

Introduction

Insurgent Thought

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These essays feature a group of emerging scholars who are concerned with understanding the relationship between forms of life and modes of thought.¹ The “thought” under consideration is distinctive for its commitment to remaking political and ethical life, and attention to the fugitive or unruly forms by which insurgent thought is transmitted, e.g., through poetry, fiction, and autobiography in addition to standard polemical tracts and sustained treatises. In turn the insurgent thinker-activists around whom this section is framed are figures who challenged traditions of critical thought and action by imagining alternate political and ethical possibilities that were global in scope while deeply engaged with the problem of subaltern difference.

Among the distinctive features of insurgent thought is its awareness of the gap, or the lack of commensurability, between non-Western lifeworlds and social experiences, on the one hand, and critical theory’s focus on general (and generalizable) conditions of human existence, on the other. Where do the embodied histories of caste and martyrdom make an appearance in standard accounts of human freedom, after all? How does the idea of abolition-democracy or the temporality of anticolonial mutiny (*ghadr*) reorient narratives of political emancipation? What kind of a political subject is the *shahid* (martyr), the *shahir* (poet), the Dalit (untouchable), or the black Muslim?

It is hard to apprehend insurgent thought on its own terms: there is a relationship of both exorbitance and intimacy between critical theory, on the one hand, and what we call insurgent thought on the other. Neither is it the aim of these essays to resurrect intellectual traditions unsullied by their engagement with European thought or theory. However it is the case that interpreting insurgent thought, and recognizing the significance of its thinker-activists, requires a somewhat poignant double move: the exemplarity of insurgent thinker-activists must be simultaneously established, interrogated, and perhaps ultimately disavowed. What do I mean?

Insurgent thought is emphatically *not* a project of recovery. There is a long tradition of criticism and commentary on the thinkers who are addressed in this themed section. These figures include the father of anticaste thought, Jotirao Phule; fiery critics of race and capital such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, and Malcolm X, whose thought and activism spanned interwar and Cold War politics; the Hui intellectu-

1. Some of the essays in this section (Chen, Powers, Vendell) had their inception in a graduate seminar on social theory and history I taught in fall 2012, and they formed the spine around which other essays (Davari, Elam, Nikpour) were discussed and developed.

als who recognized in post-Khilafat pan-Islamism a return to, or repetition of, the millennial relationship between China and Islam (in the days of the Mongol Empire); ‘Ali Shari’ati, the so-called father of the Iranian revolution, whose encounters with Fanon and Martin Heidegger resulted in an anticolonial ethics predicated on exemplary death; and Har Dayal, whose imagination of the world state as aesthetic possibility was enabled by the discordant temporalities of political anarchism and revolutionary terror. While earlier interpretative traditions might have maintained a singular focus on the heroic individual in response to a perceived ghettoization of black thought, caste radicalism, and Marxism from the global South, the essays included here challenge political hagiography to illuminate the global trajectories and the universalist aspirations of insurgent thought. These essays are sensitive to the connective tissues (of empire, Islam, capital, radical republicanism) that brought thinkers such as Fanon and Shari’ati, Phule and Thomas Paine, or Malcolm and Al-e-Ahmad into contact with one another.

Thus one might provisionally note that a project of reading insurgent thought would track missed encounters, unlikely affiliation, and painful inheritance; it would be committed to thinking rigorously about the inherent globality of subaltern thinkers while deflating their status as political exception. Best of all, insurgent thought would be predicated on uncovering shared histories of concept formation. Let me provisionally situate what follows around two sets of critical interventions that offer ways to think about insurgent thought as *global* history.

The first draws on political philosopher Jacques Rancière’s long-standing work on intellectual emancipation, especially his emphasis on separating “orders of thought” from “social order” when we study social thought.² Rancière is critical of the fact that critical theory tends to rely on sociological conceptions of “the social,” as well as on historicism in narrating its genealogy. Their combined effect, Rancière argues, is to *fix* thought by associating it with identity, or with the problem of

periodization. What would it mean to think outside the received protocols of intellectual history, with its focus on context and influence? How do these insurgent thinkers illuminate their time as well as ours?

A second and related point of departure is historian Dipesh Chakrabarty’s engagement with the project of “provincializing Europe.” A dominant reading of the project would locate its concerns within a broader critique of Orientalism, perhaps. However, Chakrabarty’s injunction to “put thought in its place” and to recognize the historical provenance (and therefore parochialism) of democratic liberalism is predicated on its impossibility: Chakrabarty acknowledges (even as he resists) European thought as a geohistorical universal. Ultimately Chakrabarty acknowledges the poison in the “gift” of enlightenment thought, for this gift burdens the colonized by asking them to negotiate incommensurable orders of abstraction; it asks them to navigate between universal categories and resolutely stubborn practices of daily life and lived belief.³ Might a more viable strategy lie in substituting the project of provincializing Europe with the task of exploring analogies between forms of life that go under the names “Dalit,” “Negro,” “subaltern,” “lumpen,” “bare life,” or “woman”? What are the virtues of analogical thinking, of thinking via approximation and family resemblance? Might abstract universality be replaced, instead, by embodied claims on the universal rather than a strict bifurcation between difference and the universal?

Rancière and Chakrabarty provide an opening for engaging insurgent thought’s distinctive claims on the universal, its resolute rejection of any association of material deprivation with intellectual destitution. Du Bois’s intimacy with Greek mythology and Latin liturgy; Phule’s imagined affinity with the Emancipation Proclamation (and figures such as George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette); and Shari’ati’s extensive engagements with German theory are fierce claims to an intellectual legacy to which these thinkers assert the right as a consequence of their own status as *dehumanized* subjects of empire. They do so,

2. See in particular Rancière, *Proletarian Nights* (originally titled *Nights of Labor*), and Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor*.

3. For elaboration of these arguments, see Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

moreover, by refusing to associate political subjugation with intellectual servitude and instead seek to expand the legacies of European humanism.

Caste and Race

It is well known that the right to education, that is, the right to intellectual emancipation, was among the very first demands of the downtrodden and the dispossessed. We could turn to the case of the anonymous “Colored Man”⁴ and his engagements with US political culture and the Constitution for an example. The so-called Colored Man appears to have been a neoliterate ex-slave in New Orleans, who in 1863, or thereabouts, commented on the brutal and enduring contradictions of slavery and the hypocrisy of its abolition. He did so by writing in the margin of selections from the Constitution and the Emancipation Proclamation and by inserting commentary that contrasted the emancipatory potential of the texts against evidence of whites’ denial of rights to newly freed black citizens. This dialogue with the founding documents manifests a difficult love: the Colored Man painstakingly reproduced the text of the Constitution in his uncertain hand as if to make the Constitution a part of his very being. He challenged the text where his appearance was marked by its simultaneous devaluation (e.g., the three-fifths clause) by instead channeling the radical democratic aspirations of the Preamble to argue: “We [are] the people.”⁵

Settling historical accounts is important, but so too is the recognition of historical openings and brief moments of political possibility. Emancipation is one such moment of global import: it was quickly foreclosed but not before Phule expressed his admiration for Abraham Lincoln, who freed the American Negroes, and Du Bois located the origins of modern racial capitalism in a legislated emancipation. Indeed for Du Bois, the “Negro problem” began with the legal freedoms announced by the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments.

In her essay on Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction*, Allison Powers explores the twin effects of capital and constitution in occluding the reality of race

privilege. The acknowledgment of race as social antagonism allows it to be delinked from its pervasive and violent materiality, from its existence as race-capital. Naming and renaming are significant, for they gesture to origins, and to history. As Powers shows us in her elegant reading of the “constitutional fetish,” names help unearth the political unconscious of a social order. And while she does not discuss it here, abolition-democracy is another term of great resonance in Du Bois’s oeuvre, one that marks the constitutive relation of a specific history (American slavery) with a universal idea (democracy). Du Bois brings the terms into proximity to name the grounding contradictions of US democracy: its historical entanglements with enslavement and unfreedom. This project was enhanced by Du Bois’s turn to a Marxist interpretation of history during the 1930s, as he began to relate the historic failure of emancipation with the hardening of a capitalist order and with the emergence of racialized interest, e.g., the white and black proletariat who had begun to form a caste system. Powers notes here the forgotten histories of caste and race, the one calling up and supplementing the other, each of them pointing to the inhumanity at the very heart of political order. *Black Reconstruction* is thus a text where Du Bois’s analysis of how race is redeployed by capital, and his efforts to understand the race privilege of the white proletariat, instead point to the limits of Marxian analysis and indict Marxian categories for their inelasticity.

This America of law and constitution exerts its long shadow across the Atlantic and beckons Jotirao Phule (1827–1890), founder of the Satyashodak Samaj (Truth-Seeking Society), who rewrites history as the history of caste enslavement. Phule’s famous 1873 text *Gulamgiri (Slavery)* represented caste as a system of exploitation and inequality by comparing it to the paradigmatic example of modern unfreedom, Atlantic world slavery. Phule argued that the antagonism between Brahmin and Non-Brahmin structured historical processes in toto, and that caste’s history was also a history of the humiliation and exploitation of low castes and Dalits.⁶ The po-

4. For more details about these documents and the so-called Colored Man, see Hager, “A Colored Man’s Constitution.”

5. See *ibid.*

6. See Rao, *The Caste Question*, esp. chap. 1.

litical subjectivity of the downtrodden and dispossessed castes could be cultivated by reminding them of this history of defeat and subjugation, but while simultaneously involving dehumanized subjects in practices of ethical cultivation and truth seeking.

In his essay, Dominic Vendell addresses this quest for truth, *satyashodh* (truth seeking), as an open-ended activity of defiant experimentation. The essay examines Phule's relentless efforts to emancipate dominated consciousness, at first through a unique critique of everyday life where caste and (colonial) capital appear as two sides of the same coin, with the Brahmin and the colonial state working together to naturalize caste distinction, *jatibhed*, and to justify the destitute living conditions of the lower castes. Later, Phule will challenge the *shudra-atishudra* (the lower castes and untouchables)⁷ to develop ethical practice and righteous conduct through the example of his "new religion," *satyashodak dharma* (the truth-seekers' conduct). Phule's project is not merely anti-Brahmin in intent but rather seeks to relate the concrete conditions of (caste) life with the abstractions to which it gives rise with regard to caste power and sacerdotal privilege, as well as to challenge them through an open-ended process of self-transformation.

Vendell sees in Phule's method important links with the project of theoretical Marxism (and the early writings of Georg Lukács): Phule recognizes the development of caste consciousness to be predicated on apprehending caste as concrete totality. However, Vendell draws our attention to the fact that, unlike class, caste is deeply connected with the theological-political, with Hinduism. This is why the late Phule turns to the problem of ethics rather than to the program of political revolution. The unresolved relationship between religion and politics has far broader implications, of course, and reappears in the essays by John Chen, Arash Davari, Daniel Elam, and Golnar Nikpour as the primary contradiction by/through which insurgent thought was engaged.

Religion and Politics

Our essays on interwar speak to yet another opening. This time it is not law and legislated hierarchies so much as imperial infrastructure—e.g., enhanced communicative possibilities, print capital, and technologies of violence—that enables insurgent thought. The time of insurgence is something like the present-past, where the past haunts the present as a political possibility, though new words and frames of reference have altered that past, even secularized it, perhaps, through the universalism of the "new man" and Marxist utopia. This conjunction of religion (Hinduism, Islam) and Marxist politics frames the interwar peregrinations of Har Dayal and Tawadu Pang in the essays by Elam and Chen, respectively. This awkward relationship reappears in Davari's essay on Shari'ati, as it does in Nikpour's on Ahl-e-Ahmad and Malcolm X. Indeed the revolutions of 1905, 1917, and 1979 are the temporal markers around which past and future, ethics and politics become indistinct, begin to supplement each other.

Chen's essay on the remarkable figure of the Chinese Muslim Tawadu Pang argues that Hui intellectuals related a recent pan-Islamism with China's millennial relationship with Islam. Their efforts to reproduce a centuries-old scholarly network through pilgrimage (to Cairo's al-Azhar), suggests links between political thought and religious belief rather than their separation. Chen notes that the Chinese Azharites' fragile links with the Muslim Brotherhood allowed them to skirt around the new republican states that had emerged out of Qing and Ottoman imperial orders. Tawadu's pan-Islamism was thus part of a pointed response to the failure of Khilafat, an interwar project that had energized the global *umma* around the protection of an Old Regime empire.

Tawadu's was an obviously anachronistic and politically unviable aspiration in the time of the nation-state. However it was not mere nostalgia for old empires but a political aspiration enabled by communicative technologies and mediatic infrastructure that gave to "textual transnationalism"

7. Phule's construction of the *shudra-atishudra* as a political collectivity and ethical community of the defeated and dispossessed is a

significant act of renaming: it unifies distinct touchable and untouchable castes around shared experiences of Brahmin domination.

its distinctive charge. Written in the aftermath of Kemalism and the relocation of pan-Islamism to Cairo, Tawadu's 1945 text, *China and Islam*, gestured to a modern genealogy of reformist scholarship that included Chinese scholars Wang Haoran and Muhammed Abduh, as well as Rashid Rida and Hassan al-Banna.

Unlike earlier connections between the Khilafat movement and Eastern Marxism, *China and Islam* was written at a moment when a civilizational discourse predicated on the deep time of an Islamic past secured the bifurcation of East and West even as it enabled the call for inter-Asian unity. Elam's essay is equally focused on textual transnationalism, though the links are between India and the United States, with the British state playing the role of surveillance machine. Elam's essay addresses the challenge of Marxist internationalism to liberal European states and to conceptions of political subjectivity. Like Chen, Elam too makes an important distinction between an earlier moment of interwar thought, when anarchists and revolutionary terrorists were comfortable with the promiscuous intermingling of diverse tendencies, from muscular Hinduism to vegetarianism, proto-fascism, and beyond, and a later moment distinguished by the transformation of anticolonialist struggle into state nationalism.

These transformations were especially significant on the Indian subcontinent, where the colonial government, and later, Indian nationalists defined communism as political treason and banned the Communist Party.⁸ The critique of violence emerges as a significant arc of concern in this period: it traverses the writings of the young Bhagat Singh, whose revolutionary prose took inspiration from the mutinous call of *ghadr* issued by Punjabi migrants on the west coast of the United States (Har Dayal was a central figure among them); to the later, "quiet" writings of Har Dayal that reference his earlier political life but now through reference to Bhagat Singh's powerful call to revolution—*Inqilab Zindabad!* (Long Live Revolution!) The

project of Indian revolt, which was first conceived across and beyond the British Empire—its central locus was the west coast of America, after all—doubles back, and it is now transformed into the call of the young political martyr, Bhagat Singh, whose image haunts the pages of Har Dayal's 1931 San Francisco pamphlet, *barabary de arth* ("The Meaning of Equality"). By scrambling linear time, revolutionary time would place Bhagat Singh (rather than the Indian revolutionaries from whom he drew inspiration) at the origin of Ghadr politics.

These scrambled temporalities and political displacements were produced by the media formations—the cultures of commentary, intercutting, and extended quotation—through which anticolonial thought circulated. They were also an outcome of the constant editing and experimentation that structured the political lives of these thinker-activists. Har Dayal could be described quite simply as a young revolutionary who renounced his past in a remarkable act of public recantation. However, Elam argues that to do so would involve ignoring the status of *Hints for Self Culture* (1934) as a postwar manual that sought to reimagine humanity in the wake of catastrophe. Har Dayal's text was not merely quiet, it was also secretive and sought possibilities for self-making beneath the state's radar: ethical possibility was cultivated as a response to political foreclosure and his (Har Dayal's) own betrayal. Elam eloquently reminds us that it is this work of political imagination that brought *ghadr* into the very heart of anticolonial self-making.

Race and Religion

The essays by Davari and Nikpour take up the project of postcolonial utopia, but as it intersects with Cold War concerns with geopolitical stability, and in Davari's case, with what can be characterized, in retrospect, as the rise of "political Islam" in the aftermath of African and Asian decolonization and postcolonial failure. In his essay on the Iranian Revolution, Michel Foucault would write admir-

8. The essays in the previous issue of this journal on the Meerut Conspiracy Case address transformations in Indian political culture that (a) isolated Communists from the mainstream by the early 1930s, while (b) hardening the

identity of radicals whose engagement with Marxism had been more along the lines of political enthusiasm than theoretical training in Marxist theory. That is, the conspiracy cases against suspected communists in the interwar

period had the effect of solidifying communist identity and party identification. Among the other essays in the special section, see Lourd and Stolte, "Meerut Conspiracy Case."

ingly of the “spirit” of revolution and argue that the political theology of radical Islam required exploration precisely because it made the European Left uncomfortable.⁹ The discomfort with political spirituality indicted the secularity of Left intellectuals, but it was also meant to remind them of the connected histories of religion and politics (and their passionate vivisection), which stood at the inception of European peace, that is, the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648.

Davari’s essay addresses the writings of the key thinker of the Iranian Revolution, ‘Ali Shari’ati, who sought to bring together the Shia conception of the *shahid*, the martyr, with the Fanonian idea of the “new man,” who was produced through the enactment of anticolonial violence. In both instances, Shari’ati’s vision of a vitalist politics of death required engagement with and the rejection of Marxism, which offered a powerful, competing ideology of the mass political subject. As the secular subject of mass politics, the proletariat lacked the drive for exemplary death, or *shahadat*, political martyrdom: if *shahadat* was predicated on singularity, mass politics prized the unstable combination of vanguardism with proletarian anonymity. Although Heidegger’s influence on Shari’ati is well known, Davari forcefully argues that Fanon’s critique of Hegelian Marxism provided Shari’ati with a model of anticolonial self-making that enabled him to hitch a radically new, *political* interpretation of *shahadat* to Shia conceptions of sacrificial politics, of “dying for the other.” It is this activation of a “new politics” through earlier social forms that would render *bazgasht* (return to the self) performatively familiar yet conceptually distinctive.

It is easy to see why the late Foucault—who explored continuities between modern technologies of the self and monastic discipline—was drawn to the forms of political spirituality that defined the Iranian Revolution. What is less known, though more interesting, perhaps, are the persistent connectivities between black thought and the political theology of Islam. Shari’ati embraced the fiery aspirations of Fanon, for whom the resolute

materiality of race, in particular black skin, had precluded the possibility of political transcendence. Instead, Nikpour’s essay takes up a critical event in the life of black separatist Malcolm X just one year before he was assassinated by the Nation of Islam, the hajj pilgrimage, where Malcolm encountered the gap between “being” and “becoming” Muslim.

Nikpour brings to the forefront questions of connection and comparison, counterposing two distinctive responses to the repetitive structure of pilgrimage and the personal performance of going on hajj. Jalala al-e-Ahmad, another critical thinker of the Iranian revolution and author of the famous *Gharbzadegi* (*Westoxification*), experiences the hajj with a sense of alienation from the spirit of pilgrimage and exhibits a patronizing curiosity about the banality of belief in evidence around him. Meanwhile, Malcolm experiences hajj as a deeply humanizing project that creates horizontal solidarity among people from different walks of life, between black and brown people. As he becomes aware of African American Muslims’ ignorance of Islamic practice, Malcolm is also surprised by the humility that submission requires. The disjuncture between (African American) Muslim identity, on the one hand, and the embodied discipline (secured through repetitive performance) that marks intimacy with Islam, on the other, produces a moment of crisis and deep introspection. Like Al-e-Ahmad, Malcolm remains agnostic about the relationship between the ethics of experience and political ideology, preferring, instead, to subject his hajj pilgrimage to relentless self-questioning. Nikpour writes with great sensitivity about these final acts of submission that came on the heels of the contentious political lives of Al-e-Ahmad and Malcolm X: going on hajj diverted each from the speed and rhythm of “acting” and instead forced them to consider the question of “becoming.” Something remarkable happens in the space outside political commitment and critique, and in the gap between thinking and acting: communal prayer encourages a highly individualistic, ethical transformation. The performativity of prayer is anchored to ritual

9. See Foucault, “Iran: The Spirit of a World without Spirit,” and Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*.

universalism, which typically depends on deindividuation. Instead, prayer and pilgrimage allowed Malcolm's exit from a reactive self-racialization, while it reconnected Al-e-Ahmad with a millennial practice. Nikpour eloquently shows that for both Malcolm and Al-e-Ahmad, the possibility of ethical practice lay in the space between race and religion.

These essays suggest unexplored links among black, anticaste, and Islamic thought spanning the political histories of (slave) Emancipation, interwar, and the Cold War. The complex conceptual issues they tackle bear witness to the distance critical theory and intellectual history must traverse if they are to recover moments of possibility amid better-known political foreclosures. However, the essays are most important in reminding us, perhaps, that the enduring legacy of insurgent thought lies in the example of its relentless experimentation in remaking words, concepts, and new worlds. ■■■■

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