

Nationalist thought and the Colonial
A derivative discourse / পাঠ্য চর্চা
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6. The Cunning of Reason

Thus God knows the world, because He conceived it in
His mind, as if from the outside, before it was created,
and we do not know its rule, because we live inside it,
having found it already made.

Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*

There is a scene in Dinabandhu Mitra's play *Sadhabār Ekādaśī* (1866) in which the leading character, Nimchand Datta, a product of the 19th century 'renaissance' in Bengal and, quite typically, alienated from the rest of his society by his own enlightenment, roams drunkenly at night through the streets of Calcutta giving vent to his feelings of irreverent, anarchic anguish. At which point an English police sergeant, dutifully performing his task of preserving the public order, appears.

[Enter Sergeant with two native sentries]

- Nimchand.* [looking at the lamp in the Sergeant's hand]
Hail, holy light, offspring of Heaven first-born,
Or of th' Eternal co-eternal beam,
May I express thee unblamed?
- Sergeant.* What is this?
- Sentry 1.* A drunkard, sir.
- Sergeant.* What is the matter with you?
- Nimchand.* Thou canst not say I did it: never shake
Thy gory locks at me.
- Sergeant.* Ah, you're scared? You know what'll happen to you, don't you?
- Nimchand.* Dear aunt, hold out your arms, save me! I am Ahalyā, turned into
stone!
- Sergeant.* You'll have to come to the police station. Get up!
- Nimchand.* Man but a rush against Othello's breast,
And he retires.
- Sergeant.* Who are you?
- Nimchand.* I am Maināka, son of the mountain, now cooling my wings in the
bosom of the ocean.
- Sergeant.* I will drown you in the Hooghly.
- Nimchand.* ... drown cats and blind puppies.

Sergeant. Pick him up, quick!
Sentry 2. Get up, you bastard! [ties his hands and drags him]
Sergeant. Every drunkard should be treated thus.
Nimchand. And made a son-in-law . . . Yes, let us go to the nuptial chamber.
 [Exit]¹

That is the story of Enlightenment in the colonies; it comes in the hands of the policeman, and the marriage is consummated in the station-house. And when those who have seen the light try to assert the sovereignty of the admittedly 'particular' ethical values of their nation, including its 'vices, deceptions, and the like', can we then conclude that the Cunning of Reason has met its match? Unfortunately not. Reason is, indeed, far more cunning than the liberal conscience will care to acknowledge. It sets 'the passions to work in its service'; it keeps Itself 'in the background, untouched and unharmed', while it 'sends forth the particular interests of passion to fight and wear themselves out in its stead'.² No, the universality — the sovereign, tyrannical universality — of Reason remains unscathed.

Nationalist thought has not emerged as the antagonist of universal Reason in the arena of world history. To attain this position, it will need to supersede itself. For ever since the Age of Enlightenment, Reason in its universalizing mission has been parasitic upon a much less lofty, much more mundane, palpably material and singularly invidious force, namely the universalist urge of capital. From at least the middle of the 18th century, for two hundred years, Reason has travelled the world piggyback, carried across oceans and continents by colonial powers eager to find new grounds for trade, extraction and the productive expansion of capital. To the extent that nationalism opposed colonial rule, it administered a check on a specific political form of metropolitan capitalist dominance. In the process, it dealt a death blow (or so at least one hopes) to such blatantly ethnic slogans of dominance as the civilizing mission of the West, the white man's burden, etc. That must be counted as one of the major achievements in world history of nationalist movements in colonial countries.

But this was achieved in the very name of Reason. Nowhere in the world has nationalism qua nationalism challenged the legitimacy of the marriage between Reason and capital. Nationalist thought, as we have tried to show above, does not possess the ideological means to make this challenge. The conflict between metropolitan capital and the people-nation it resolves by absorbing the political life of the nation into the body of the state. Conservatory of the passive revolution, the national state now proceeds to find for 'the nation' a place in the global order of capital, while striving to keep the contradictions between capital and the people in perpetual suspension. All politics is now sought to be subsumed under the overwhelming requirements of the state-representing-the-nation. The state now acts as the rational allocator and arbitrator for the nation. Any movement which questions this presumed identity between the people-nation and the state-representing-the-nation is denied the status of legitimate politics. Protected by the cultural-ideological sway of this identity between the nation and the state, capital continues its passive revolution by assiduously exploring the possibilities of marginal development, using the state as the

principal mobiliser, planner, guarantor and legitimator of productive investment.

By now, of course, the historical identity between Reason and capital has taken on the form of an epistemic privilege, namely, 'development' as dictated by the advances of modern science and technology. Notwithstanding the occasional recognition of problems of 'appropriateness' or 'absorption' of modern technology, the sovereignty of science itself in its given, historically evolved form is presumed to lie outside the pale of national or other particularities of cultural formations. This sovereignty nationalist thought can hardly question. It can only submit to it and adapt its own path of development to those requirements. But like all relations of subordination, this one too remains fraught with tension, for even in submitting to the dominance of a world order it is powerless to change, nationalism remains reluctant, complaining, demanding, sometimes angry, at other times just shamefaced. The political success of nationalism in ending colonial rule does not signify a true resolution of the contradictions between the problematic and thematic of nationalist thought. Rather, there is a forced closure of possibilities, a 'blocked dialectic'; in other words, a false resolution which carries the marks of its own fragility.

The incompleteness of the ideological resolution accomplished by nationalist thought in its fully developed form can be identified in the very process by which it reaches its moment of arrival. It is a characteristic of the passive revolution that it 'incorporates in the thesis a part of the antithesis'. We have shown above how in its journey nationalist thought necessarily passes through its moment of manoeuvre. The political appropriation of the Gandhian intervention in nationalist politics in India is only a particular and rather intricate example of this process. There could be other ways in which the conflict between capital and the people-nation can be posed and the political consequences appropriated by the passive revolution of capital: Mexico and Algeria readily appear as two dramatic examples. What is historically decisive in this process is precisely the asymmetry between the contending 'subjective forces'. The victorious side enjoys the crucial advantage of affiliation with a 'world consciousness', thus having access to vastly superior ideological resources for running the machineries of a 'modern' state. In this it can, as we have seen, even mobilize for purely nationalist purposes the 'economic' slogans of a socialist ideology.

But no matter how skilfully employed, modern statecraft and the application of technology cannot effectively suppress the very real tensions which remain unresolved. They are apparent in the political life of every post-colonial nationalist regime in the world. In numerous cases they appear as separatist movements based on ethnic identities, proofs of the incomplete resolution of 'the national question'. More significantly, they often appear as fervently anti-modern, anti-Western strands of politics, rejecting capitalism too for its association with modernism and the West and preaching either a fundamentalist cultural revival or a utopian millennialism. There too the fragility of the forced resolution by nationalism of the contradiction between capital and the people-nation is shown up.

But to the extent that these antagonisms remain bound by ideological forms such as ethnic separatism or peasant populism, they are in principle capable of being appropriated by the passive revolution by means of yet another manoeuvre. The asymmetry between the 'subjective forces' can be removed only when the antithesis acquires the political-ideological resources to match the 'universal' consciousness of capital. This is no simple task. For a large part of this century it was believed that the association of national liberation movements with the ideology of socialism could achieve not only the completion of the democratic tasks of the national revolution but also the world-wide consolidation of the struggle against capital and the establishment of a socialist internationalism. The experience of the last three decades has shown that the task is far more difficult than what the founding fathers of socialism had visualized. In fact, many of the problems faced by socialist countries today show to what extent the identity between Reason and capital, in its contemporary form of the unchallenged prerogative of 'modern' technology, still remains a reality. Reason, as we said before, has not exhausted its cunning.

Inasmuch as he was a child of the Enlightenment, Marx retained his faith in Reason. But in his life-long critique of Hegel, he also pleaded that Reason be rescued from the clutches of capital. In the process, he provided the fundamental theoretical means to examine and criticize the historical relation between capital and Reason. And this relationship, as he repeatedly pointed out in the final, mature phase of his work, was no simple process of unilinear development. Correcting many of his earlier formulations, Marx in his last years saw little regenerative value in the depredations of colonialism in Asian countries. And it was in Russia that he saw in 1881 'the finest chance' in history for a country to pass into a phase of socialist development without first submitting to capital and thus 'committing suicide'. Marx was convinced that capital in its global form had reached a stage where it was definitely 'against science and enlightened reason' and he saw even in the 'archaic' resistance of the popular masses in countries still not enslaved by capital the possibility of a new beginning.³

Thus, much that has been suppressed in the historical creation of post-colonial nation-states, much that has been erased or glossed over when nationalist discourse has set down its own life history, bear the marks of the people-nation struggling in an inchoate, undirected and wholly unequal battle against forces that have sought to dominate it. The critique of nationalist discourse must find for itself the ideological means to connect the popular strength of those struggles with the consciousness of a new universality, to subvert the ideological sway of a state which falsely claims to speak on behalf of the nation and to challenge the presumed sovereignty of a science which puts itself at the service of capital, to replace, in other words, the old problematic and thematic with new ones.

Notes

1. Act II, Scene 2.
2. G.F.W. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*, tr. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p.89.
3. See in particular the drafts of Marx's letter to Vera Zasulich, now available in English translation in Teodor Shanin, *Late Marx and the Russian Road* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983).

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— Unit 1, Eco, *The Power of the Atom*

There is a scene in Dostoevsky's play *Soldatiki* (1866) in which the leading character, Nikolai Durov, a product of the 19th century 'renaissance' in Bengal and, quite typically, alienated from the rest of his society by his own enlightenment, means drunkenly at night through the streets of Calcutta, wept up to his feelings of resentment, phobic English, at which point an English police sergeant, dutifully performing his task of preserving the public order, appears.

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Ninchand: ... are you!
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