

Editorial Note

We are publishing in this volume of *The Marxist*, the second set of papers presented at the school held for Central Committee members at Hyderabad and Chennai in December 2010 and January 2011 respectively. The papers relate to Post Modernism and Identity Politics; Changing Agrarian Relations under Capitalism; and Science and Society.

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On Post Modernism

The first difficulty in talking about ‘postmodernism’ is that it is a very imprecise word, with shifting meanings in different contexts. Logically, it should be regarded as the ‘post-’ of ‘modernism’—as something that happens after modernism *per se*. Now, the term modernism refers exclusively to a cluster of movements and developments in literature and the arts: movements such as Cubism, Surrealism, etc., and writers such as Joyce, Proust, or Eliot. The term postmodernism means much more than that. It is applied even more frequently to a number of philosophers—Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida, among the most famous—whose conflict is not with Modernism (all of them admire modernist art) but with the Enlightenment and its principal legacies, notably Marxism.

We can ignore the issue of postmodernism in art and literature. Philosophical postmodernism is more important because it offers itself not only as a philosophical alternative to Marxism but also as a radically new (‘Post-Marxist’) practice of politics. We should be concerned mainly with the political implications of the theoretical and philosophical positions of postmodernism.

Moreover, the word ‘postmodernism’ is also connected with terms

like ‘the Postmodern Age’ (first used in this context by the American sociologist, C. Wright Mills, in 1959), ‘Postmodern Condition’ (the title of Lyotard’s highly influential book of 1979) and ‘Postmodernity’ (as in the title of David Harvey’s superb book of 1989, *The Condition of Postmodernity*). In all such usages, the distinction is between ‘Modernity’ and ‘Postmodernity’, as phases of actual history. By modernity is generally meant the kind of philosophies, states, political forms, industrial economies, bourgeois societies and revolutionary ideologies that arose—specifically in Europe and its North American offshoots—as a result of (a) the impact of the Enlightenment on modern thinking, (b) the political impact of the French Revolution and (c) the socio-economic transformations wrought by the Industrial Revolution(s). The concept of ‘postmodernity’ rests on the proposition that after the Second World War something very fundamental changed—and changed very drastically—in the nature of capitalism itself, hence in capitalist societies and the kind of politics that are appropriate for such societies. *This* kind of discussion of postmodernism was concerned primarily with changes of an economic, social and technological nature with far-reaching consequences for modern forms of politics.

PART I. POST MODERNISM INTERNATIONALLY

We should begin with a detailed exposition of the concrete historical context in which these ideas arose, first in the US and then in France, before their world-wide dissemination. Many philosophical ideas surely have a semi-autonomous history of their own. For instance, it is perfectly possible to read the bulk of Derrida’s philosophy as a critique of Cartesian rationalism—and leave it at that. But Derrida is also the author of a book on Marx and makes constant political pronouncements. This is true of postmodernism generally. To understand the political origin and character of such ideas, a good understanding of the context becomes essential. In the United States, postmodernism arose in the 1950s, in a period of extraordinary capitalist stability and prosperity. In France, it arose a decade later, after a comprehensive defeat of the labour movement and the broader left there, and borrowed much from American ideas of postmodernism. These respective national origins help explain the character

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of those ideas, even though they did then get globalised with transhistorical claims.

Most of us tend to think that the term 'postmodernism' is of recent origin and refers to a body of French ideas. In reality, the term has been around since at least the 1870s, in Britain as well as Latin America, but with very different meanings which we shall ignore. The core meanings that the term now commands were given to it largely by a group of American sociologists and their colleagues during the 1950s, the first decade of the Cold War, specifically with the aim of debunking Marxism and the idea of class struggle as such. These American ideas were then taken up by a group of French thinkers after left resurgence of the 1967-69 period had been beaten back across Europe. Suitably re-phrased in the language of French philosophy, these ideas were then *returned* to the Anglo-Saxon countries, began dominating their universities and were then disseminated from there to countries like India.

What was the context in which those American ideas were assembled? The US had emerged from the Second World War as the dominant global power, with full employment, enormous war-related technological advances (atomic bomb, the computer, great advances in telecommunications, aviation, etc.), historically unparalleled financial resources, and the ability to command virtually the whole world, including Western Europe itself. Over the next two decades, the US assembled the most powerful university system the world has ever known, which was to then produce ideas for the global bourgeoisie as a whole. Most crucially, the US-led global capitalism experienced its longest period of prosperity and its highest rates of sustained growth in history, which indeed did lead to vast changes in structures of production, management and communication. Unlike continental Europe, the US never had a powerful communist movement or a culture of Marxist ideas. Politically quiescent and conservative at home, immensely optimistic about its own future, the US was riding a wave of prosperity that was to produce what was variously called Mass Culture, Affluent Society, Postmodern Society, Post-Industrial Society and Information Society, the Active Society, and so on. One forgets now that 'postmodern' was comprehensively American well before it became French.

In the American usage of the term, there were two sides. A very

large part of it had to do with literature, culture, the arts. All that we shall here ignore. The other part had to do with science and technology, modes of economic production, and social organization. At the centre of this other narrative was a hero: the computer. The most influential narrators of this hero's exploits were sociologists, experts in cybernetics, writers of popular science. And a central belief: transformed by the latest technologies, capitalism had finally produced the prosperity it had always promised, the prosperity was here to stay, and it was only natural that the poor too would get a share of it, sooner or later. This belief was managed by a specific entity: the advanced-capitalist welfare state in an age of unprecedented prosperity, with vast expansion of the middle class. The claim was made across the social sciences that the US was basically a middle class society and the working class, with its home ownership and personal automobiles, had become part of the middle class. It was then claimed that as more and more workers came to have middle class incomes, communist politics was rendered irrelevant by a combination of (a) rapid economic growth, (b) Keynesian redistributive mechanisms and full employment, and (c) a new compact between Capital and Labour whereby gains in productivity were reflected in higher wages.

What Lyotard was to later call 'computerization of society' was already being celebrated in the U.S. during the 1950s and 60s as having introduced a decisive shift in the history of capitalism. As European economy had in the past experienced fundamental changes from agriculture to simple manufacture, and from simple manufacture to modern industry in the proper sense, information technologies were now said to be bringing about an equally epochal shift from 'production society' to 'information society' and from the industrial to the post-industrial. Whatever philosophical positions may have attached themselves to it later, and whatever the term may have eventually come to mean in the field of art and aesthetics, the social theory of postmodernity has its real roots in the previous theories of post-Fordist production and post-industrial society.

Post-Fordism meant that the great system of centralised factory production was being broken up into smaller units which specialised in particular aspects of the production, and, eventually, into a production system so dispersed and 'flexible' that parts could be made at a dozen different sites and the great automobile centres of Detroit

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were to merely assemble whole cars out of those parts. This system was then globalised by the multinational corporation and their countless subsidiaries. The industrial working class was said to be not only declining relative to the white-collar workers employed in the information sector and office work, it was also no longer concentrated in particular cities or regions, with their gigantic manufacturing plants, but dispersed in huge number of plants across the country, and indeed across continents.

'Post-industrial' meant great many different things. First, a shift from the primacy of production to primacy of consumption: industrial plant now expanded not by preferences and decisions of particular capitalists but in response to effective demand, which was created by full employment, expansion of credit to encourage over-consumption, advertising to constantly create new markets for new products. Second, it meant the central role of information technology in planning the whole production-consumption chain, so that information technology came to occupy a more central role than mere production technology. Third, it meant the shifting ratio between industrial employment and employment in services. Fourth, computerization, robotization and increasing productivity gains thanks to constant technological innovation meant that fewer and fewer workers were needed to produce more and more goods (and, presumably, these fewer workers could then be given high enough wages to become 'middle class'). Fifth, it was also proposed that the predominance of the multinational corporation, with its capital drawn from sale of shares in the open market had transformed the very nature of modern capital which was no longer owned by a handful of capitalists but by the whole of the shareholding population—a capitalist sort of socialisation of capital, so to speak. Moreover, decisions for corporations were made not by capitalists but by a techno-managerial elite, which was recruited not on the basis of family inheritance but on merit and skill. The capitalist class had thus been upstaged in post-industrial societies by meritocracy. It was thus proposed that since postmodern capitalism had neither the production system nor the working class nor even the capitalist class of the type that Marx had written about, Marxism had become simply redundant.

Within this larger analysis, though, there were contrasting accents. Popularisers of science and mediology, such as Marshall McLuhan or

Alvin Toffler, and some of the more modish cultural critics, such as Leslie Fiedler, tended to be the most ecstatic; the society of infinite communication and consumption, a global village of play and plenty, was at hand. Irwing Howe and Daniel Bell, former Trotskyites who had settled to a combination of cultural elitism and mildly social democratic politics, celebrated the world of plenty, mourned the consumerism and massification of culture, and generally drew up a relatively bleak picture of a society that was, in Irwing Howe's words, 'part welfare, part garrison'. Daniel Bell introduced into all this a novel twist: the modern for him was 'the saving society' of Weberian Protestant Ethic where you saved before you spent, whereas the postmodern was 'the spending society' which was first created by the credit system of the 1930s whereby you could simply borrow and spend what you did not have (e.g., housing purchased on mortgage, cars on credit). The postmodern was the profligate, the narcissistic, indicating a fundamental shift in capitalist society from 'production' to 'consumption' as the motor of growth. For him, this consumerist hysteria was a sign of social decay and a slide from the values of high bourgeois society. The idea that technologically-driven prosperity had led to social degradation would surface again and again, on both sides of the Atlantic, with the notable difference that while the American critics saw the demise of Enlightenment values as a tragedy, the French postmoderns saw it as a happy liberation from constraints of normative value and rational conduct. For this whole range of writers, no revolutionary historical change was in any case possible precisely because the working class no longer had a revolutionary role. End of Ideology was written into the birth certificate of Post-Industrial Society. All this was re-formulated some forty years later, in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, by Fukuyama in his End of History thesis: the assertion that all possible alternatives to liberal capitalism had now been beaten back decisively and all that remained now was the globalization of this liberal capitalism which was now under way.

It is really quite remarkable how many of the thinkers of postmodernisms were former Marxists or still claimed Marx. I have already mentioned Irwing Howe and Daniel Bell, former Trotskyites. Another highly influential figure during the 1960s was Herbert Marcuse, a member of the Frankfurt School who had emigrated to

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the United States during the Second World War and had then settled there permanently. He wrote perhaps the most popular book debunking the culture of mindless consumerism, *One-Dimensional Man*, but he also preaching a hedonistic kind of Marxism (Marx plus Freud, the sexual revolution), describing the proletariat as a declining, reformist class, and resting his hopes of regeneration in the students and the lumpen proletariat of the inner cities—directly reflecting the character of the anti-war protests and the rebellions of the inner city slums of the United States during the 1960s. Thus, within the ranks of those who continued to declare allegiance to some variety of Marxism but who were to form a bridge between the American ‘New Left’ and the thesis of the demise of the working class as a revolutionary agent, such as Marcuse, the critique of capitalist society shifted from any strict sense of class politics to the theories of alienation, sexual repression, cultural revolt, minority rights, student radicalism, localised revolts and so on. The shifts from class to culture were becoming a generalized phenomenon among the youth movements that began to grow during the 1960s, specially among the white middle classes, and the problems of capitalism itself were viewed much more in terms of faulty distribution and social alienation than in terms of exploitation at the point of production.

On the whole, two features of those revolts of the 1960s—a sort of prelude to more recent postmodern forms of politics—were striking. One was that the social base of student radicalism was so overwhelmingly middle class that the organized working class remained quiescent, indifferent, and in thrall of the dominant welfarist politics, which in turn only seemed to confirm the widespread thesis that the proletariat was no longer revolutionary, so that the agency for revolutionary social change could now be shifted to other, more dispersed social groups. This contempt for the working class was to become a permanent feature of postmodern politics. The second striking feature was that aside from the opposition to the Vietnam War, which naturally produced a wider anti-war sentiment, the main thrust of that radicalism was cultural, across a wide range, from sexuality to Pop music, from drugs to dress codes, from ethnic identities to religious cults—a far-reaching revolt against the repressive variant of bourgeois society but in pursuit of the most basic forms of bourgeois individuation, self-fashioning and even self-consuming.

These trends in youthful culture were taken up elaborately in French postmodernism in what called 'the Philosophy of Desire'. Foucault, for example, came to expound ecstatically on what he called 'Care of the Self' and 'Aesthetics of Existence', shifting the emphasis from collective political action to private self-gratification.

II

What was the historical moment in France within which postmodernism first made its mark, after 1968?

The socio-economic transformations of the advanced-capitalist kind had come in France later but much more dramatically. The United States had emerged as a major industrial power by the end of the 19th century and then became the world's leading financial power in the aftermath of the First World War. France, by contrast, had remained until after the Second World War a predominantly rural society. But, in another contrast with the United States, it had so massive a working class movement that the French Communist Party (PCF) emerged out of the War as the single largest party, with 26 per cent of the vote. Both these realities were to change drastically over the next two decades, as the face of Western Europe was changed—thanks partly to the injection of American finance through the Marshall Plan—by the fastest growth of the productive forces that European capitalism has known in its history. During that same decade when foundations were being laid for economic and social embourgeoisement of a very broad section of the population, France also lost two major colonial wars, in Indochina and Algeria respectively, and the consequent sense of national humiliation made rightwing opinion in the country far more widespread and belligerent. The Left had opposed the Marshall Plan as well as the savagery of France's colonial wars. Immense fury was unleashed against the Left by the beneficiaries of the Marshall Plan as well as by the national-chauvinist wave that arose in France after the wars were lost.

All that was in addition to epochal changes in the class structure itself. A majority of the population in 1945, the peasantry accounted for a mere 14 per cent of the French population by 1968, while the latest kinds of advanced technologies, brand-new consumption goods' industries, American-style urban development, rapid growth in

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ownership of cars and other goods of that kind, and immense expansion of cultural and academic complexes of the nation altered the rhythms of French life within one generation; between 1960 and 1968 alone, the number of college students trebled from 200,000 to 600,000, over 40 per cent of them women and over one-third concentrated in Paris alone. It is symptomatic of the contradictions of this new prosperity itself that the student uprisings of 1968 were fuelled not by fear of unemployment, since the economy was still expanding very rapidly, but by the failure of the university infrastructures to keep up with students' academic needs and the rebellious impulses of a vast number of first-generation students entering a university system that was possibly the most hierarchical and snobbish in the world. What they were seeking in fact was more rapid modernization of institutions and greater recognition of their own worth by the highly aristocratic elite educational institutions of France. The reforms, when they came after the student revolts, in fact re-organised the French university system relatively more closely on the American-style competitive model.

The rapid rates of capitalist growth meanwhile led to relative political disengagement in the better-paid sections of the working class itself. This phase also witnessed massive expansion of a new type of petty bourgeois strata that had little continuity with traditional France and was much more open to the increasingly globalised American culture. More generally, an intellectual atmosphere prevailed in which capitalism, fortified by an advanced social democratic state, seemed to be living up to its promises of stable and increasing prosperity for those who had gained access to higher forms of culture and education. Lyotard, perhaps the most eminent of French postmodernists (and himself a former Luxemburgist), was to express this delirium of commodities most succinctly: 'the age of scarcity is over; the age of goods and services has arrived!' Surrealism rather than classical Marxism, culture rather than class, seemed to be more relevant to the phalanxes of the upwardly mobile. The political vanguard of these newly privileged strata was bored with the slow rhythms of working class politics. Instead, it dreamed of distant affiliations with Maoism and Guevarism—or just plain anarchism.

All in all, then, the university-based French radical youth of the 1960s was more than normally receptive to the ideologies emanating

from the U.S.—from the elite sociologists and from the anti-war radicals of the white middle class, mainly because those ideologies corresponded to large parts of their own experience; they too were children of the computer and Coca-Cola.

Such were the powers of U.S. capitalism and pressures of the Cold War that for the first time in two hundred years the elite of the French intelligentsia were looking to the United States for theories and markets. Leading imperialist power in the world, the United States had also become the empire's intellectual and artistic centre. Having lost its own empire, key intellectual fractions in France now looked up to the new imperial centre. The young filmmakers at the cutting edge of French cinema wanted to be Hitchcock. Leading sociologists and philosophers of the new generation borrowed their ideas from Daniel Bell. French postmodernism itself would emerge from this milieu as a globally dominant intellectual current only after its spectacular marketing, re-packaging and expanded reproduction in the United States.

The story of the French upheavals of 1968, as re-written by a combination of liberals and postmodernists, concentrates almost entirely on student revolts. Fact of the matter is that this was also the year of the largest general strike in European history, and a proletarian uprising was the crux of this general strike. In response, President De Gaulle began actively planning to call in the NATO troops. The PCF and CGT were acutely aware of the fact that the US was simply not going to allow a revolutionary success in a key European country like France. Faced with the prospect of actual intervention, they organized an orderly retreat for the working class. By contrast, the ideology of the 1968 student revolts in Paris was a curious mixture of surrealism and Maoism, sexual revolution and American sociology, the cult of spontaneity and the demand for upward mobility. As for the vision held by those who were to later attack the PCF and the French working class so very bitterly for 'betraying the revolution', Cohn-Bendit, one of the key student leaders, put it succinctly: 'People were not looking for a confrontation on 11 May. The idea at the beginning was to have a big party in the Sorbonne courtyard. The barricades went up by themselves.' When communists tried to remind them that not just the French army but also the two hundred thousand U.S. troops stationed in West Germany were not likely to walk away from their

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arsenal to join this 'big party in the Sorbonne courtyard,' they were accused of reformism, bureaucratism, betrayal, Stalinism, and all the rest. The upper crust of the French intelligentsia was now ready to turn away decisively from the working class movement. As the dust of 1968 settled and French capitalism took up its expansion with renewed vigour, most radicals of yesteryears took up lucrative posts in the expanding cultural apparatuses of the state, especially after the Socialist Party abandoned the Common Programme it had formulated with the PCF and came to power without the communists. This was the milieu in which French postmodernism arose to dominance, with its most powerful constituency located in North America.

III

Let us now turn to some contradictions and ironies inherent in postmodern thought.

The first irony that strikes me is its great popularity in countries like India and China. All the fundamental presuppositions of postmodern social and economic analyses refer to the structures of advanced capitalism. Looking at things from India, it seems implausible that postmodernist analyses could apply to societies that are not modern even by the standards of 19th century Britain or France or Germany. Nor is it possible to be postindustrial in predominantly agrarian societies.

Definitive decline of the industrial working class is a central tenet of postmodernism. This too does not apply. Given the demographic size of China and its rapid industrialization in recent years, there has been greater expansion of the industrial proletariat there in mere three decades than perhaps in all of Europe during its industrial revolutions. A small number of countries—East and South East Asian countries, plus India, Brazil and Argentina, let us say—has experienced a demographically much larger process of proletarianisation than the West did in all its history, and this has happened precisely during the half century which has witnessed the ascendancy of postmodern ideas in the higher echelons of university education.

As for the great prosperity and generalised ownership of housing and consumer durables that capitalism is said to have delivered, the

fact is that (a) the vast majority of people outside the Euro-American zones never experienced anything of the kind, and (b) that kind of prosperity, including homeownership for the working classes, is precisely what is getting dissolved by the current offensives of the capitalist class across Europe and North America. And if the credit system was the great motor for the making of the 'consumer society', 'affluent society' etc, it is precisely the scale of private and state debts that is bringing that whole phase of American prosperity to a close under our very eyes.

We shall ignore here the absurd idea of the disappearance of the capitalist class in the United States. But something needs to be said about the opposite thesis, regarding the working class. I have already pointed out the actual and historically unprecedented expansion of the proletariat in numerous Third World countries over the past half century. Moreover, the dramatic decline of the industrial working class in the US is an index of the general decline of manufacture in US economy as such, and this decline is proving to be not a sign of prosperity but the key cause of the decline of American economic power as such. That is certainly not the case in the most powerful European economy, namely Germany, where industrial working class continues to have far greater social weight. In another frame, as early as the 1970s, when ideas of the death of the working class were swirling around on both sides of the Atlantic, Harry Braverman, in his brilliant book *Labour and Monopoly Capital*, had demonstrated that some 90% of the US population owned no income-generating property and relied exclusively on an economy of salaries and wages. A sectoral breakdown of jobs and incomes then showed a very high degree of proletarianisation.

Meanwhile, since at least the advent of Lenin, communists have never believed that the industrial working class will necessarily become the majority of the population or the exclusive agent of revolutionary change; nor has it been postulated that the industrial working class is the only kind of working class we have. The proletariat has always been conceived of as the leading nucleus of a revolutionary movement which will, however, necessarily rely on mobilization of and joint action with other oppressed classes, such as the peasantry, the rural proletariat and the mass of workers in branches other than manufacture, not to speak of numerous other social strata. The

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postmodernist idea that communism has somehow become irrelevant because the industrial proletariat constitutes only a minority of the population—and even of the proletarianised masses—thus has no bearing on how the role of the industrial proletariat is actually conceived in communist thought.

We can thus say that so far as the social and economic analyses of postmodernism are concerned, we can treat this part of the ideology essentially as a reflection of a particular phase of western, especially US, prosperity, with the assumption that this particular kind of prosperity will now be permanent. Moreover, the ideology is quite an accurate reflection of the class location of the new and prosperous middle class which itself a product of the type of capitalism that arose in the imperialist core of contemporary capitalism during the ‘Golden Age of Capitalism’ between 1945 and 1973. This class has actually continued to gain during the whole period of the Bubble Economy that speculative capital was able to sustain even after the recessionary trends set in after 1973. Moreover, key producers of such ideologies tend to be concentrated, even when they come from Third World origins, in institutions of higher learning and cultural management in those countries. This highly Westcentric ideology was presented, moreover, as a universalism, i.e., as if conditions prevailing in the West were somehow global conditions and ideas produced in specific circumstances had universal validity.

Finally, there is a certain basic difference between the American proponents of postmodernism and the French ones. Some of the American proponents were former Trotskyites and even former communists, but by and large the US has no powerful tradition of Marxist thought or communist politics. Rather, liberalism has been hegemonic. These postmodernists had no difficulty in settling into that liberal tradition, defence of capitalism, praise songs of bourgeois democracy and so forth. The French case was different. There had been a very powerful current of communist politics as well as Marxist thought. Moreover, French postmodernists claimed to be the inheritors of the radicalism of 1968. Kristeva had been a Maoist and she was one of the few who went all the way into Anglo-Saxon liberalism (perhaps because she was not really French but a White Russian émigré from Bulgaria). Lyotard came from a background of the ultra-Left, more Luxemburgist than Trotskyite, before moving

into the more rightwing section of the Socialist Party. Foucault had been so close to the PCF in his youth that it is still not clear whether or not he was a member. Derrida said that Deconstruction, his distinctive philosophy within postmodernism, was no more than a 'radicalisation of Marxism' and wrote a book in praise of Marx (interpreting Marx in a way no Marxist could agree with). Most of them despised liberalism, took much from theoretical anarchism, presented themselves as more radical than Marxism. The general postmodernist claim of revolutionary radicalism, in India and globally, derives from them and asserts that communism is simply not revolutionary enough—that radical social change now needs a different kind of politics.

IV

Let us now turn to certain specific ideas, developed mainly in France but with close affinities with US developments. For the sake of brevity, I shall confine myself to certain formulations by the three most eminent of French postmodernists—Lyotard, Foucault and Derrida.

Lyotard is in some ways a representative figure since his work touches on all the principle themes that are relevant to contemporary postmodern, anti-Marxist politics. In the Introduction *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), his most widely influential book, Lyotard defines postmodernism as a rejection of three fundamental legacies of the Enlightenment: Dialectics (associated with Hegel), Reason (associated, respectively, with Descartes and Kant) and the idea that that political economy was the backbone of all social organization (associated with Marx). He further rejects, as mere 'Enlightenment optimism', the idea that humanity could work toward its own emancipation through rational thought (Kant) and revolutionary action of the working class (Marx).

Later in the book he also speaks of 'the severe reexamination that postmodernity imposes on the thought of the Enlightenment, on the idea of a unitary end of history and of a subject.' By 'unitary end of history' Lyotard means both the Hegelian idea that the true vocation of history is the pursuit of universal Liberty as well as the Marxist conception that the prehistory of humankind can come to an end, and real universal History can begin, only after the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by socialism and communism. By 'the

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idea . . . of a working subject' he refers to the Marxist proposition that class struggle is the motive force of history and the proletariat is the central social class ('the subject' of history) for evolutionary transformation. He similarly rejects the Marxist idea that the capitalist class as whole is the ruling class in any capitalist social formulation. In stead he posits:

'The ruling class is and will continue to be the class of decision-makers/ Even now it is no longer composed of the traditional political class, but of a composite layer of corporate leaders, high-level administrators, and the heads of major professional, labour, political and religious organizations . . . poles of attraction represented by nation-states, parties, professions, institutions, and historical traditions are losing their attraction.'

This definition of the new ruling class is taken straight from American political sociology of the 1950s, but he then adds the idea that nation-states and political parties are also losing their salience in the new, postmodern form of politics—an idea that will become greatly pervasive in subsequent years in the rhetorics of globalisation on the one hand, and in the global emergence of NGOs, the so-called social movements, various kinds of identity politics and so on.

Liotard published his famous book in 1979, after Pinochet and Margaret Thatcher had initiated neoliberal policies in Chile and Britain, just as the Deng reforms were getting promulgated in China, and the year before Reagan came to power in the US. Mitterand, who had won the French elections a year earlier, after breaking with the PCF and the Common Programme, was to soon emerge as a close ally of Reagan in the neoliberal offensive. Here are Lyotard's approving comments on the evolving situation, which indicates his increasing enthusiasm for neoliberal ideas and policies:

'The reopening of the world market, a return to vigorous economic competition, the breakdown of the hegemony of American capitalism, the decline of the socialist alternative, a probable opening of the Chinese market—these and many other factors are already, at the end of the 1970s, preparing states for a serious reappraisal of the role they have been accustomed to playing since the 1930s. that of guiding and even directing investments.'

And, even more clearly:

‘. . . the blossoming of techniques and technologies since the Second World War . . . can also be seen as an effect of the redeployment of advanced liberal capitalism after its retreat under the protection of Keynesianism during the period 1930-60, a renewal that has eliminated the communist alternative and valorized the individual enjoyment of goods and services.’

The key word in the latter paragraph is ‘renewal’. ‘The redeployment of advanced *liberal* capitalism’, after decades of Keynesian regulation was a ‘renewal’ of capitalism as such, which has ‘eliminated the communist alternative.’ With his most up-to-date French philosophical postmodernism, Lyotard was thus a neoliberal at the very dawn of the neoliberal phase, even before Reagan came to power in the US.

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About Foucault I shall be brief. He is more a philosophical historian and little concerned with active politics. He was as opposed to the fundamentals of Marxist thought as Lyotard but had absolutely no truck with neoliberalism. His opposition to Marxism can be illustrated with a brief but paradigmatic formulation of his difference from Marxism: ‘no narrative of history can be assembled from the twin sites of political economy and the state.’ What does this mean? First, classes are not the fundamental units of society; economic power is just one kind among many kinds of power; the state is just one social actor among many other kinds of actors; to abolish one kind of state (e.g., the capitalist state) and replacing it with some other kind of state (e.g., the proletarian state) amounts to no more than replacing one kind of power over the people with another kind of power. Second, society is composed of countless complexes and organisms of power: the family, the prison complex, the schooling complex, the medical complex, the technologies for management of sexuality, and so on and on and on. Each has to be addressed in its own terms, not in the overall framework of class struggle.

Such ideas then lead to a very restricted notion of what forms of politics might be permissible. One of Foucault’s key political ideas is that no one can really represent any one else without a coercive

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relationship with those who are represented. All you can do in the social domain is try to help enhance the power of people to represent themselves. For this you need what Foucault calls ‘micro-politics,’ local, issue-based, time-bound. You help others if you can but you make sure that you don’t try to *represent* them, since self-representation is the only authentic form of representation.

Foucault’s idea of ‘micro-politics,’ local and issue-based, and especially the rhetoric of ‘empowering’ without organizing politically, does authorize the kind of politics that has come to be practised now on such a vast scale by the NGOs and the so-called social movements. His proposition that (a) every society is composed of countless centres of power and great many institutions, and therefore (b) what is required is not a unified political party but a whole plethora of agents addressing those multiple centres of power resonates well with the very structure of the postmodern politics that have arisen in our times, especially in the form of identity politics. And, for all its radical claims, this kind of politics is perfectly acceptable to Anglo-Saxon liberal statecraft which has always understood that capitalist state power is safest when it can fragment the opposition into diverse claimants competing for a share in the national revenue—atomisation of politics, so to speak—and most vulnerable when it has to face a united opposition to its rule. In immigrant societies such as the United States, where the population itself is composed of diverse social groups—distinguished by countries of origin, religious affiliation, racial divides etc—this atomisation of politics in the shape of ‘identity politics’ has always been the principal weapon against class politics, as Marxist historians such as Mike Davis have shown with extensive documentation. By the end of 1960s, this politics of ethnic identity became state policy not only in the US but also in Canada as ‘multiculturalism’ and in Britain as ‘race relations’—increasingly with the high philosophical rhetoric borrowed from French postmodernism. This Anglo-Saxon manoeuvre was then imported into India, often with postmodernist authority; even the word ‘ethnicity’ was a gift to Indian social science from the Ford Foundation and its funded scholars, institutes, publications and seminars. Until the 1970s, hardly any Indian social scientist used this word.

VI

The case of Derrida is more complex. Unlike Lyotard he never broke with philosophical Marxism wholly and, even unlike Foucault, affiliated himself quite explicitly with what he calls a 'certain spirit of Marxism.' Problems arise when we begin to examine what this 'certain spirit' actually is and the kind of politics he derives from it. He even claims that his own kind of philosophy ('Deconstruction') is itself a 'radicalization of Marxism' and in this sense owes a debt to Marxism. That claim is manifestly extravagant. Deconstruction is strictly a method for reading literary and philosophical texts, and whatever else Marxism may be, it is by no means and in no basic sense a mere method of reading; it is above all an extensive critique of the capitalist mode of production, and a science of politics to overcome this mode and make a transition to socialism and communism. To be meaningful, Derrida's claim that he has always been interested in 'radicalizing' Marxism would then have to be a political claim, not about reading but about acting politically.

In that, Derrida is equally scathing of neoliberalism and of communism, as averse to political parties and organizations as Foucault, as dismissive of Reason and class struggle as Lyotard. He actually published a famous book on Marx in which he not only denounces the whole of history of communist revolutions and parties, but goes as far as to propose new 'International' which he defines in the following words:

'It [The 'new International'] is without title, and without name, barely public even if it is not clandestine . . . without coordination, without party, without country, without national community (International before, across, and beyond any national determination), without co-citizenship, without common belonging to a class. . . . an alliance without institution . . . in order to ally themselves, in a new, concrete and real way, even if this alliance no longer takes the form of a party or of a workers' international, but rather . . . critique of the state of international law, the concepts of state and nation, and so forth '

Derrida's use of the term 'new International' was deliberate, with implied but inescapable contrast to—and rejection of—the Third International (as well as the Second and the Fourth). And while

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constantly invoking the name of Marx, he rejects everything that Marx himself practiced and taught in the political domain. In its conceptual underpinnings his stance is very close to that of theoretical anarchism, and in its practical recommendations it does correspond fairly closely to the kind of non- and even anti-communist radical protest we have witnessed in recent decades which is usually composed of individuals (often mobilized through the Internet), the locally active micro-political group, broader social movements, networks of such movement, and periodic aggregation of a cross-section of such individuals, movements and networks, in such events as the anti-globalization protests against the IMF, the G-20 Summits, the Davos Economic Forum, etc. Indeed, the World Social Forum would be the characteristic form corresponding to Derrida's conception of the 'new International': a network of all networks, a festival of politics without a political programme of its own.

VII

In conclusion:

Postmodernism is comprised of so many different strands that it would be difficult to present it as a coherent body of thought. Certain features do stand out, however:

~ Virtually all of it reflects conditions prevailing in the advanced West and its own understanding of those conditions. This Westocentric feature is obvious enough in its economic analyses and would become even clearer if we were to focus closely on its strictly philosophical side, which we have omitted here for reasons of space but which is really one long engagement with lineages of Cartesian Reason in modern European philosophy.

~ In its political persuasions, all of postmodernism is engaged in distancing itself from Marxism and communist politics, but in very different ways. The American variant has been grounded primarily in traditions of Liberalism and Possessive Individualism. A minority of French postmodernists, notably Kristeva and Lyotard, move in that direction, but majority do not. These others would appear to be moving, in varying degrees, in the orbit of classical anarchism. It is well to remember that in Marx's own time, anarchism was the main competitor of Marxism on the

Left—and this remained the case in parts of Europe right up to the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s. It would seem logical, then, that with so many radicals breaking away from Marxism, anarchism would register something of a resurgence as indicated, for example, by the great salience of Noam Chomsky (the best of theoretical anarchists in our time) in the US and beyond.

~ The most far-reaching consequence of postmodernism in practical politics has been what I have called the atomisation of politics, the displacement of class politics by an amorphous entity called ‘culture,’ the further displacement of the politics of Equality by the politics of Identity, the fracture of the unity of the exploited and the oppressed into countless little oppositional claims, so that resistance seems to be everywhere but nowhere in particular.

~ We have shown that postmodernism was comprehensively American before it became French. American cultural hegemony has also led to the globalisation of postmodernist ideas and political forms, often backed by corporate and even state fundings of various kinds. For instance, retreat of the state from social welfare and public enterprise alike, as mandated by neoliberalism, has also meant an increasing role for the funded NGOs and social movements in areas where the state has abdicated its responsibility, all of which is in turn legitimised by postmodern ideas.

~ Postmodern ideas now have a fairly strong grip over many aspects of knowledge production in India too, especially in the social sciences. We have not elaborated on this subject here but it is given in a supplementary note.

PART II. POST MODERNISM IN INDIA

We have seen that ‘the postmodern’ can be understood in at least three different ways:

1. as a set of structural changes in the very nature of capitalism that have gathered increasing force over the past sixty years or so, and the way these changes have been conceptualised in postmodern thought, in the US as well as France;

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2. as philosophical positions that postmodernist thinkers take in opposition to the Enlightenment and its legacies—in opposition, most importantly, to Marxist thought and Communist politics; and

3. as actual political practices, organizational principles, and ideological assertions which they posit in opposition to Marxism and communism, and which objectively correspond to those postmodern philosophical positions (a fetish to localism and ethnicity, rise of the funded NGOs, the so-called ‘social movements’ and ‘civil society organizations’ etc are the obvious examples).

Postmodernism has come to India in all these forms, through a variety of channels.

I

For our present purposes—for the specific purpose of drawing a distinction between Modern and Postmodern—we shall divide the post-independence history of India into three phases. We shall comment at greater length on the first phase, which is often the object of postmodern denunciation.

The first phase, from 1947 to the early 1970s, can be regarded, on the whole, as the period of the Nehruvian paradigm, with ups and downs, culminating, eventually, in the wave of nationalisations, the ‘Garibi Hatao’ rhetoric, the victory in the Bangladesh war etc—all of which served in fact to conceal the scale of the accumulating crisis of that paradigm. This is the phase in which the ruling bourgeois-landlord alliance was shaped and consolidated but very much under the guidance given to it, and constraints imposed upon it, by the Nehruvian state. For the first fifteen years or so, the state was dominated by leaders who had also led the anti-colonial movement, commanded immense authority and legitimacy for that reason, and was therefore able to impose upon the ruling alliance a kind of class compromise. The key elements in that class compromise was the existence of a quasi-Bonapartist state that taught the ruling classes what was good for them. The bourgeoisie of private accumulation was taught that it needed a relatively prolonged period of gestation under a protectionist state, a dominant public sector, state-funded development of a techno-scientific establishment that privately owned industry would

eventually need for its own purposes; a reformist ideological state apparatus through state-funded educational systems, state-owned media of radio and TV—and many other structural elements of that kind. In short, state-led development of capitalism, ‘Keynsian’ and ‘social democratic’ in the context of a Third World, backward-capitalist, largely agrarian country. The landowning classes of the countryside were taught, similarly, to accept some limited degree of agrarian reforms to facilitate a gradual transition from feudal power to the rise of a new class of agrarian capitalists arising out of the old big landed property, rich peasants, semi-urban entrepreneurs etc. Land redistribution was limited, and it was accompanied with technologies of the Green Revolution; both were designed to facilitate the rise of capitalist agriculture.

Sociologically, India is by far the most diverse, heterogeneous society in the world, in terms of languages, local and regional customs, intricacies of caste and sub-caste divisions, belief systems (i.e., so-called ‘religions’), music, cuisine, the plastic arts and so on. Thanks to this diversity, India is also particularly prone to the kind of divisiveness that is organized in these postmodern times under the benign banner of ‘identity politics’. Also, in those early years after Independence, India was economically and militarily weak, hence pressed by the leading imperialist powers to come into their orbit. That was the context in which secularism and caste justice at home and non-alignment in foreign relations came to occupy so central a place in the state’s ideological articulations as it fashioned a project of Indian Modernity in the early years after Independence. The key idea here was the idea of the ‘national’. It meant, first, the idea of national unity over and above internal diversity, which could only be obtained by containing communal strife through a secular compact and combating caste privilege through constitutional, legal, social reforms as well as programmes of historical redress undertaken by the state, such as ‘reservations’ etc. Second, in external relations, non-alignment was seen as India’s declaration of independence in relation to the dominant world powers—a logical step, as it were, following the formal achievement of political independence from colonial rule.

We can designate this as, typically, the period in which there was an overwhelming consensus on a certain conception of Indian Modernity: a nation-state radically different from the colonial state

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against which it had won its independence, the leading role of the state in the making of a modern society after colonial pillage, secularism taking precedence over religious particularity and upheld by the state as primary public virtue, the main political configurations in the electoral arena (the Congress as the dominant party but also the Communists, Socialists, the RSS, etc.) clearly demarcated by their ideologies, hence their differences from others.

Much else could be said about that phase but this particular understanding of the first phase—between Independence and the Emergency, let us say—as a phase of Indian Modernity, in continuation with the pre-47 Independence Movement, does help us understand (a) how structurally different that phase was from the present one, and (b) why that phase gets debunked so much by mainstream Anglo-American scholarship of India, by neoliberals generally (Western and Indian alike), by Hindu communalists (who can even accept some parts of Gandhi but none of the Nehruvian legacy), and by the Indian postmoderns (the subalternists, Ashish Nandy and so on). There has of course been a communist critique of the Nehruvian state that must be preserved and improved, but that communist critique must also be clearly demarcated from the subalternist, communalist and other rightwing critiques.

The second phase begins with the declaration of Emergency when a full-blown crisis of the Congress paradigm manifested itself in the suspension of liberal democracy itself. We don't have the space here to specify the structural meaning of that phase. In short, we can say that the Emergency inaugurated a transitional phase of instability in which the future course of the Indian state was deeply contested, until the crisis was resolved, in favour of the Right, twice over, first with the Rao-Manmohan neoliberal reforms of the early 1990s, and then with the rise of the BJP as a competing ruling party toward the end of the 1990s. This is the period that witnessed major attacks on the basic pillars of Indian Modernity: leading role of the state and public enterprise, economic nationalism, secular polity, independent foreign policy. By the beginning of the 21st century, India had again obtained a coherent power bloc, comprised of the Congress as its liberal wing in social terms and the Sangh conglomerate as its communal wing, but with a consensus on neoliberalism and pro-imperialism.

If the 1975-1990 years can be regarded as a transitional phase

between one (so-called 'Nehruvian') paradigm to another ('neoliberal'), we can say that the period between 1991 up to the present has witnessed the consolidation of the latter paradigm, with much turbulence during the 1990s, then more smoothly during the period just behind us. Twenty years of neoliberalism has in fact created some of the conditions which have a certain resemblance to conditions in which postmodern ideas had made their first appearance in the US. The great polarisation between the super-rich and the destitute millions is one kind of reality. Alongside that, however, 'consumer society' has undoubtedly come into being for not only the upper bourgeoisie but also for expanding sectors of the middling bourgeoisies, not only in the main metros but also in many other cities, townships and the agrarian rich. There is a discernable social shift from 'saving' to 'spending' often with the crutch of the new consumer credit system. Privatisation and proliferation of the electronic media—including the arrival of foreign channels into domestic livingrooms and computer screens bringing the globalised postmodern American culture to millions of people young and old—is rapidly giving rise to a kind of social subjectivity unprecedented in Indian social history and quite similar to that of the American middle classes. The obvious nexus among state functionaries, corporate moneybags and outright criminals is creating a widespread cynicism regarding the practice of politics as such, very much in the American mould. Structural changes of this kind create an objective ground for reception and acceptance of postmodern ideas.

II

Such are the structural changes. As for the philosophical ideas, Indian postmodernism seems to have none of its own but has been skilful in adapting the received ideas. Let us recall some of the features of American and French postmodernisms we discussed earlier. First, there is a revolt against Enlightenment ideas of Rationality, Universality and Progress. Second, in political theory, there is widespread rejection of the state and political organizations—parties, trade unions etc—as mere bureaucratic machines for mass coercion. Politics, then, can only be local, community-based and issue-based. The Nazi death camps and technologically produced weapons of mass destruction

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are cited again and again to debunk the idea that Science can be an instrument of human emancipation. Most of the postmodernists equate communism and fascism as 'totalitarian' ideologies and systems, borrowing this equation from the Far Right. Rejection of Modernity then often leads to a certain romanticization of the premodern—the traditional, the primordial—as something authentic. (Foucault, for instance, not only debunked communism as 'totalitarian' but also wrote essays praising the clerical revolution in Iran). Versions of all this re-appear in various shades of Indian postmodernism—as we shall see below.

The postmodern political forms in India typically take the shape of 'social movements', 'civil society organizations' and the funded NGOs. It is important to understand these terms. 'Social movement' is contrasted to 'political movements'. Politics addresses the issue of state power, but if state is dismissed as realm of corruption and bureaucratic manipulation then political parties—even workers' parties which participate in the political field and fight for state power—are also seen as part of that corruption, as yet other kinds of bureaucratic machines. Logically, then, the political is replaced by 'the social'; the objective now is not to work toward a different kind of state power but to bypass the issue of political power altogether, and to work, in stead, for 'empowerment' of individuals, local communities and social groups where they exist, in relation to the specific issues that concern them in their daily lives. The same applies to the concept of 'civil society organizations'. 'Civil society' is equated with 'the people' and is differentiated from 'the state.' Another term for the same is 'people's movements'. All of these typically take the form of the NGO. Much is made of NOT taking state funds, which is said to guarantee independence from the state. This is an interesting claim considering that great many of the most successful NGOs do take money from the Scandinavian governments, German foundations, various institutions of the United Nations, or such entities as Action Aid which is itself an arm of the British government—and for some years, increasingly, the World Bank, Ford Foundation etc. More recently, a number of Indian corporate houses have also moved into this field of patronage for NGOs. In practice, then, the national Indian state is the one that is treated as particularly unworthy, while funding from virtually anywhere else is considered clean.

Now, local work, among particular communities and on specific issues, is as old as 19th century reform movements, and most political parties which have any kind of ideological claims do have such programmes. But all such works was historically done with the idea of building larger and larger unities and organization for emancipation of the nation as a whole, of the peasantry and the working classes as entire social units, or of women on the national scale. What was new with NGOs etc was an *exclusive* emphasis on local work and the small group, with great contempt for electoral politics and with deliberate refusal to work in terms of classes, national liberation, or even trade union work. The phenomenon of the NGOs—many of whom starting calling themselves ‘social movements’ etc—arose in India as a major, distinct phenomenon when European social democratic parties—with their governments and foundations—began funding such organisations, essentially to compete with communist organizational efforts among the peasantry, the working classes, women and artisanal groups. On the global scale, those social democratic parties were already closely aligned with US imperialism since the beginning of the Cold War but much of the broad left in India which was opposed to the communist parties came to see those very social democratic parties as a progressive, democratic alternative to communism. There is reason to believe that CIA money was also funnelled through those European parties but the anti-communist projects of those parties themselves were now just as extreme as those of US imperialism. They funded anti-communist NGOs not only in India but across Asia and, especially, Africa.

Once that breach was in place, other funders could also move in. This phenomenon remained relatively restricted during the period when ideologies of anti-imperialism, economic nationalism and independent Indian development were strong and, rhetorically at least, the state itself paid lip service to such ideologies. As neoliberalism took hold and those ideologies receded, inhibition about getting funding from foreign agencies and domestic corporates also fell off. Then, as the state started withdrawing from direct involvement in providing social entitlements, it also began farming out some of its own work to NGOs, as had previously been done in weaker states such as Bangladesh. Over time, these ‘social movements’, armed with the rhetoric of ‘micro-politics’ borrowed from French postmodernism,

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have come to occupy more and more of the political space in the name of 'civil society' and 'the social'. This atomization of politics, which undercuts the politics of organized unity against the ruling class and its state, is greatly favoured by global capital itself.

III

At the level of ideas that are crucial in the formation of new intellectuals—i.e., reading publics, teachers and students in institutions of higher learning, political activists, research and writing in social sciences and the arts—Indian postmodern thought takes several forms. Ascendancy of neoliberalism in all its aspects should itself be seen as the primary ideology of postmodern global finance capital, so that a chief characteristic of all kinds of postmodernism is that it may oppose great many other things—the state, political parties, trade unions, environmental degradation, caste oppression, and so on—but never—*never*—the market as such. Indeed, the ideologies extreme anti-statism that one finds in all kinds of postmodernism logically means that, unhindered by state interventions, the completely unregulated market and totally privatised economy become the chief powers in society as a whole, which is exactly what transnational global capital wants.

Once philosophical postmodernity had established its dominance over the Euro-American academic institution it was only a matter of time before it laid claim to being a hermeneutic equally applicable in all parts of the globe. A key role in this globalisation of a distinctly Euro-American ideology is played by clusters of Third World intellectuals—in our case, Indian intellectuals—who are trained in social science graduate programmes in the US. For instance, it is by now perfectly well understood that if someone wants to do a social science Ph.D. on an Indian theme he would be very unlikely to get a long-term fellowship if his dissertation proposal departed significantly from the Subaltern historians' perspective. Conversely, a Ph.D. from a reputable US university greatly increases one's chances of getting a teaching position in India's elite colleges and universities. In the more recent period, when foreign agencies have begun to give funds directly to Indian universities and departments, such funds are often used to re-structure teaching programmes, perspectives and

methodologies in postmodernist directions. For instance, postmodernism is now the main conceptual framework with which the newly prestigious academic disciplines—such as Women’s Studies, Gender Studies, Dalit Studies, even Environmental Studies—are getting organised. One could also profitably look at the Women’s Studies Supplements that Economic and Political Weekly has been publishing for many years now, with great number of research articles and analytical essays, most of which are written from postmodern perspectives. In all this, the Subaltern Studies Group has played a unique role in spreading postmodern ideas not only in the discipline of History but also across the social sciences. This Group first made its appearance in 1982 under the leadership of Ranajit Guha, a historian of Indian origin who was by then based in Australia. It included Indian scholars based in India, some other scholars of Indian origin who were based abroad, as well as some western scholars of India. In short, *Subaltern Studies* was always a transnational enterprise with émigré Indian intellectuals playing a substantial role. International fame for this School came early. Four years after its initial appearance, Professor Ronald Inden of Chicago University was to confidently state the North American position: ‘perhaps for the first time since colonisation,’ he said in 1986, ‘Indians are showing sustained signs of re-appropriating the capacity to represent themselves.’ Almost a decade later, in his 1995 *Afterward* in a new edition of his famous book *Orientalism*, Edward Said identified the Subalternists as those who shall carry forward his own legacy. Much praise of this kind came fairly quickly from powerful sources.

It is difficult to talk of Subalternism as a unified category, partly because membership of the group has changed again and again over time, and, more significantly, its ideological positions have kept shifting. Aside from Ranajit Guha who was the founder and the largest influence, the three constant figures have been Dipesh Chakravarty, Partha Chatterjee and Gyan Pandey, and we shall refer mainly to these four. Meanwhile, the project has gone through two significant shifts. In its early years, it sought to retain some broad and tangential relationship with some broadly Marxist currents, with frequent references to Mao, Gramsci, E.P. Thompson, et al. As its reputation got internationalised and Americanised, the break with Marxism became overt and affiliation with Euro-American postmodernism

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more pronounced (Edward Said pointedly referred to Guha as a 'poststructuralist'). Then, in the 1990s, when the destruction of the Babri Masjid and the rapid rise of the BJP in electoral politics put communalism squarely at the centre of Indian politics, two key members of the Group, Partha Chatterjee and Gyan Pandey, moved rapidly into the orbit of well-known anti-communists and neo-traditionalists in the Indian social sciences, notably Ashish Nandy and T.N. Madan. This is quite in addition to someone like Swapan Dasgupa who contributed to an early volume of *Subaltern Studies*, then moved to become an influential spokesman of the RSS/BJP ideology. In the two sections below, we shall comment, first, on the kind of claims the Subaltern project had made in its earliest formation and, then, on the positions it took on issues of nationalism, secularism and communalism.

IV

The first volume of *Subaltern Studies* opened, in 1982, with an essay, 'On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,' in which Ranajit Guha, the founder of Subalternism, spelled out the basics of the project. The opening sentence runs as follows: 'The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism—colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism.' In the rest of the essay, and indeed in the entire work of Guha and other subalternists over almost three decades, there is no mention of the Marxist historiography of the colonial period and of bourgeois nationalism itself. Reading them, one would never know that any communist ever wrote on these subjects. Even their use of the term 'subaltern' is odd. They claim to take the word 'subaltern' from Antonio Gramsci, one of the founders of the Communist Party in Italy who did his most brilliant writing in a fascist prison. Trying to avoid the censorship of his prison guards, he used the word 'subaltern' when he meant 'the working class' or he used the formula 'the fundamental class and other subaltern strata' to mean 'the proletariat and other exploited classes'. Ranajit Guha and his colleagues, on the other hand, divided the whole of Indian society between what they called 'the elite' and 'the subaltern strata'—avoiding the Marxist understanding of society as being divided by classes and adopting, in stead, vague terms from

bourgeois sociology. In the next move, it was said that various groups could be 'elite' in one situation and 'subaltern' in another: landowning peasantry, for instance, was part of 'the elite' in relation to the poorer strata in the countryside but also 'subaltern' in relation to bigger landlords and the bourgeoisie. In a final move, it was said that there were two 'domain' of politics in India, the 'domain' of 'the elite' and the 'domain' of 'the subaltern'. The subaltern domain was said to be 'autonomous' in which the 'subaltern strata' had its own kind of consciousness and modes of action. This new school of historiography was going to write histories of people living in this other 'domain.' It was not at all clear whether actions undertaken by trade unions or kisan sabhas or the communist parties or their mass organizations were also a part of the 'domain' of the subaltern. In almost thirty years of their voluminous work, subalterns have simply never engaged with either the histories and social analyses that communist writers have produced, or with the actual activities of trade unions, peasant organizations and workers' parties. The central feature in all these verbal gymnastics is the total avoidance of class politics—in deed, of classes as such—while talking of oppression.

Even though Guha and his colleagues never attack or even discuss the work of Marxist historians, the implication is that there is no difference between the communist understanding of Indian history and the bourgeois understanding. In his major historiographic statement on colonialism and nationalism in India, the 100-page essay entitled 'Dominance without Hegemony and Its Historiography', in Volume VI of *Subaltern Studies* (1989), Ranajit Guha summarizes his position as follows:

'There has never been a school or tendency in Indian historiography that did not share the liberal assumptions of British writing on the colonial theme.' (p.306)

The sweep of this judgement (not even a 'tendency', until the advent of Guha!) is at least very remarkable, for, it contends (a) that all 'British writing on the colonial theme' is essentially 'liberal' in character, which is doubtful, but then also (b) that the distinctions we normally make not only between various kinds of British historians but also between communalist historians, nationalist historians and Marxist historians are all illusory, because *all* of them are not only

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products of a unitary 'liberal assumption' but are, more specifically, the children of British colonialist historiography as such. Guha then specifies the heart of the problem with equal aplomb:

'Since the first quarter of the nineteenth century, every mode of Indian historical discourse has conformed faithfully to the rational concepts and the ground rules of narrative and analytic procedure introduced in the subcontinent by official and non-official British statements on the South Asian past.' (p. 306)

Thus, the thing that accounts for collusion of Indian nationalism and Marxism with British colonialism is the use of 'rational concepts.' To break free of such collusions, we have to get rid of Reason itself as it has been understood in modern philosophy since the Enlightenment.

The Marxist idea that society is divided into distinct classes had already been rejected in terms of much more diffuse categories of 'elite' and 'subaltern' borrowed from bourgeois sociology. Now, this attack on 'rational concepts' announced an even deeper affiliation with postmodern anti-rationalism which became increasingly central to the subaltern project as a whole, as it distanced more and more from even the basics of Marxism.

In an article published in 1993, Dipesh Chakrabarty ascribed this great change in the very nature of the original subalternist project to, in his words, 'the interest that Gayatri Spivak and, following her, Edward Said took in the project.' Having thus identified the main influences behind the mutation, he also identifies the precise nature of the shift: from the project to 'write 'better' Marxist histories,' free of 'economistic class reductionism' to an understanding that 'a critique of this nature could hardly afford to ignore the problem of universalism/Eurocentrism that was inherent in Marxist thought itself.' This is a significant formulation, since it suggests that subalternism rejected the fundamentals of Marxism not once but twice. In the original project itself, Chakrabarty says, Subalternism rejected what he calls 'economistic class reductionism'—in other words, it rejected the idea that (a) that economy was the backbone of any society, (2) that the classes that are fundamental to the working of a capitalist system are the fundamental social forces of that society, (c) the idea that class struggle is the motivating force of history around

which other kinds of struggles are shaped, and (4) the idea of the proletarian revolution itself. These are the ideas that are here described as ‘economistic class reductionism,’ which, Chakrabarty says, subalternism rejected at the very beginning. In the second phase, after American postmodernism—represented in this case by Said and Spivak—blessed the project, subalternism also rejected Marxist thought for its ‘universalism.’ Here, ‘universalism’ is again a code word for a number of ideas that are sought to be rejected, such as the idea (1) that there is a common humanity, beyond race or ethnicity or even nationality, which is exploited under capitalism, (2) that the proletariat cannot really emancipate itself without emancipating society as a whole and thus emerging (in Marx’s words) as ‘a universal class,’ (3) that what we have so far had is capitalist universality (my term for what the bourgeoisie calls ‘globalization’) and it cannot be overturned with anything less than a socialist revolution which itself will have to be, eventually, universal (global), and (4) that identities and ethnicities, important as they undoubtedly are, involve, in each instance, only a small part of humanity, whereas exploitation is what is ‘universal’ for the vast majority of humanity, beyond identity etc.

In short, then, rejection of what subalternists, in their code language, call ‘class reductionism’ and ‘universalism’ amounts in fact to rejection of Marxism as a whole, regardless of how often they invoke Gramsci or Mao or whoever.

This rejection of Marxism, coupled with growing identification with postmodernist ideas, and especially with postmodern anti-rationalism, then leads the subalterns to adopt positions on the issue of secularism and communalism, for instance, which are clearly rightwing even though they cannot be identified with Hindutva politics as such.

Gyanendra Pandey is the chief subalternist writer on these issues, though Partha Chatterjee has also written influential pieces. The assumptions which we saw earlier in Guha and Chakrabarty are fully present here as well. Thus, in his book, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (1990), Gyanendra Pandey casually remarks that ‘communalism is a characteristic and paradoxical product of the Age of Reason. . .’ (p.5) Criticising the secularist projects of anti-communal mobilisations, Pandey then remarks that ‘both nationalist and colonialist positions derive from the same liberal

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ideology in which ‘rationalism’ and ‘secularism’ operate as adjacent elements of thought.’ (p. 13) ‘Behind the flurry of research activity since the 1960s,’ he says, ‘one still finds a continuous search for ‘causes’ and for ‘rationality’ . . . there would appear to be a consensus among historians now on the question of the hard-headed, economic ‘rationality’ that allegedly lay behind politics and strife.’ The authors Pandey rejects for their ‘rational’ pursuits and lack of ‘originality’ include Romila Thapar, Harbans Mukhia, Bipan Chandra, Tanika Sarkar, Asghar Ali Engineer, Uma Chkravarti, Nandita Haksar, and many others, not to speak of, as he puts it, ‘numerous Civil Liberties groups and Citizens’ Enquiry Committees.’ (p17) Professor Pandey then concludes this whole argument by identifying, aside from the Subalternist group, two authors with whom he feels profound affinity: Ashish Nandy and T.N. Madan. (p. 22) Nandy’s well-known essay, ‘An Anti-Secularist Manifesto,’ comes in for special praise.

Like Nandy, Pandey identifies communalism as a product of modernity (‘the Age of Reason’), just like secularism, and therefore not fundamentally different from it, considering that secularism itself operates with close affinity with rationalism (which is supposedly a bad thing). Pandey then rejects the idea that one could rationally look for ‘causes’ behind communalist behaviour or to suggest that in at least some of the cases there might be economic factors behind communal conflict. In stead, he proposes that what we call communalism may be nothing more than a perhaps justifiable reaction to too much secularism:

‘It is possible also that the need felt by the ‘secular’ nationalisms to forge a different kind of (‘secular’) historical tradition for the Indian citizen . . . contributed substantially to the counter construction of the Indian past in more dogmatically *community* (specifically, *religious community*) terms.’

Thus, according to him, it was the attempt to create a secular historical tradition that led to the ‘counter-construction’ of community dogmatism; reaching out for secularism was the original mistake, communalism was only a reaction! It is astonishing that a historian would say so. All historical evidence suggests that secularism in India grew as a reaction—ideological and practical reaction—against a prior outbreak of communal strife. Pandey in fact goes further and says that secularism was a ‘new religion’ which started up in India in the 1920s,

and like any religion it needed to set up a demon to fight against. Communalism was this demon invented by joint efforts of colonial authorities and secular nationalists.

Partha Chatterjee greatly praises his colleague, Gyan Pandey, and like him, invoke the anti-secularist, rightwing ideologues Ashish Nandy and T.N. Madan as the two scholars who have written most perceptively on secularism and communalism. In a famous essay, 'Secularism and Toleration,' he repeats Nandy's idea that traditional religious communities were intrinsically tolerant and that religious intolerance is a product of modernity. He asserts that it is the nation-state's efforts to secularize India and manage communal conflict in accordance with secular law which increases the resistance of religious communities against this project of modernization. He further proposes that the best way to manage intra-communal relations is for the state to minimize its own role and let the respective religious communities manage their own affairs as well their mutual relations. According to Chatterjee, the question as to who shall lead a particular religious community, and whether or not a community chooses to reform its internal rules, is an internal affair of that community in which no one not belonging to that particular community has any right to intervene. In Chatterjee's view, this withdrawal of the nation-state and the recognition of India as a conglomeration of religious communities (rather than a secular nation) will necessarily lead to religious tolerance since traditional religious communities are by nature tolerant. He does not quite tell us what is to be done about VHP, Bajrang Dal, or about Imam Bukharis and company; presumably, Hindus and Muslims will just sort it out among themselves.

All this is consistent with Subalternism's extreme opposition to not only universalism, rationalism and secularism but also equal opposition to the idea of the nation, nationalism, and the nation-state as mere elite projects. All those are dismissed under the rubric of 'statism'. In a very influential book, Chatterjee describes nationalism as nothing more than a 'derivative discourse,' i.e., derived from those same principles of modernity—liberalism, in particular—which gave rise to colonialism. Communities are said to be the primordial truth of Indian society while the nation-state is decried as an imposition of the modern age which which wrongfully abridges the autonomous rights and lives of communities. In Chatterjee's writings, a special

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venom is reserved for Nehru as the embodiment of 'statism,' with his secular convictions, state intervention and state planning of the economy, constant emphasis on modernization etc. This too arises logically out of the whole cluster of subalternist beliefs. We said in the opening section of this note that the period of the Nehruvian state was the one in which all the basic elements of capitalist modernity were sought to be constructed in the newly independent India. It is logical that subalternism, which became so very influential in the period of neoliberal restructuring of Indian economy and polity, will target that phase of Indian history as having gone wrong. Chatterjee himself would not say so but the fact remains that the extreme anti-statism which he and his colleagues preach only serves the ideology of market fundamentalism. If state regulation is bad, then only the freedom of the marketplace can determine the functioning of society. Anti-statism is by its very nature neoliberal whether or not subalternists openly support the neoliberal policies.