

# “Erring on the Side of Democracy”: Nations, Modernities and Disputations

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Partha Chatterjee. *Empire and Nation: Selected Essays*. Columbia University Press, 2010. 384 pp.

In the introduction to this collection of Partha Chatterjee’s writings, Nivedita Menon states, “I am one of those whose engagement with the contemporary has been utterly transfigured by reading Partha Chatterjee’s work over the years” (1). This volume collects essays that engage with the central concerns of Chatterjee’s *oeuvre*, including the development and limits of postcolonial nationalism, the provincializing of the theories and histories of modernity and the development and implementation of the “political society” as a theory and actually-existing site of democratic engagement—among many others—that have put Chatterjee at the forefront of the study of Indian history and politics, cultural studies and postcolonial studies for the last twenty-five years. As an overarching compendium of essays that are organized thematically rather than chronologically, it provides a crucial supplement to Chatterjee’s major works: *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (1986), *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (1993) and *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (2006). Significantly, the non-chronological approach directs the central concerns that have occupied Chatterjee’s longer works to coincide and interrogate one another, allowing new insights to form and seemingly finished ideas to jettison off in new directions.

While always grounded in the particularities of Indian history and governance, the essays grouped together here ask questions that are transposable beyond this context, at least in their asking if not in their findings. Indeed, Chatterjee’s own summation of the work of the Subaltern Studies Group announces this very aspect of their methodology: “Having travelled from Italy to India, the idea of subaltern history has now produced a generally available methodological and stylistic approach to modern historiography that could indeed be used everywhere” (301). Even when writing on the specific case of the rise of Hindu nationalism in Indian politics, Chatterjee’s

questioning of whether secularism is an enviable or even viable alternative to religious fundamentalism provides an analogue for debates elsewhere. Arguing for a concept of tolerance over secularism, Chatterjee reminds us of the secularism of historical fascist movements as well as the relative ease with which a majority religion can mask itself in the progressive discourse of secularism: "The Hindu right in fact seeks to project itself as a principled modernist critic of Islamic or Sikh fundamentalism, and to accuse the 'pseudo-secularists' of preaching tolerance for religious obscurantism and bigotry" (205). By adopting this position as the mouthpiece of enlightened progress, the Hindu right becomes the voice of the state on matters of religion in India. Here, an all too obvious parallel can be drawn for readers in the United States, as Chatterjee reminds us of "the very real theoretical possibility that secularization and religious tolerance may sometimes work at cross-purposes" (206). By moving from the concrete example of the Hindu right in India to the abstract terms of liberal democracy, this last is not only a reminder for south Asian nations and communities, but should also be kept in mind in Europe and the Americas as religious tolerance is threatened by a particularly virulent pro-Christian pseudo-secularism.

Alongside the issues of religious tolerance, secularization and democracy, perhaps the most pertinent aspect of Chatterjee's text given current debates between postcolonialism and globalization theories is his reminder of the power the nation-state still holds on the popular imagination as well as its productivity as a continued site of a politics that privileges difference over universality. In this vein, Chatterjee avers that:

...for certain strategic reasons which have to do with the politics of theoretical intervention, I will insist that the journey that might take us beyond the nation must first pass through the currently disturbed zones within the nation-state; and that in fact a more satisfactory resolution of the problems within could give us some of the theoretical instruments we are looking for to tackle the questions beyond. (165)

For Chatterjee, there is a very real fear that by taking up the cause of populations left out of civil society whose rights are not recognized by the state, the transnational actors (NGOs, human rights organizations, United Nations agencies, etc.) "whose moral claims derive from the assumed existence of a universal society" essentially end up modeling the imperialist logic of "the moral-cultural drive to spread 'modernity' throughout the world" (176).

Opposed, then, to this framework of a universal "global modernity" that is predicated on the logic of a global civil society, Chatterjee privileges an opening of the spaces of political society, which present the potential for real democracy through localized action. As such, the "spectre of pure politics" raised by political society presents not

a prepackaged concept of democracy, but instead opens a space between civil society and the state where “the certainties of civil-social norms and constitutional properties are put under challenge” (201). Consequently, political society simultaneously raises both the threat and promise of democracy: “Rights and rules have to be, seemingly, negotiated afresh.... There is violence in the air. Not everything that happens here is desirable or worthy of approval” (201). But as such, it is a site that breaks the yoke of a universal modernity and allows for postcolonial nations to be producers of their own modernities and democracies. In the end, between the threat of global modernity and the pure politics of political society, Chatterjee chooses to “err on the side of democracy,” while all the while remembering that “Those who dream of building the new democratic society must aspire to be greater story writers than god” (235, 201).

My only real note of complaint with this text comes not in the quality of its arguments, but instead in the structuring of the collection; while the nonchronological organization of *Empire and Nation* does bring to light new points of comparison in Chatterjee’s thought, at the same time the seemingly arbitrary re-distribution of the essays into three discrete categories limits the potential of this reorganization and closes off some of the possibilities that it would otherwise allow for. The structure of the volume is divided amongst those constitutive aspects of the history of modernity that Chatterjee’s work responds to through a tripartite structure of: [a] Empire and Nation [b] Democracy and [c] Capital and Community. However, while these are certainly major themes in Chatterjee’s corpus, the logic by which these divisions were made and substantiated is not clear and the reasoning for aligning the essays with one concept over another is similarly absent. Without this explanation, the divisions feel capricious and unnecessary, and as such, they ultimately impinge on the book’s strengths such that the comingling of ideas from different periods in Chatterjee’s work, and the possibilities which arise from reading in this way, are ultimately arrested. The divisions attempt to give some conceptual order to the flow of the essays, but the most positive attribute of this volume is its breaking of the limits of the chronological chain of Chatterjee’s work and its departure from the more specific, focused queries of his longer works.

The conceptual intermixing that this non-chronological ordering encourages allows us to read and think the limits of “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question” from 1986, for example, alongside later works dealing with the development of the political society in India from the later 1990s and early-2000s, as referenced above. Ostensibly, according to the logic of the collection, these essays fall into different registers of Chatterjee’s thought, the former under the rubric of “Nation and Empire” and the latter under “Democracy,” but there is no clear explanation in the volume for why this should be so. So while Chatterjee contends in the essay on the “Woman’s Question,” that neither the state nor the civil society of the nationalist

bourgeoisie are able to continue the necessary work of a feminist politics, it would seem that it is precisely the lack of such an institutional space in this instance that provides the grounds for Chatterjee's later development of the political society where "the certainties of civil-social norms and constitutional properties are put under challenge" by minority religious populations, thus opening the space where "Rights and rules have to be, seemingly, negotiated afresh" (201). What was posited as a conceptual dead end in the former essay can therefore find new life through the development of the categories of the latter essays. While my concern with the text's organization may seem a minor quibble, or even worse overly nit-picky, these divisions seem to arrest the free-flowing intellectual permissiveness that is otherwise enabled by this collection by walling off Chatterjee's ideas as of different conceptual concerns; what the collection enables with its break from chronology it ultimately reinstates through its introduction of section divisions as a conceptual apparatus.

Compiled editions of previously published works can be a tricky thing to pull off well. Often times they seem to suggest datedness by way of canonicity, something similar to a "best-of" recording by a band that (re)markets the familiar and the already known. As such, collections of this sort simultaneously risk announcing the importance of the author's ideas, while at the same time, potentially or inadvertently, relegating them to the library stacks of history. That is, while in today's cultural climate, the fetishization and marketing of the new finds its way into academia through the announcement of the next big idea or the new theory of "x" or, all too commonly, as the promotion of a new "post-" that renders all that came before it obsolete and quaint, a collection of previously published works can seem inert and finished. The editors at Columbia University Press are able to stave this off by including some of Chatterjee's more well-known essays, such as the first included essay "Whose Imagined Community?" alongside lesser known essays and even those newly translated by the author such as "A Brief History of *Subaltern Studies*," which will undoubtedly prove of interest to readers. Perhaps more luckily for Chatterjee's publishers and certainly for his readers, however, is that even Chatterjee's most well-known work manages to come off as fresh and provocative. Ultimately, by bringing old and new ideas together, I found myself newly inspired by the re-reading of familiar pieces and intrigued and challenged by those that were unfamiliar.

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