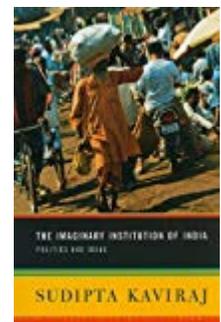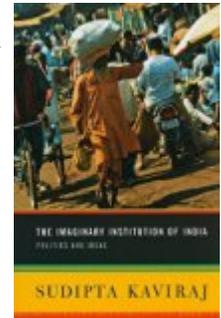**Partha Chatterjee.** *Empire and Nation: Selected Essays.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. viii + 368 pp. $29.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-15221-1.

Sudipta Kaviraj. *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. 299 pp. $29.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-15223-5.

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Politics in Modern India

How do we go about studying the specificity of "postcolonial" countries like India? What are the concepts, the categories, the theoretical tools, and the linguistic conventions that can help us make sense of a society whose history, society, and systems of ideas have been mediated by colonialism? Can "universal" theories, which originally emerged in the context of Western modernity, help us to understand our world? In different but nonetheless related ways, these two volumes set out the address these questions. Chatterjee is more preoccupied with thinking through and even inventing categories that capture the particularities of postcolo-

nial societies, and with distinguishing these categories from Western-centric theories. Kaviraj is less anxious to distance himself from dominant conceptual frameworks of Western origin, but he is equally concerned about the capacity of these concepts to understand Indian society.

At the outset, we must note that firstly, both these volumes are compilations of essays published over the years. Therefore, some of the essays address methodological and conceptual issues that were the flavor of earlier decades. Of the two authors, it is Chatterjee who had moved on, and ad-

dressed issues that confront contemporary India. Kaviraj's essays were mainly written in the late1980s and in the early 1990s. Secondly, not only is there is a good deal of thematic overlap between the various pieces but journalistic essays are juxtaposed with philosophical reflective ones. Thirdly, both authors draw heavily upon the experiences, the ideas, and the literary productions of Bengal. If perchance they had paid attention to the historical constitution of Maharashtra or Tamil Nadu or even Punjab, would their analysis have been different? The question gives us cause to ponder. For instance, Romila Thapar in her study of the Chola state rejects the very idea of segmented societies that is the focus of Kaviraj's comprehension of pre-colonial India. And it is well known that Brahmins were not privileged in Punjab as they were in large parts of the country. Nonetheless, let us assume that the history of Bengal can provide us with insights into the history of the rest of the country, and proceed to chart out the cognitive horizons of the authors, beginning with Kaviraj.

Six of the eight chapters of *The Imaginary Institution of India* are marked by the following themes. First, caste hierarchies in traditional India were arranged in an asymmetrical fashion simply because no one caste dominated every source of power--political, epistemological, and economic. India was in other terms, a segmented society. Leo Tolstoy famously remarked in *Anna Karenina* (1873-77) that all happy marriages are alike, and that each unhappy marriage is unhappy in its own way. In the same vein, Kaviraj suggests that whereas capitalist societies are structurally similar, each type of pre-capitalist society is traditional in its own way. Pre-colonial Indian society can be likened to a circle of circles of caste and religious communities. This structure was not altered in any significant manner by Muslim rulers, who carried a different religious doctrine but not a fundamentally different cognitive apparatus (p. 53). Second, this decentring of social power bore important consequences. Because it was difficult to identify a discrete structure of domination, lower-order defiance was rather infrequent.

Third, the loosely articulated social order made for what Kaviraj calls fuzzy identities. Fixation of identities had to await colonial practices of enumeration. Fourth, in the middle of this circle of circles sat the largely ceremonial state. The state, which refrained from intruding into the daily life processes of the community, or taking on fundamental restructuring of social relations, was mainly concerned with rent extraction and with demonstrating the magnificence of kingly power. That is, the political simply did not play a large role in constituting society. In an allied vein, Sunil Khilnani has argued that politics in pre-colonial India was consigned to the realm of spectacle and ceremony. It was this arrangement of power, concludes Khilnani, that explains the most peculiar characteristic of India's pre-colonial history, "the perpetual instability of political rule ... combined with the society's unusual fixity and cultural consistency."[1]

Fifth, the ordering of the social, and the relative insignificance of the political, was overturned by colonialism and the project of modernity that was imposed on India. Kaviraj seems to suggest that the introduction of modernity from the outside, or the fact that modernity rested on foundations that were unfamiliar to Indian society, explains much of the disjuncture that continues to mark Indian politics to date. Economically India witnessed the development of a degenerate capitalism, and politically it was given institutions and ideas that were at complete variance with indigenous notions of how political power should be arranged. "This array of ideas, when seen in their totality, constituted the invention of a new political world, or a re-cognizing of the world, and of the position of the society and the state in their modern versions" (p. 18). Colonial discourses that largely centered on pedagogy and techniques of enumeration, produced two sorts of results. The first was the constitution of identity politics, and second

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was the production of an elite/mass divide, or what he calls high and subaltern cultures.

Sixth, Kaviraj elucidates the impact of this social, cultural, and epistemological divide on the nationalist movement and on the postcolonial state. Colonialism instituted a divide between those who inhabited the world of modernity and those who did not. The nationalist movement superimposed on this divide another one, that between the nation and the imperial power. Given that the postcolonial state embodied the modernist vision of Jawaharlal Nehru, the subalterns were expectedly left out of these discourses and these institutions. Kaviraj accepts that Nehru tried to effect marvellous transformations in politics and in the economy, but he failed to undertake the cultural reproduction of society. In time, the high ideals of the Nehruvian period were to be interpreted in a radically different manner by the subaltern classes either in their avatar as an electorate, or as members of the lower levels of the bureaucracy. The net result was that high politics in the spectacular arena, which was earlier the preserve of the modernist elite, came under pressure from the repertoire of the lower classes. When ordinary people write their minds into the format of politics, concludes Kaviraj, democracy as generally understood by the West, comes under great pressure.

Kaviraj's canvas is painted in broad strokes: it depicts Indian society as predominantly cultural. The failure of Indian politics, for him, is the failure to comprehend the importance of culture in people's lives. It is worth recollecting that the period in which these essays were written was marked both by the "cultural turn," and by an emphasis on the autonomy of the subaltern in Indian academia. Since then two developments have fundamentally transformed the domain of Indian society. One, in the aftermath of the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations in 1990, political discourse in India has undergone a profound shift. Even as the leaders of the backward castes have aggressively pushed the agenda of "social jus-

tice," any diversion from this agenda is contemptuously dismissed as elitist and plain irrelevant. This new vocabulary of politics, mainly a product of the phenomenal accession of caste-based parties to power, is frankly partisan and unashamedly self-referential (based as it is on the interests of particular castes and sub-castes) and rejects the universal discourses of earlier democracy. Therefore, the gap that Kaviraj discerns between the elite and the subaltern has been narrowed at least in the politically correct vocabularies of the public sphere. If there is anything that a self-respecting Indian academic fears to be accused of, it is elitism. The acrimonious debate on whether the census should be caste-based is testimony to how the subaltern classes/castes have managed to imprint Indian politics with their own imaginaries of how things are, and how they should work.

Moreover, though in the 1980s and the 1990s the discourse of Hindutva had foregrounded the discourse of majoritarianism in terms of cultural belonging and exclusion; globalization has changed matters dramatically. If there is one common language that binds the youth belonging to the small town and to the urban metropolis besides that of Bollywood, dress codes, cuisine, cricket, and increasingly soccer, it is that of social networking sites in cyber-spaces, consumer seductions, and economic opportunities. In the process we see the making of an entirely new linguistic community. Culture is still important, but it is political economy that now preoccupies a rapidly globalizing India.

Finally, a more fundamental issue is at stake here. Can we divide society into the elite and subalterns and leave it at that? Sunil Khilnani reminds us that pre-colonial India was not simply an archipelago of villages imprisoned by the local ties of caste. The prevalence of common aesthetic and architectural styles, as well as myths and religious motifs, attests to the presence of a larger, more cohesive power. The power of the Brahmins did not emerge from their capacity to enter into alliances

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or by the imposition of a belief system, but because of selective distribution of literacy. "By renouncing political power, the Brahmanic order created a self-coercing, self-disciplining society founded on a vision of a moral order."[2] Romila Thapar had earlier suggested that the notion of the segmentary state/society is untenable, because of its insistence on dual sovereignty; the political and the ritual. Power in the Chola state, she concluded, was based on a fusion of power resting in the capacity of the state to bestow titles, tax policies, and create administrative units.[3] Above all can we subscribe to the idea that society consists of discrete social and cultural categories that are neither constituted by each other, nor by wider processes such as the market and the electoral system, and leave it at that?

Yet it is precisely such an elite/mass distinction that is the center of attention in Partha Chatterjee's analysis of Indian society and politics. Though the volume under review carries a number of interesting and insightful journalistic pieces, of enduring interest are Chatterjee's well-known philosophical essays on imagined communities, constitution of the Indian nationalist discourse, the nationalist resolution of the women's question, secularism and toleration, and civil and political society that form part of this collection.

Let me concentrate on two themes that have distinguished Chatterjee's contribution to the discourse of what is so very specific about India. One, as Chatterjee argues in chapter 1 (in response to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* [1991]), nationalisms in the rest of the world are not mirror images of modular forms available in Europe and the Americas (p. 26). On the contrary, anti-colonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battles with the imperial power "by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains--the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the 'outside' of the economy and of statecraft ... the spiritu-

al, on the other hand, is an 'inner' domain bearing the 'essential' marks of cultural identity. The greater one's success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one's spiritual culture" (p. 27). Though in the second phase of nationalism the colonial state is kept out of the inner domain of national culture, nationalism launches its most significant project, to fashion a modern national culture that is modern but not Western (p. 45). This dichotomy lays at the heart of the nationalist project. This point had been made earlier by scholars of the African resurgence in the early twentieth century. Though African elites showed anxiety about cultural autonomy, and though nationalist leaders searched within their own histories to discover elements that were of indigenous and not foreign origin, they remained all too conscious of the impact of colonialism on the collective psyche. Leopold Senghor, for instance, was more than aware that he was a product of two cultures. For instance, he described graphically how every morning and every evening he did his exercises first listening to the music of Johannes Brahms and then to the tones of the *balafon;* first to the poetry of St. John Pierce and then to the music of the *griot*s. [4]

The use of the dichotomy as a structural feature of Indian political life is reconstructed in the distinction Chatterjee makes between political and civil society. The wider question that he asks is whether the concept of civil society is relevant for countries like India that are marked by social exclusion, inequality, and poverty. In Europe the emergence of civil society took place in tandem with the consolidation of bourgeois society, the rights-bearing individual, and the rule of law. In India, however, large numbers of citizens continue to be relegated to the margins of society. Not only do they not possess any kind of status, they are not protected by the law. Chatterjee (chapter 11) accordingly argues that in India civil society as a bourgeois sphere is restricted to a fairly small section of citizens, notably the middle classes who

speak the language of rights. The poor, who negotiate the travails of everyday existence through the adoption of illegal means, and clear violations of the law, occupy the space of political society. Though Chatterjee does not explicitly reject civil society, he sees it as irrelevant for a vast majority of Indians. And though he does not valorize political society, he seems to indicate that this space and these mediations are somehow more authentic than those of civil society.

Nivedita Menon, in an interesting introduction to this collection of essays, suggests that Chatterjee seems to see both civil and political society as empirical spaces, and wonders whether it is not more productive to think of political and civil society as two styles of political engagement available to people: the former to the urban elite, the latter to the rest. The availability is fluid and contentious and not fixed by class (pp.11-12). This is an important point because to assume that political practices are fixed both in terms of location and substance might be a categorical mistake.

Let me add two more difficulties that can be identified with Chatterjee's distinction between political and civil society. One, do practices in "political society," such as tapping water and electricity connections illegally, fall into the category of politics, or that of proto-politics? As Eric Hobsbawm put it in his study of social banditry, certain forms of politics are, strictly speaking, proto-politics. And these can be undetermined, conservative, and ambiguous.[5] Proto-politics or semi-politics refers to those practices that seek concessions for the individual or the group. But if the objective of politics is to shape and reshape the political context in which we live, then we need a politics that has a broader vision than merely negotiating the problems of everyday life illegally. Such a politics demands that people be brought into a relationship with each other, that collective action be forged, that the universal be mediated by the particular, and that citizens participate in the constitution of a public and critical discourse. State concessions to proto-political activities neither change formal institutions, nor build solidarity. In fact piecemeal practices might even strengthen the power of the state. Though such forms of politics can exist in modern civil societies as well, ultimately democratic agents have to take on the responsibility of making the transition from short-sighted practices into long-term engagement with modes of power. In democracies therefore, political society may well be a transitional space, not a permanent feature of Indian politics.

Secondly, the suggestion that subaltern groups are untouched by bourgeois ideology seems to overlook the fact that political practices transcend boundaries of discrete spheres. In their struggles for, say, land rights to squatter settlements, the poor can be motivated by bourgeois notions of entitlements and rights to property. Further, illegal transactions are not only a feature of non-civil society spaces; formal civil societies also engage in these transactions.[6] But more importantly, we hardly find in any historical setting a "pure" civil society that has been lifted from a textbook account and transplanted into a specific context. The concept of civil society signifies a space and a set of values, but this space and set of values are mediated by and modified by historical contexts. In India's civil society, modern discourses of rights coexist with practices that reinscribe collective identities, individual self-consciousness articulates with subordination to the dictates of the leader of the caste or religious group, and legal practices intersect with other sorts of practices that break the law. In other words, the moment we think of civil society as a plural and oft-fragmented sphere, the distinction between political and civil society blurs.

The value of both volumes, however, lies not in the detail, but in the philosophical questions they raise; in the attempt to negotiate the problems of a modernity that was imposed on society; and in Chatterjee's attempts to relegate Western modernity to being one of the many avatars of modernity

and not the norm. For these reasons these two volumes contribute significantly to thinking about India.

Notes

[1]. Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India (*London: Hamish Hamilton, 1997), 20.

[2]. Ibid.

[3]. Romila Thapar, *Early India: From the Origins to A.D. 1300* (London: Allen Lane, 2001), 370-71.

[4]. I. L. Markovitz, *Power and Class in Africa: An Introduction to Change and Conflict in African Politics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 181.

[5]. Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959), 2.

[6]. Pranab Bardhan, "Notes on the Political Economy of India's Tortuous Transition," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 5 (December 2009): 31-36; and K. Coelho and T. Venkat, "The Politics of Civil Society: Neighbourhood Associationism in Chennai," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 27 (June 2009): 53-62.

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