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Insurgent Imaginations: More Dimensions in Cultural Theory in the Light of Inter-War Soviet Theory

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Insurgent Imaginations is not only an important corrective to postcolonial readings of modern Indian literature based on Foucauldian assumptions, but a bold reconceptualization of how a Marxist humanism might reassert its critical power in relation to the non-Western world. Instead of a reflexive ‘writing back’ against a monolithic, or monological colonial discourse, we are here presented with a range of engaged intellectuals responding both to the dominant culture of Western colonialism, but also drawing upon local cultural resources that both contrast, and provisionally align, with certain international trends. This is a complex and substantial conception of agency that recognises and negotiates the fragmented culture of the colonised and the internally divided culture of the West while reaching beyond both. It emerges in the opening chapter of the book where, drawing upon Timothy Brennan’s important 2014 work *Borrowed Light: Vico, Hegel and the Colonies*, the Vichian-Hegelian notion of *Geist*, the achievement of self-consciousness through ‘purposive human action’ (labour) and ‘processive struggle’ founds a universal humanism that grounds critical engagement with the present and a vision of an alternative future. This perspective is immediately shifted beyond the European context, with an intriguing set of continuities between the Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore and the leader of the Communist Party of China Mao Zedong when speaking about literature situated in local conditions and larger historical processes. It would be difficult to identify two more different figures in order to formulate a peripheral aesthetics, but the common background of Revolution and then the emerging Stalinist system in the USSR, and the combined and unequal development of India and China, provide a shared reference point for an envisioned humanism.

The focus here is on the conception of world literature (*visva-sahitya*) outlined in Tagore's 1907 speech outlining the need for an education system beyond colonial control, and Mao's 1942 Yanan talks on literature as a collective practice, as 'two ends of an "impossible" dialogue during the interwar era' (p. 11). Midway between them lies Lukács's 1936 sceptical essay about literary modernism 'Narrate or Describe', but the concerns extend well beyond the interwar era, to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's group of Kenyan thinkers who, dismayed that the University of Nairobi's English Department was continuing to function as if nothing had changed with independence, demanded the 'abolition of the English department' in 1972. Consideration of peripheral aesthetics thus extends from the first dramatic shock that exposed European vulnerability to rising Asia with the defeat of the Russian fleet at the hands of rising Japan in 1905 through the moment of the Communist International to the apex of the influence of the non-aligned movement. Institutional preconditions included the 1918 founding of the World Literature publishing house in Revolutionary Russia, through the foundation of the Indian Progressive Writers Association in 1936 to the Afro-Asian Writers Association founded in 1958, each of which has become an object of serious study in recent years.

Coming to *Insurgent Imaginations* as a cultural theorist and intellectual historian whose work has focused on the early USSR, the book resonates with many of my concerns, especially since I have focused questions of the early Soviet critique of Indo-European philology and Oriental Studies in recent years. The themes discussed in the book become clearly defined against the Soviet background. Not least the discussion of M.N. Roy's 1922 book *India in Transition*, published in Russian as *Novaia India* (Modern India) in 1923, and which shaped the early Soviet understanding of contemporary Indian history until Roy broke with the Comintern at the end of 1929.¹ Roy taught at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East and played a leading role in the Comintern before being sent to China in 1927, and in this capacity his ideas circulated widely, spreading an awareness of the importance of caste as rooted in an 'economic base' but complicated by the cultural aspects of colour prejudice deriving from the (then universally accepted notion of an) Aryan conquest and scriptural sanctions. This was quite different to the mechanical conception of caste as a 'superstructural' phenomenon arising on the economic basis of class that would dominate Communist Party thinking in the 1930s and would necessitate, and lead to a damaging split with, a separate anti-caste movement.² While in many respects immature, Roy's early work was not reducible to the dogmatic, periodising formulas that dominated Stalinist Marxism, and had been nuanced by the productive debates within the first four congresses of the Comintern. Roy was open to some of the more productive and flexible conceptions circulating among Soviet Marxists in the 1920s, such as the way in which the emergence of an international capitalist system affects different parts of that system in particular ways. Trotsky's notion of combined and uneven development was perhaps the most theoretically elaborated

account, and this likely alerted Roy to the ways in which factors that had emerged at various historical moments, local and international forms, could combine at certain conjunctures under conditions of imperial domination. This made Roy's subordination to the vagaries of Stalinism unsustainable and, as Majumder shows, may have even affected the organisational principle of Roy's later *Memoires*.

The 'juxtaposition of foreign and local aesthetic forms, the retrieval and reconfiguration of older cultural forms, the deliberate insertion of the collective oral popular elements' that Majumder sees as characteristic of the 'aesthetics-politics peripheral internationalism' (p.38) persist in Soviet cultural theory throughout the Stalin period, even as practical politics was squeezed into a narrow channel. While I cannot here do justice to the multiple dimensions in which Majumder develops the thesis of *Insurgent Imaginations*, I think, that I can here make some hopefully productive comments on how the themes in *Insurgent Imaginations* might be extended and deepened with regard to the areas in which I work.

Perhaps the most well-known Soviet thinker to develop these themes on the basis of a non-psychologistic humanism was Mikhail Bakhtin, who, despite his overwhelming focus on the European novel, sought to connect the novel with the same 'collective oral popular elements' inherited from pre-class society. There is nothing distinctly 'European' about the folkloric elements unearthed in Bakhtin's account of Mediaeval carnival, rather they are survivals from a common Afro-Eurasian substratum, or a universal humanism, that are retrieved and deliberately inserted in works of modern literature in order to democratise culture. While Bakhtin's notion of carnival has been subject to much overgeneralisation, often to a point where its critical edge ceases to be visible let alone effective, research now shows it was to a considerable extent based upon the work of thinkers who were seeking to undermine the ideas of Indo-European philologists who, as Said was to argue, provided 'Orientalism' with its technical characteristics.

In both his 1940 dissertation on Rabelais and in the revised monograph of 1965 that was to become so famous by virtue of the (flawed) English translation *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin identifies one of the most important sources of the grotesque image of the body in the literature of the European Renaissance to lie in Indian mythology. Borrowing heavily from Georges Lote's 1938 monograph *La vie et l'oeuvre de François Rabelais* [Life and Work of François Rabelais], Bakhtin discusses how accounts of "Indian wonders" [*indiiskie chudesā*], fantastic, hybrid humans and beasts, were collected and circulated in Europe, and achieved popularity at the time Rabelais was writing. This material was combined with sources from Irish legends of sea beasts and European antiquity, which Rabelais was held to have synthesised. In Bakhtin's account, by inserting such elements in his novels, Rabelais undermined the authority of dominant (official) culture, and these factors are effective precisely because they partake of a common, deeper substratum of semantic material.

These ideas were based on those of the pioneer of comparative literature Aleksandr Veselovskii, whose *Historical Poetics* sought to establish a palaeontology of literary plots, a historical typology of literary genres and to ground an account of borrowings on a new basis. Borrowed forms of thinking rather than isolated roots and motifs, were based on a convergence of ways of life. These ideas were reformulated in socioeconomic terms in the early Soviet period by the controversial philologist and archaeologist Nikolai Marr and his colleagues who pioneered the semantic palaeontology on which Bakhtin was to draw. Rejecting the search for *Ur*-texts and *proto*-languages as an ideologically motivated practice that replaced historical research with tracing of a mechanical movement through space, they held 'Indo-Europeanism' to be academic cover for those seeking to justify colonial domination. Characteristic forms of worldview and semantic organisation were now related to stages in the development of human labour, while the Indo-European model of the Aryan invasion was extended to Europe itself, so the modern languages and cultures of Europe exhibited something akin to a caste character.³ While many of Marr's own linguistic conceptions hold little credibility today, the wider palaeontology of myths and folklore underlying literary plots proved of considerable value, as the reception of Bakhtin's ideas of carnival shows. Yet in the hands of an ultimately idealist thinker like Bakhtin, the lack of a firm institutional analysis allowed, or perhaps even encouraged, these ideas to be severed from their foundations and yoked to a range of extraneous theories and orientations. The more the ideas spread their influence the more they were diluted. The task of engaged intellectual historians in this case is to retrieve the theoretical and critical core, uncover the engagement with the struggles of the time, not in order to preserve it in aspic, but to reveal the potential for development and application in new historical conditions. This is what we see happening in *Insurgent Imaginations*, and why it is important to engage with the book creatively, deepening and widening the kind of work this book represents.

Arguably a similar fate befell the work of Tagore, but the ideological appropriation was more direct and troubling. His advocacy of the central role India, emerging from colonial domination, had to play in the development of a universalist humanism was quickly saffronized and yoked to a much narrower conception of 'Greater India'. As Yorim Spoelder notes,⁴ 'Greater India,' the notion of India's 'superior and exceptional civilizational force with a mission to fulfill abroad,' which Tagore encouraged, 'has long shed its interwar humanist glow and buttresses the historical fantasies and global ambitions of Hindu nationalists.' Tagore surely bore some responsibility for enabling this appropriation. The danger was already evident when his idealist and culturalist musings prevented him from understanding Mussolini's fascism and was seen as endorsing the latter's vision of a 'Greater Italy' in the 1920s. *Insurgent Imaginations* retrieves the other potentials of Tagore's vision, other aspects of its emergence in relation to the global, historic struggles of the time of which the Indian struggle for independence was but one important dimension. Tagore's

visit to the USSR in 1930 and intersection with the humanism that became central to cultural policy in the USSR in the 1930s was one crucial aspect of this.

Tagore's work was already widely read and discussed in the USSR by the time of his visit, and the leading translator and commentator on Tagore's work as well as an important scholar of Mahāyāna Buddhism and founder of Bengali scholarship in the USSR was Mikhail Tubianskii, one of Bakhtin's interlocutors in the 1920s. Unfortunately, Tubianskii was already in Mongolia, working on regional Buddhism by the time Tagore arrived, so he was unable to meet Tagore, whose work he had done much to demystify and link to the debates in the USSR at the time. He moreover ended up meeting a tragic fate in the Great Purge of 1937.

Like many areas of literary scholarship and cultural theory, Modern Indian philology nevertheless thrived in the USSR in the 1930s, leading to some insights that anticipate some of the most important insights of Dalit studies in the 1990s. Though circumscribed by the repressive political environment of the time, important work was carried out at such institutions as the Institute of World Literature in Moscow (to which Bakhtin submitted his dissertation on Rabelais), and at the Institute of Oriental Studies in Leningrad. Attention now shifted away from a focus on Sanskrit cultures and attempts to find commonalities between upper-caste and European cultures towards issues such as vernacular literatures and their struggles with Brahminical values, and the need to consider the penetration of Indian lower-caste peoples into Europe: the Roma. This, along with the plight of indentured labourers, was an area completely ignored in Brahmanical conceptions of Greater India. Soviet *Tsyganovedenie*, or Roma Studies, based on sociolinguistic conceptions decades before William Labov turned his attention to the relationship between the low status of African-American speech and poor levels of educational attainment in the United States. Rather than 'Orientalising' the culture of the Roma, which was common in the work of the UK-based Gypsy Lore Society at the time,⁵ Roma Studies in the USSR contributed to early Soviet nationality policy, leading to unprecedented promotion of the culture of the Roma, including the development of a Romani-medium schools and a Romani press, and investigations into historical prejudices against the Roma.⁶ The relations between Romani, Russian and Ukrainian in the USSR were studied systematically and this led to the creation of the first dictionary and text books of Soviet Romani.⁷ *Tsyganovedenie* basically came to an end with the regressive shift in Stalin's nationality policy in the late 1930s, but the same focus on the interaction of vernacular and official languages formed the basis of Modern Indian Philology in Leningrad, which not only sought to dispel the 'Orientalising' myths of European Indology but also show that Indology to be a product of the collaboration between Brahmin Pandits and colonial administrators.⁸

These examples show that even at the height of the Stalinist repression, some areas of intellectual endeavour flourished, and a focus on an international, anti-colonial humanism in cultural policy persisted longer than Soviet internationalism in the political realm. Such considerations further strengthen the main ideas developed in *Insurgent Imaginations*, which traces some of the heritage of this paradoxical situation in India itself, and in so doing provides a valuable stimulus to more research in related fields that points beyond the limitations of postcolonial theory today.

Notes

- ¹ The Russian translation of Roy's 1926 book *The Future of Indian Politics*, was published as *Budushchee indiiskoi politiki (Rabochaia partia ili nar[odnaia] Partia)* [The Future of Indian Politics (Workers' Party or National Party)] the same year as its English language publication.
- ² On this see, *inter alia*, Arnand Teltumbde. 2018. *Republic of Caste: Thinking Equality in the Time of Neoliberal Hindutva*. New Delhi: Navayana, 91-116.
- ³ Some interesting parallels between Marr and the Vichian humanism discussed and developed so productively by Brennan in *Borrowed Light* and Majumder in *Insurgent Imaginations* can be found in Patrick Sériot. 2020. "If Vico had read Engels he would have been called Nikolai Marr." *Interventions* 24(5): 716-741. See the other articles in the same volume for discussion of various aspects of Marrism.
- ⁴ Yorim Spoelder. 2023. *Visions of Greater India: Transimperial Knowledge and Anti-Colonial Nationalism, c.1800–1960*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 285.
- ⁵ Lee, Ken. 2000. "Orientalism and Gypsylorism". *Social Analysis* 44 (2): 129–156. See also Thomas A. Acton. 2016. 'Scientific Racism, popular racism and the discourse of the Gypsy Lore Society.' *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39 (7): 1187-1204.
- ⁶ In English, see Martin Holler. 2015. "Historical predecessors of the term 'anti-Gypsyism.'" In Markus End (ed.), *Antiziganism: What's in a word?* Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 82-92.
- ⁷ For an overview of policies towards the Soviet Roma in English see Brigid O'Keefe. 2013. *New Soviet Gypsies: Nationality, Performance, and Selfhood in the Early Soviet Union*. Toronto etc.: University of Toronto Press. Unfortunately the study does not discuss early *Tsyganovedenie* in great detail.
- ⁸ See Craig Brandist, "Language, Caste and the Brahmanical framing of European Indology: Aleksei Barannikov's 'Some Positions in the Field of Indology (1941)'"', introducing an English translation of Barannikov's article (2024) *Interventions*, 26 (2): 215-249.

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