. Despite considerable attention to the subject and convenient summaries on the latter point on pages 12–13 and 219–20, I have evidently failed to persuade both Conlon and Susan Bayly on the strength, as continually reproduced over time, of the Karava's sense of Karava-ness. I have answered Bayly at length and direct those readers with an interest in these issues to *Modern Asian Studies* 19:2 (1985):343–422. Fortunately, other scholars—among them Vijaya Samaraweera and Robert Kearney—have understood my style of analysis better.

Conlon demands documented facts that connect the Karava caste elites of the early-nineteenth century with those of the late-nineteenth century and further connections to the early-twentieth-century elites before he can accept the argument that there was even an enduring Karava identity at the elite level. My delineation of structured oppositions between the castes over time (constituted in part by the various colonial governments' policies), *together* with the several illustrations of caste-conscious political activity by Karava spokesmen, or Goyigama and Salagama spokesmen, have not been deemed adequate ground for my argument. In brief, the structural framework, as it was constituted and transformed by the interaction between polity, caste, and economic changes, has been put out of mind by Conlon.

Behind this, then, is a quantitative empiricism and a positivistic epistemology. This interpretation is confirmed in Conlon's concluding note: my book on the Karava "is something less than history" and my insights are not linked to "documented historical reality"; I have, goodness gracious, even gone so far as to allow myself such disquieting phrases as "must have happened."

Such remarks appear to lose sight of the truism that the craft of history is essentially an inferential and speculative science, a "soft science." In linking events in a causal relationship, or in attributing specific motives to a person or group, a historian is usually inferring what *must have happened*, as most readers understand. It would not be difficult to go through Conlon's *A Caste in a Changing World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977) and extract numerous interpretive assertions of a like order.

At a seminar in Adelaide in 1984, Lawrence Stone expressed dismay at the manner in which empirical fact-gathering was being rigorously and self-consciously pursued in the major "schools" of history in the West (the contemporary *Annales* is one example).

If this naive empiricism sweeps all before it within the corridors of history departments, the prospect for interdisciplinary studies, as well as the potential for history and sociology to meet as a *single* disciplinary space focused upon the problem of “eventuation” (which denies the “orthodox” sociologist’s stress on synchrony by erasing such a concept altogether), as argued for by Philip Abrams, will fade away. In such an event, likewise, a historian such as Robert Brenner would be left whistling in a wee corner of his department. The diversity in the institutionalized channels of academic expression will probably negate the latter prospect. The problem is to devise ways of talking meaningfully with each other.

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Response to Michael Roberts

Interested readers may wish to consult my review of Dr. Roberts’s book while reflecting upon his remarks. Roberts concludes that “the problem is to devise ways of talking meaningfully with each other.” I agree wholeheartedly and await, with friendly curiosity, his future initiatives in the endeavor.

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