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East West Affairs
A Quarterly journal of North-South relations in postnormal times

East West Affairs (EWA) is a multidisciplinary journal devoted to that examining the relationship between East and West in a rapidly changing world, where power is shifting from West to East, uncertainty and complexity are the norms - what is generally being described as ‘postnormal times’. EWA provides opportunities for publication of scholarly articles, which may represent divergent ideas and opinions, on international, political, economic, social and cultural issues from the perspective of shifting power balance from West to East. The Journal also publishes essays and commentaries on policy and research relevant to the global South. It seeks to promote understanding of East-West relations and appreciation of non-western concerns and issues. Articles and commentaries are peer reviewed.

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The Postnormal Lady in Red

Underneath its economic success, Turkey is seething with democratic deficit and a complex string of grievances

Gordon Blaine Steffey
It belongs now to a global archive of images that billow the cloak of Progress just enough for us to catch sight of the gulping leviathan beneath. Wrapped in red cotton, rigged with a white shoulder tote, black curls launched heavenward, she shutters her eyes against a jet of pepper spray discharged into her downturned face by a crouching bobby in a gas mask. If it pales next to the staggering asymmetry bottled by the 1989 photographs of the Tiananmen “tank man,” that chilling standoff between an unidentified individual and the queued brawn of the Chinese state, still, the image preoccupies, its grip likewise sourced by the rank dissonance of its principals. The snapshot of the police action in Gezi park on 28 May 2013 rendered Ceyda Sungur of Istanbul Technical University the “lady in red,” an iconic asset of the protest imaginary in Turkey and elsewhere. The image circulated via conventional and social media, efflorescing in sympathetic representations, from a Lego tableau in homage, to street art of the lady in red soaring above her bantam antagonist with the caption “The more you spray the bigger we get,” to homemade “carnival cutouts” or “stand-ins” that invite solidarity through identification. Osman Orsal’s photograph of the lady in red opens a window onto the over-determined origin of trouble in Turkey and the circulation of unrest abroad.

A pet initiative of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), the proposed but now uncertain “pedestrianization” of Taksim square and Gezi Park is a single link in a chain of urban “renewal” or “rejuvenation” (that is, gentrification and bold commercialization) projects engineered and championed by the AKP during its tenure. From the expropriation and demolition of Romani properties in Sulukule and the displacement of several thousand Roma in order to throw up natty “Ottoman-style” townhomes, to the sledgehammering of the historic Tarlabası neighborhood (adjacent to Taksim square) in advance of posh residential and commercial properties that will surely transcend the reach of the medley of minorities and emigrants for whom Tarlabası is home, the AKP practices a neoliberal developmentalism that merrily disfigures historic urban landscapes in the interests of maximizing rent and commercial profit. Setting aside the cavalier reengineering of the communities forged, found, or desired by the human residents of these vanishing landscapes, AKP ascendancy means that much of “our” variegated and unruly İstanbul will (continue to) be consumed by a rationalized neo-Ottoman theme park.
When this future encroached on Gezi park, one of few extant urban green spaces in Istanbul, in the perverse form of a shopping mall housed within a tinsel recreation of a nineteenth century Ottoman garrison, Taksim Topçu Kışlası, Ceyda Sungur, and others “occupied” Gezi park in support of inoculating this wild commons against the viral creep of neo-Ottoman kitsch. Some dissenters were alive to darker nuances of the decision to recreate Taksim Topçu Kışlası, a hotspot of the 1909 counter-revolution that nigh terminated the constitutional and parliamentary experiment in favor of the autocracy of Sultan Abdülhamid II. Nobel Prize winner and veteran Istanbulite Orhan Pamuk observed that the failure of Erdoğan and the AKP to consult with locals on the disposition of Gezi Park and Taksim Square, neither their first nor latest such failure, “clearly reflects the government’s drift toward authoritarianism” (Pamuk, 2013). The extravagant violence meted out in answer to protesters and the conceit with which Erdoğan dismissed them as “çapulcular,” a pejorative sometimes translated “looters” but better translated “dregs,” “thugs,” or “layabouts,” amply confirms the authoritarian drift of the ruling party. A slogan that abridged the ugly ditch between Kemalist Ankara and pious Anatolia in the 1920s surely suits the AKP’s approach to statecraft: government “for the people, despite the people,” or despite a considerable quantum of the people. This “despite” soaked the profligate policing in Taksim that proved to be the flashpoint for the geographical and topical dilation of an Istanbulite ruckus into nationwide demonstrations.

Whether a decade of wide-ranging reforms under AKP rule, from marketizing the education sector to rapprochement with regional neighbors (the so-called “zero problem” policy), constitutes the true “Turkish Spring” in defiance of this protest winter (as Erdoğan would have it), the Turkish body politic is fitter in some respects than it has been. A fifty-two year tab at the IMF discharged in May 2013, a GDP more than doubled under AKP governance, and IMF projections for viable, perhaps enviable, economic growth in the coming years seem to warrant Erdoğan’s swagger and paint protestors as a kettle of killjoys. To be sure, any swagger must be tempered by concern about a surging private sector debt that contributes to a prominent current account deficit, and a morbid unemployment rate (even with recent gains), especially among women and youth. The “youth bulge” and youth unemployment rate should occasion some late nights in Ankara given the causal link established between that coincidence and youth
violence (Bricker and Foley, 2013). Still, the trouble in Turkey is not (only) about unemployment, not (only) about viral neoliberal restructuring, not (only) about minority rights, and not (only) about the splendor of trees in Gezi park.

It began with sycamore trees. The initial demand of Taksim Solidarity Platform that pioneered the nationwide demonstrations was to preserve Gezi park “as is,” but grievances soon outpaced the pillage of green space as a result of the quickening cycle of assertion and counter-assertion between the çapulcular and security forces (Taksim Solidarity, 2013). Local and environmentalist çapulcular soon discovered their ranks swelling from an inflow of incipient çapulcular of fabulously diverse casts and interests. The surprising fraternity forged by dissent among partisans of football clubs, Beşiktaş, Fenerbahçe, and Galatasaray pales only when compared to the wider mingling of football enthusiasts, trade unionists, feminists, university students, LGBT activists, Alevi, Kemalists, Kurdish activists, and anti-capitalist Muslims, among others. As Alain Badiou observes, “the people can indeed concentrate its existence in a square” (Badiou, 2011). The çapulcu defies profiling. S/he is young and old, queer and straight, trans-and cissexual, employed and un(der)employed, Kurdish and Turkish, headscarved and bareheaded. The çapulcu stands silently before the Atatürk Cultural Center; she wears a red dress and twists away from riot police in Gezi; he dies while protesting the construction of a gendarmerie post in Lice; she covers her hair with a scarf and carries a sign reading “Mülk Allah’ındır” (all property belongs to God). The verbal runoff of Erdoğan’s executive pretension, the pejorative “çapulcular” initially rebounded from dissidents, none of whom answered to the definition of a çapulcu. The dissidents undermined the barb by owning it, by co-opting it to name their striving and their emergent society, a society that renounces the identity-based discourse of being and belonging, that transcends its own contradictions through negotiated consensual dialogue, consensual use and conservation of the public space required for democratic praxis, and artistic imagination.

Freed from special interests, the several extant texts of çapulcular “demands” carry the impress of contradictions transcended. An early text circulating under the title “Occupy Gezi Demands” insists on such transcendence, refusing “permission” to any group or ideology seeking “to
claim ownership of the resistance. The resistance will proceed shoulder to shoulder regardless of ethnic group, religious group, political party or gender identity.” Demands stated in the crowd-funded advertisement “What’s Happening in Turkey?,” drafted by the Gezi Democracy Movement, certainly “proceed shoulder to shoulder” with the demands issued by Taksim Dayanışması in its 12 June press release (Gezi Democracy Movement, 2013). While no single set of demands enshrines the Final Word, the several sets of (un)final words in the burgeoning çapulcular library converge on a common ground. Overlapping demands for a free media, the opportunity to assemble and protest nonviolently free from police violence and detention, and a “public square” characterized by open democratic dialogue confirm Pamuk’s finding of an authoritarian or anti-democratic drift in the ruling party.

Such high-handedness soaks the polarizing politics of piety in Turkey. The decay of Kemalist hegemony and neutralization of Kemalist brawn in the military and judiciary enabled the AKP to serve up identity politics to its conservative base. Preferring the vague “conservative democracy” brand to any Islamic reference, the AKP nevertheless serially titillates its pious base with allusions to and foretastes of an Islamist future. Expressed chiefly in the sometimes daffy, often inappropriate, and routinely polarizing dicta of the Prime Minister and in what Seyla Benhabib terms the “moral micromanagement of people’s private lives” (Benhabib, 2013), the revanchist project to normalize Islamism proceeds apace to the vexation of the “other half” of the electorate. While polarization jollies the base, it cripples prospects for consensus-based change, incubating çapulcular whose experiences under the ruling party are abridged by the photo of a lady in red. Erdoğan and the AKP take shelter against criticism not only through police intimidation and violence, but also by reading the “ballot box” as a warrant to carry on. “Occupy Gezi Demands” duly retorts that “democracy does not consist only of going to the ballot box to cast a vote.” Erdoğan and the AKP practice a hardboiled dominant party politics that stretches democracy thin rather than a consensus politics that reinforces it. The “moral micromanagement” decried by Benhabib and fueling dissent is a case in evidence. In accumulating and consolidating their own power and relentlessly sidelining opposition players, the ruling party has failed to consolidate Turkish democracy after bringing off several key democratic reforms. Political scientist Kemal Kirişçi concludes that Turks “have a
democracy of some sort, but we still do not have our democrats and this is reverberating throughout our domestic politics” (Kirişçi, 2012). Erdoğan once observed that “democracy is like a streetcar. When you come to your stop, you get off,” prompting pundits worldwide to marvel at the vulgarity of his political philosophy and to conjecture about when he intends to disembark. It is surely not inappropriate to worry that he got off too soon.

Alain Badiou credits Jean-Maire Gleize with observing that “a revolutionary movement does not spread by contamination, but by resonance” (Badiou, 2011). In the second decade of the twenty-first century resonances abound. The struggle initiated in Istanbul by the çapulcular, which has roots in the Arab Spring, Occupy, Precarious Generation, and Indignant Citizens Movements, resounded in Ankara, İzmir, and beyond and will reverberate in future indignation, demonstrations, and revolutions. An image from Gezi rediates: a nonviolent protester in red endures a violent police action, a pictorial correlate of Badiou’s axiom that “it is right to rebel.” Against what? Against the shallow consolation of political democracy without economic democracy or ballot box without genuine worker control of decision-making, against striking and mounting income inequality (Turkey is in the top five among OECD nations), against intimidation and repression of the “fourth estate,” against “masculinist restoration,” against a political culture of cronyism, against the steady erosion of civil liberties, and against dominant party politics, all of which undermine the practice of democracy. To what end? It is too soon to encompass the meanings and outcomes of the protests in Taksim square and elsewhere. Still, it seems certain that neither a passé secularist nor sectarian Islamist discourse will ultimately survive. Rounds of dissent and domination, undecided and unresolved violence, confirm that Turkey cannot redress its democratic deficits without acute political and economic reforms, including at a minimum the development of multiple, viable opposition formations and a culture of consensus, or better still the invention of political formations discontinuous with the control culture of the Global Business Party. Having practiced for months a generative, inclusive, and progressive polity, the çapulcular model the society they seek. And it resonates. In the pidgin shibboleth of the protestors and in solidarity, “everyday I’m çapuling.”
REFERENCES


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Russia and the Middle East

Russia is forging new relations with Muslim countries and plans to join the Organization of Islamic Conference

Eric Walberg

In the days of the Russian empire, Russia’s relations with the Islamic world were very different from the West’s, defined by Russia’s own imperial expansionist logic. The Kazan khanate was already conquered by Russia by the sixteenth century. With the decline of the Safavid dynasty in Persia in the eighteenth century, Russia was able to easily move in and occupy Azerbaijan, Dagestan, the Kazakh steppe, and finally Turkestan (present-day Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan). Crimea was seized from the Ottomans at that time as well. The Caucasus tribes were more resistant, and it was not till the mid-nineteenth century that they were quelled.

Afghanistan became Russia’s southern flank, and British-Russian imperial rivalry there prompted Britain to initiate two wars in attempts to subdue Afghanistan in the nineteenth century to keep Russia at bay, finally allowing the British to control Afghanistan’s foreign affairs. Just to make sure, the British signed a treaty with the Russians on the northern boundary in 1887 (no need to worry about the Amir).

Under the influence of British-Russian intrigues, from the 1890s on, both
Central Asia and Afghanistan modernized somewhat. Muslims were by then a significant part of the Russian empire but were treated brutally. When the Russian revolution happened in 1917, even the atheist communists looked good in comparison. And indeed, after a few decades of repression of all religions, the fruits of socialism came to Soviet Muslims and Christians alike, with economic well-being far exceeding that of the Muslim world under the imperialist yoke.

The socialist revolution in Afghanistan in 1978 must be seen in this context. Until its collapse in 1991, the Soviet Union, after briefly flirting with the newly created Jewish state of Israel in 1948, was a solid ally of the Arab world in its fight against Israel and was welcomed as an ally by the peoples of Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Palestine. Afghan leftists did not fear Soviet influence (most studied in Moscow at the Patrice Lumumba Friendship University) and by the 1970s looked on enviously at the high standards of living, education, and culture next door, without a thought for how shaky the foundation for an “Afghan Soviet Republic” might be. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the Muslim majority “republics” voted overwhelmingly in a referendum by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev to maintain the union, as the orphan Afghan Socialist Republic desperately fought off the western-backed mujahideen.

Looking back, it is only too clear how painful the legacy of these “Great Games” played in the Muslim world by the West (including Russia and the Soviet Union) was, leaving a trail of tribal and linguistic divisions, trade routes disrupted, and local leaders and dictators with varying allegiances.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has had to rethink its relations with the Middle East and Central Asia. So far, considering its reduced status as an ex-superpower, no grand strategy is evident, other than non-interference and good neighborly relations, though, there are hints of a new constellation of forces. What has been accomplished by Russia is some modest institution building with collaboration with its neighbors. The new institutions include the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which includes Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and four observers—India, Iran, Pakistan, and Mongolia—founded in 1996 by Russia and China; and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) was formed in 2002, bringing together Russia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and
Kazakhstan, as well as Armenia and Belarus, though Uzbekistan’s prickly
dictator Islam Karimov unceremoniously withdrew last year. The newly
reinstalled President Vladimir Putin campaigned on his ambitious plan to
build a Eurasian Union, which has broad backing and is moving ahead,
building on the customs union already in place among Russia, Kazakhstan,
and Belarus.

There is strong official Russian reluctance to embrace the winds of change
in the Middle East proper—the Arab Spring, which Russia sees as being
manipulated particularly by the US. The West’s invasion of Libya revived the
specter of British/French/Italian/US imperialism on Africa’s north coast and
has proved a fertile breeding ground for al-Qaeda types. Rajab Safarov,
director of the Center for Modern Iranian Research in Moscow, argues that
Russia’s policies toward the Muslim world are a direct reaction to America’s
attempts to reconstruct the Middle East. “The US managed to organize the
chaos that followed the Arab Spring, creating a region that has no place for
Russian influence. Color revolts [US-sponsored regime change in Kyrgyzstan,
Georgia, and Ukraine in the 2000s] were just a rehearsal. Now, Washington
is trying to apply the same strategy to the Middle East,” he told me.

Russia also has domestic political concerns arising from the recent
uprisings the Middle East, both within the federation and with its ex-Soviet
“near abroad” neighbors, including its “near abroad” Muslims in Central
Asia. The immediate result was the “White Revolution” in Russia itself,
which reached a white-hot peak during the parliamentary elections of
December 2011, though its challenge to Putin and his United Russia has
so far been quelled.

But Russia is even more worried about the spillover effect of a reawakening
Muslim world in its restive Caucasus region, where separatists in Chechnya,
Ingushetia, and Dagestan continue their terrorist attacks, despite the
impossibility of ever realizing independent Islamic states there. The 1990s
especially was a violent and unstable period in the Caucasus, where a defiant
Chechen leader Dzhokhar Dudaev conducted a bloody campaign for
independence from the Russian Federation, using terrorist attacks. The first
terrorist attack was the 1995 Budyonnovsk hospital hostage crisis, which
resulted in 200 deaths. It was Chechen terrorist Shamil Basayev’s first
major “success” in as much as it led to peace talks with Yeltsin’s government
and resulted in the establishment of a quasi-independent Chechnya. The next major terrorist acts were the five bombings of mostly Moscow apartment buildings that killed nearly 300 people in September 1999. None of the Chechen field commanders, including Basayev, accepted responsibility for the bombings and Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov denied involvement of his government. However, they coincided with border skirmishes between Chechnya and Dagestan, and given that al-Qaeda and Wahhabism were increasingly active in Chechnya, Russia launched what is called the Second Chechen War, on which Vladimir Putin staked his presidency after he was appointed president by Boris Yeltsin in December 1999.

There followed a decade of gruesome war in Chechnya, with tens of thousands dying. In addition to Russia’s military campaign, Chechen terrorism continued with Basayev’s 2002 siege of a Moscow theatre (200 deaths) and the 2004 Beslan school siege (330 deaths). Basayev was finally killed by Russian security forces in 2006. The Kremlin declared “mission accomplished” in Chechnya in 2009, pulling most of its forces out of the tiny “republic,” and leaving it under the control of local strongman Ramzan Kadyrov. Since then there have been sporadic terrorist incidents, the worst being the 2010 Moscow subway bombings that killed 40, the latest the 2012 assassination of Dagestan’s most revered Muslim scholar Sheikh Said Afandi.

Just as the Russian state is determined to keep its Muslim regions part of the Federation, it is also determined not to let Afghan Taliban, whose earlier incarnation arguably brought the entire Soviet Union crashing down, back into power. The brittle regimes in Central Asia would be in danger of Talibanization, in the view of Russian political strategists, with dire implications for all of Eurasia.

While Russia has been trying to reassemble some form of union with its Central Asian republics, and working with China and Iran on Eurasian matters, it is in a more reactive mode in the Middle East proper, cautious of the fluid situation and striving to put a cap on unpredictable change. Until the crisis in Syria blew up, with Turkey lining up with the Saudi-Gulf-NATO attempt to speed up regime change, Russia was attempting to move with Turkey toward a new axis that would provide a credible alternative to US hegemony in the Middle East, agreeing on visa-free travel, building the
massive South Stream gas pipeline to Europe, commencing construction of Turkey’s first nuclear power station, with ambitious trade and investment plans (denominated in rubles and lira).

Russia maintains relations with Palestine’s Hamas (which went so far as to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia), and, as a member of the so-called quartet of Middle East negotiators (along with the EU, the US, and the UN), insists that Israel freezes expansion of settlements in the Occupied Territories as a condition of further talks. It appears to be trying to regain some of the goodwill that existed between the Soviet Union and Arab states, supporting the UN Goldstone Report which accused Israel of war crimes in its 2008 invasion of Gaza. Its relations with Egypt have been weak since President Anwar Sadat kicked the Russians out in 1972 and have not improved with the February 2012 revolution and the short-lived ascent to power of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is technically illegal in Russia as it is classified as a terrorist group. Russia’s relations with Saudi Arabia are reasonably good but wary, turning a blind eye to (what is hoped is) past support for Chechen rebels, with a Russian railway supposedly under construction as part of Saudi Arabia’s economic expansion plans. In 2008, Russia embarked on a diplomatic offensive with Arab states, offering Syria and Egypt nuclear power stations, and is re-establishing a military presence in the Mediterranean at the Syrian port of Tartus, though this is now on hold given Syria’s current civil war, with Russia and Iran lined up against the West and the Arab states.

There are many reasons why Russia does not favour regime-change Syria, but western attempts to portray Russia as the power-hungry bad guy in Syria do not hold water. The small Russian naval facility at Tartus has more symbolic than a real significance. Damascus has a poor record on repaying its debt, which will have to be mostly forgiven whatever happens now. Russia’s economic interest in Syria is modest compared to economic cooperation with Turkey. For the real reasons for Russian refusal to join the West against Syria, we have to look elsewhere. In general, Russia does not approve of outside attempts at regime change, which is what the battle in Syria has turned into. After NATO’s “success” in Libya, Russia is concerned about NATO making R2P (responsibility to protect) the new imperial catchphrase. It is genuinely concerned about heightened civil war in an evenly divided population, with rebel groups openly armed by the Syrian regime’s
Arab and western foes. Whatever the Turkish/Arab motives are in supporting the Syrian rebels (there are many conflicting ones), the US/Israeli desire to replace the current regime in Syria is because Syria is a gateway to their joint obsession: Iran, and its regional allies Hezbollah and Hamas. “If Iran falls, Washington will tighten the noose around the neck of the Russian regime. A pro-western Iran will mean Russia is surrounded by US military bases,” says Safarov. The collapse of the Assad regime would be another confirmation to both Russian liberals and Russia’s Muslim peoples, that there is no longer any “politics as usual,” and that Putin’s autocratic style and the Russian Federation itself can be reversed. If it leads to an attack on Iran, the consequences for Putin and the Eurasia Union would be catastrophic.

Since the mid-1980s, around a million Russians have emigrated to Israel. The importance of Jewish financial and economic interests in post-Soviet Russia—both the banking and industrial oligarchs and the Kosher Nostra mafia—ensures that Israel gets a sympathetic hearing from Russian leaders. Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman is a Russian Jew who emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1978. Russia now has its very own well-funded Israel Lobby; many Russians are dual Israeli citizens, enjoying a visa-free regime with Israel. Of course, the US benefits from Israeli pressures on Russia. This is a key feature of the current Great Game, where the US and Israel act as the new imperial “center.”

However, the Russian Israelis are not necessarily a Lieberman-like Achilles Heel for Russia. A third of them are scornfully dismissed as not being racially Jewish enough and could be a serious problem for Israel. Many have returned to Russia or managed to move on to greener pastures in Europe and America. Already, such prominent rightwing politicians as Moshe Arens, political patron of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, are considering a one-state solution. Perhaps these Russian immigrants will become a catalyst for a viable solution to the Palestinian problem.

Russia holds another intriguing key to peace in the Middle East. From its inception, Zionism was a secular socialist movement, with religious conservative Jews strongly opposed, a situation that continues even today, despite the defection of many under blandishments from the likes of Ben Gurion and Netanyahu. Many True Torah Jews don’t recognize the “Jewish
state.” But there is a legitimate Jewish state, a secular one set up in 1928 in Birobidjan Russia, in accordance with Soviet secular nationalities policies. Blessed with abundant raw materials, it is truly, to us Golda Meir’s words, “a land without a people for a people without a land.” It has taken on a new lease on life since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russian president Dmitri Medvedev made an unprecedented visit there in 2010, the first ever by a Russian (or Soviet) leader and pointed out the strong Russian state support it has as a Jewish homeland where Yiddish, the secular language of European Jews (not the sacred Hebrew), is the state language.

Given Turkey’s historic links with Turkestan via the Ottoman Caliphate and Russia’s links with Turkestan via the Soviet secular “caliphate,” Russian strategists are promoting a long-term scenario involving a strong Russian-Turkish axis. Whatever happens in Syria, given its buoyant economy and aggressive leadership, Turkey will be the new strongman in the Middle East. Together, Russia and Turkey have far more justification as Middle Eastern “hegemons” than the British-American-Israeli axis. In a delicious irony, invasions by the US and Israel in the Middle East and Eurasia (Afghanistan, Iraq, Gaza, threats to Iran) have not cowed the countries affected, but emboldened them to work together, creating the basis for a new alignment of forces, including Russia, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran.

Then there is Russia’s close relationship with Iran. The new constellation of Russia, Iran, and China in Eurasia is taking shape as the US withdraws from the region. Russia continues to veto any overt attack on Iran and is handing over complete control of Iran’s nuclear power stations this year. Both Russia and Iran support the current Afghan government against the Taliban. In fact, in case US State Department and Pentagon officials haven’t noticed the obvious, the main beneficiary of the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq has been Iran. The invasion brought to power the ethnic Persian Tajiks in Afghanistan, and the invasion of Iraq set up a Shia-dominated government there. Just as Russia and Turkey are creating an alliance in the Middle East proper, Russia and Iran have forged a long-term alliance in Central Asia with implications for Eurasia as a whole.

But Russia is still struggling to leave its own tragic civil war in Chechnya behind and to make sure there’s a place at the table for its Muslims. With its 16–20 million Muslims (about 12% of the population), not to mention
the largely pro-Russian populations of former Soviet republics, it has a natural interest in joining the Organization of Islamic Conference. And its main support for this initiative comes from predominantly Muslim Tatarstan, which also represents an example to the Muslim world of Russian tolerance of Islam. The Tatar president, Mintimer Shaimiev, joined the deputy chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Reverend Vsevolod Chaplin, at a religious conference in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in November 2008. President Shaimiev read a greeting from President Medvedev that stressed that “Russia intends to stick firmly to its course to expand active interaction with the Islamic world.” Chaplin told the Conference, “Russia is inseparable from the Islamic world, as many millions of Muslims live there, and the Islamic world is inseparable from the Russian and Orthodox world, whose members live in so many Muslim countries.”

Contrast the attitudes of the United States and Russia toward the OIC. In 2008, US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice, speaking at a reception in Washington to introduce Sada Cumber, the first US special envoy to the OIC, said, “The notion that the United States is at war with Islam, as we sometimes hear, is simply propagated by violent extremists who seek to divide Muslim communities against themselves.” Cumber, a smooth Pakistani-born businessman from Texas, later admitted that he hadn't made much headway at the OIC conference in persuading people of the truth of Rice’s claim. In contrast, Russia actually wants to join the OIC—its Muslim population is larger than that of several Asian and African Muslim states—“to enhance co-operation with Islamic nations,” according to Russian ambassador at large Veniamin Popov. Russia continues to work within international bodies and observe international laws, while the US continues to deny its responsibility for the terrible situation in the Middle East and insists that the world follows one of its many “roadmaps.”

Russia inherits fond memories across the Middle East region as the anti-Zionist Soviet Union’s successor. It is now using this historic legacy to forge new partnerships with Middle Eastern countries. Its own domestic dilemmas also require good relations with the various Muslim Brotherhoods across the region who will be the best “vaccine” against the jihadi terrorists who continue to plague the Caucasus and occasionally venture into Russia-proper. The Sinai border incident in August 2012 when
16 guards were killed has forced Egypt to come down hard on such terrorists, and it will be eager to help Russia deal with its own, as terrorism knows no boundaries anymore. Farsighted Russian strategists are eager to forge such alliances.

A string of new re-alignments are appearing in the Middle East. Russia’s alliances with Turkey, Iran and various groupings such as the Collective Security and Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, is set to change the political map of the region. If Russia is able to join the Organisation of Islamic Conference its relationship with the Muslim world will enter a new era. The tragedies of Syria and Afghanistan will require difficult compromise from all sides. But Russia cannot be accused of Machiavellian intrigues in either country.

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Is China Up to the Challenge?

Scepticism and concerns over China are well-placed but they need to be seen in context

Andrew Leung

In a recent article in YaleGlobal Online, a platform of the Yale Center for the Study of Globalization, David Shambaugh expresses doubt, if not pessimism, on the ability of China’s new leadership to deliver (Shambaugh, 2012). Shambaugh is professor and director of the China Policy Program at the Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University, and Senior Fellow in the Foreign Policy Studies Program at the Brookings Institution. So he is an important and influential figure. The article heralds his forthcoming book China Goes Global: The Partial Power (Shambaugh, 2013).

Shambaugh identifies “a surprising strong consensus” both inside and outside China on the following critical domestic reform areas:

— Reorienting the economic growth model away from investments into physical infrastructure and subsidized exports to one driven by domestic consumption and innovation, emphasizing the knowledge economy and service industries;

— Breaking the government’s monopoly over several sectors, while empowering civil society and loosening controls over the media, so as to facilitate the free flow of information needed in a real market
economy and innovation society;
— Adequately resourcing “public goods” for the populace—including healthcare, environmental protection, improved quality of education, pensions, old age care—while seriously addressing social stratification and inequity;
— Instituting the real rule of law—so as to counter rampant corruption, rising crime, systemic abuse of privilege and power, and facilitate the predictable functioning of a market economy;
— Addressing seething discontent among ethnic groups in Tibet and Xinjiang in positive ways instead of relying on intimidation and repression;
— Permitting greater political pluralism, even within a one-party system.

“In the foreign-policy arena,” Shambaugh thinks that “China’s neighbours hope it will adopt a more accommodating and less confrontational posture, particularly over maritime territorial disputes. Beijing also needs to work with the United States to stem the strategic competition and mistrust now pervasive in the relationship. Its relations elsewhere in the world are increasingly afflicted by the growing perception of China as a mercantilist state soaking up natural resources and investing in strategic assets. China also needs to play a greater role in global governance commensurate with its power and position in the international community.”

The eminent professor thinks that China’s new generation of leaders is hamstrung by four inherent constraints. The first is a “path dependency.” Shambaugh suggests that “the growth model has not only produced impressive national development – it has also employed a huge relatively unskilled workforce. To transition away from this model risks widespread unemployment and labour unrest, which would threaten social stability and party rule.” Shambaugh explains that “the composition of (China’s) exports needs to move up the value chain – and this is linked to shifting investment from ‘hard’ to ‘soft’ infrastructure: education, science, cutting-edge technologies, innovation and cultural creativity. For China to make these transitions requires more than a shift in financial allocations, though, as it requires loosening of the political system, media censorship and civil society. A ‘knowledge economy’ cannot easily be built in an authoritarian system.”
The second is the “Soviet shadow.” Shambaugh argues that with the spectre of the collapse of the former USSR, together with the lingering threats of the Eurasian “colour revolutions” and the “Arab spring,” there is a gripping fear that “opening the political system to genuine pluralism, empowering civil society, loosening media censorship, permitting free inquiry and critical thinking in education and research, or making the legislative and judicial systems autonomous of party control, would inevitably cascade out of control and spell the demise of party rule.”

The third, “Institutionalized” or “vested interests,” is described as a core problem of economic sector, which still accounts for roughly 30% of GDP. This includes state monopolies of the banking, energy, finance, defence, heavy industrial, aerospace, telecommunications, and much of the transportation sectors, as well as enormous swaths of land and property owned by the party, state and military. Lenin warned of “state-monopoly capitalism” in 1917 – China has it in spades today. These vested interests, particularly the 145,000 state enterprises and 120 “national champion” corporations, are not about to divest their interests voluntarily. In addition, “three other entrenched interest groups inhibit reforms: the military, the sprawling internal security apparatus and the arch-conservative wing of the Communist Party.”

Finally, the fourth is “Aggrieved nationalism,” which emerges from an “entrenched national narrative of victimization.” This narrative, assiduously developed over six decades through the propaganda and educational systems, underpins the political raison d’être of the Communist Party—but it is a core source of the frictions with China’s neighbours and the West. China needs to shed this psychological baggage to truly normalize relations with Asia and the West—but to do so is to undercut the party’s legitimacy.

Shambaugh’s prognosis is much more balanced and analytical compared with most China studies characterized by sectoral or pre-judgemental bias, hyping either the “China threat” or “China collapse” at one end of the spectrum to “China rules the world” at the other. According to his description of his forthcoming book, his conclusions are based on “six distinct dimensions of China’s global emergence (perceptual, diplomatic, global governance, economic, cultural, and security) and multiple manifestations of each.”
While Shambaugh’s scepticism is well-placed, it must nevertheless be seen in a particular context. So let me, briefly, contextualise his four “inherent constraints” one by one.

On “path dependence,” it is important to realise that, ever since China started to reform and open up in 1978, the country’s development has been a continuous work-in-progress, to stay above waters of a continually changing tide. This perennial status of flux, of adaptation and change, has been at the core of China’s economic miracle, compressing over a century’s economic progress into a few decades. However, this has been breeding existential threats in unbalanced growth, rampant corruption, social inequity, and ecological degradation and a hotbed of other social ills.

As early as the beginning of China’s 11th Five Year Plan (2006–2010), the leadership has been highlighting the so-called five imbalances—rural versus urban, human versus environmental, economic versus social, national versus local, and inward versus outward investments. The leadership has since ushered in a swath of initiatives to hone “a nation of innovation” including a battle for talent (Liyan and Jing, 2012) and the promotion of the kind of “soft” infrastructure highlighted by Shambaugh: education, science, cutting-edge technologies, innovation and cultural creativity, though the outcome at this stage remains inconclusive.

There has thus been a clear sense of changed direction since 2006—now reinforced by the 12th Five Year Plan (2011–2015)—towards a dramatically different path based on slower but more balanced, higher-quality, more equitable, and more sustainable growth. There is a broad-based awareness that the cheap labour pool is dwindling and China must redouble efforts to respond to the so-called Lewis Curve Turning Point, a stage of development, during which the supply of labour decreases and the cost of labour increases; and the challenges of the Middle Income Trap, which describes the examples of many developing countries getting ensnared at a stage of development unable to rise beyond around $8,000 per capita income when growth stalls as wages rise when the pool of cheap labour dries up without a concomitant growth in productivity.

The point here is that “path dependence” is not immutable.
On the “Soviet shadow,” it is true that the Communist Party is caught in a
quandary. But what Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson describe as
“extractive institutions” (Acemoglu and Robin, 2012) have generated
growing social unrests that threaten to undermine the stability of the whole
regime. It is no coincidence that from Wukan, Shifang to Ningbo, a recent
series of uncharacteristic, high-profile, government about-turns have begun
to happen, overturning local projects approved in Beijing in response to
public protests against land grabs and pollution. In particular, the so-called
“Wukan model” of open and fair village elections was daringly promoted
by Wang Yang, one of China’s rising, if recently checked but by no means
“disabled,” pro-reform “stars.”

It is also instructive that a host of reform proposals in a new 468-page
World Bank report were given the rare imprimatur of the State Council’s
Development Research Centre. These include the promotion of civil society,
including the role of the media to monitor governance (if initially only at
the local level), and the strengthening of the rule of law, although,
admittedly, there is still a long and winding road towards greater legislative
oversight and judiciary independence.

But if the story is to be believed, Alexis de Tocqueville’s “French Revolution”
is doing the rounds amongst China’s top leadership, including Li Keqiang,
the Premier-in-waiting, and Wang Qishan, the new anti-graft czar. Fighting
corruption has been termed a matter of “life or death” for the Party and the
nation, according to both outgoing President Hu Jintao and President-in-
waiting Xi Jinping at the 18th Party Congress.

The point here is that the “Soviet shadow” also means that “not managing
change” in tune with the times will only threaten the whole regime’s
survival.

Now to “vested interests.” The reason why the 18th Party Congress was
unexpectedly delayed was the shock of the Bo Xilai affair. Regardless of
factional vested interests, nothing concentrated the minds of the collective
leadership better than when the whole apple cart was about to be overturned
by the overarching ambition of a scheming, if charismatic, individual. This
was also an epiphany that vested interests must be curbed, if not eradicated,
particularly those represented by the monopolistic state-owned enterprises
which sapped the vitality of the private sector. Indeed, this is one of the major reform areas highlighted in the World Bank/Development Research Centre report.

As for the military, a series of top military promotions and reshuffling took place during the mysterious disappearance of then Vice President Xi Jinping. It is probable that he took French leave to boost the loyalty of the military leadership in preparation for his taking over the Military Commission chairmanship in a first-of-its-kind complete power transfer at the Party Congress. The Party’s top leadership has been reduced from nine to seven members, downgrading the security and propaganda apparatus to below the level of the Politburo Standing Committee.

All these changes are of course not enough to break the so-called “iron quadrangle” of the military, the security apparatus, state-owned enterprises, and arch-conservatives. This is not totally unlike the American example of the military-industrial complex forewarned at the time of President Eisenhower plus its modern adjunct of big business and Wall Street.

The point here is that vested interests, when push comes to shove, can also trigger reform in order to maintain overall regime stability.

The “aggrieved nationalism” is a product of the nation’s psychological baggage which is a reality borne of centuries of foreign oppression. Some of the remaining territorial disputes are in fact their outcome. Such disputes are unlikely to be resolved anytime soon. So, territorial integrity is likely to remain a sore point in the national psyche for a long time to come.

Nevertheless, China has now become more proactive in the global commons, for example, in international peacekeeping, as the largest contributor of peacekeeping forces amongst Permanent Members of the Security Council. The country is also instrumental in brokering the six-party talks on North Korea and is taking a keener interest in addressing conflicts in the Middle East. But such a role cannot be equated to acquiescence with one-sided demands or abrogation of China’s own national interests. Indeed, no self-respecting nation would do this.

Meanwhile, China is now embarking on a mission to promote the country’s
soft-power, including Confucianism and other aspects of China’s culture and heritage. But notwithstanding the gravitas of China’s economy, debates about the merits of the so-called Beijing Consensus and growing world-wide interests in the Chinese language, China is unlikely to have many genuine followers until the country succeeds in showcasing a new attractive civilization with a heart and soul that appeal to the spirit of the times (Leung, 2012).

In the final analysis, despite many negative connotations, “in the past ten years under the current leader, Hu Jintao, the economy has quadrupled in size in dollar terms. A new (though rudimentary) social safety net provides 95% of all Chinese with some kind of health coverage, up from just 15% in 2000. Across the world, China is seen as second in status and influence only to America,” according to The Economist front cover article of 27 October 2012. An article for the South China Morning Post dated 19 September 2012, the flagship publication of Gateway International, a global China consultancy firm, postulates that brighter days are ahead for China’s economy (Zhao, 2012).

The latest Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report “Looking to 2060: Long-Term Global Growth Prospects” suggests that “China will overtake the Euro zone in 2012 and the US within the next four years to become the largest economy in the world. By 2060 ….. the combined GDP of China (27.8%) and India (18.2%) will be larger than that of the OECD—and the total output of China, India and the rest of the developing world (57.7%) will be greater than that of developed OECD and non-OECD countries (42.3%)” (OECD, 2012).

Notwithstanding competition and rivalry, which are common to all political systems, the different factions, power centres, and vested interests of the Party polity all embrace and continue to benefit from China’s continuing reform and progress. The question is not whether to reform but where, how much, and how fast, and of course, how to apportion their respective power and influence. Depending on the time horizon and a host of imponderables, brighter prospects may or may not materialize. Nevertheless, I am more inclined to the view that the bottle is at worst half full. There is serious leakage that needs to be fixed, but more water is coming in.

If one is to believe that in reply to Richard Nixon, Zhou Enlai said it is still
too early to judge the impact of the French revolution, perhaps it is still too early to be pessimistic about China, especially at such an epochal watershed when no change is no option. China will remain a work in progress for years to come. So, Shambaugh may be accurate when he says that China remains a “Partial Power.” At any rate, the jury is still out.

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PAPERS

The New Polytheism: Updating the Dialogue between East and West

It is time to sort out the possible contributions of our various traditions to a new spirituality that does not bend to the reductionism of the new atheists

JAY O'GILVY

About a third of the way into his remarkable book, An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World, Pankaj Mishra includes a long speech by one of his friends, Vinod. Pankaj and Vinod have retired to the roof of Vinod’s family home. Pankaj asks him about a picture he’d seen downstairs that turns out to be a photo of Vinod’s sister, Sujata, whose in-laws, disappointed with her dowry, had poured kerosene over her and burned her alive. Vinod’s impassioned speech takes up fully eight pages of Mishra’s book. It has the feel of a turning point in the book, and in Mishra’s own development as an author, as a thinker, and as an Indian.

One paragraph of that long speech:

It is people like Gautama Buddha and Gandhi who have misled us. They have taught us to be passive and resigned. They have told us of the virtuous life; they have told us to deny ourselves in order to be content. But they haven’t told us how to live in the real world—the world that grows bigger and bigger and more complex all the time. This is why Vivekananda is important. He could see why the old habits of fatalism and resignation—the habits of village people—wouldn’t work any more.

East-West Affairs
He saw that they had made us the slaves of the Muslims and then the British, why these people coming from outside could rule over India for so long. He was totally unsentimental, and he was brutally frank. He told us that we were sunk in tamas, darkness. There was no point in trumpeting our spiritual success, our philosophical wisdom. All that was in the past. It was meant for primitive people. This was now the age of big nations. India was one such nation but it was way behind Europe and America. The West had technology, it had mastered nature, it had exploded nuclear bombs, it had sent people to the moon. When someone asked Gandhi what he thought of western civilization, he made a joke. He said that western civilization would be a good idea. But Vivekanandana knew that the West had much to teach us. The first lesson was that we have to be materialists first. We have to learn to love wealth and comfort; we have to grow strong, know how to take pleasure in things, and recognize that there is no virtue in poverty and weakness. We have to know real manhood first. Spirituality comes later, or not at all. Perhaps we don’t need it. (Mishra, 2004, 129f.)

These are not Pankaj Mishra’s beliefs. He remains steadfastly respectful of the Buddha. But he quotes his friend Vinod’s words at such length because they provide a vivid statement of views that have become important. If, as many believe, power is shifting from West to East, Vinod’s words are worrisome, for the “East,” at least the India that Vinod has in mind, will not be the India of Buddha or Gandhi. It will instead be a westernized, materialistic Asia, a giant awoken to pave the earth and pollute the skies.

The East/West dialogue is not what it used to be. It is no longer a matter of comparing cultures and traditions to find the common ground for some universal belief system. That was the work of philosophers like F.S.C. Northrop (1946) and religious historians like Huston Smith (1958). Nor is it a matter of fleeing one set of customs for another, forsaking the fallen gods of ones elders and seeking elsewhere in a kind of grass-is-greener syndrome. Think of the procession of journeys to the east, from Lawrence of Arabia to the Beatles. Where the old universalism asserted that, deep down, we are all One, a more postmodern phase of the dialogue acknowledges real differences, othernesses, to the point of risking immersion in the exotic—“going native.”

But now we’re well beyond all that. With figures like Pankaj Mishra from India, and Nobel Prize winning author Orhan Pamuk from Turkey, we are
witnessing a new generation of writers who are integrating East and West in ways that take the dialectic of sameness and otherness through new and different cycles of shock and recognition. As we move into the future, trying to find a path that balances sustainable material wealth on the one hand and some measure of spiritual well-being on the other, it is important, I will argue, that we listen to these new voices and not get caught up in old clichés.

From the Ruins of Empire
Modernization, colonialism, westernization, industrialization, globalization—these are huge forces and dynamics that have shaken Asian cultures to their ancient foundations. As Mishra (2012) puts it in his more recent book, From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals who Remade Asia:

The much-heralded shift of economic power from the West to the East may or may not happen, but new perspectives have certainly opened up on world history. For most people in Europe and America, the history of the twentieth century is still largely defined by the two world wars and the long nuclear stand-off with Soviet Communism. But it is now clearer that the central event of the last century for the majority of the world’s population was the intellectual and political awakening of Asia and its emergence from the ruins of both Asian and European empires. To acknowledge this is to understand the world not only as it exists today but also how it is continuing to be remade not so much in the image of the West as in accordance with the aspirations and longings of former subject peoples. (Mishra, 2012, 8f.)

This shift of perspectives—from that of the rulers to that of the ruled—reveals a history—past, present, and future—quite different from those histories written by western scholars. And the picture is not pretty.

Now that many of us in the West think of colonialism as ancient history, as an idea so out of favor that even the term “post-colonial” sounds obsolete, it’s too easy to forget just how brutally the nations of the West subjugated and oppressed Asian peoples. Mishra helps us to remember: How, “In 1824 the British, ensconced in eastern India, began their long subjugation of Burma. In the same year an Anglo-Dutch treaty confirmed British control of Singapore and the Malaya states,” (Mishra, 2012, p22) while the Netherlands took Java and the French dominated Vietnam. Mishra quotes
Bengali novelist, Bankim Chandra Chatterji (1838–1894): “The world has never seen men as tyrannical and powerful as the people who first founded the Britannic empire in India . . . The English who came to India in those days were affected by an epidemic—stealing other people’s wealth. The word morality had disappeared from their vocabulary.” This is not Winston Churchill’s way of writing England’s history.

Vinod’s hero, Vivekananda, is equally critical:

Intoxicated by the heady wine of newly acquired power, fearsome like wild animals who see no difference between good and evil, slaves to women, insane in their lust, drenched in alcohol from head to foot, without any norms of ritual conduct, unclean, materialistic, dependent on material things, grabbing other people’s land and wealth by hook or crook . . . the body their self, its appetites their only concern—such is the image of the western demon in Indian eyes.

(Vivekananda quoted in Mishra, 2012, p36)

From the suppression of the Indian Mutiny in 1857, to the burning of the Chinese Summer Palace of the Chinese Emperor in 1860 during the Second Opium War, to the putdown of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, the British (with help from the French) established a reputation for brutality that set the stage for twentieth century atrocities. Nor were the Dutch or the Portuguese innocent of dark histories of imperialism.

Of course, we know that imperialism was ugly. White Americans should be ashamed of the treatment of Native Americans. What Mishra adds to the appalling history of imperialism is his sensitivity to the dilemma of Asian intellectuals, the Hobson’s choice they faced between recoiling into the embrace of their ancient cultures, or adopting western ways precisely in order to gain the strength to resist the West. This was the paradox: Either accept the Trojan horse of western culture in order to master its “secrets”—technology, organization, bureaucracy and the power that accrues to a nation-state—or accept the role of underpaid extras in a movie, a very partial “universal” history, that stars the West.

Civilization came to be represented by European forms of scientific and historical knowledge and ideas of morality, public order, crime and
punishment, even styles of dress. Asians everywhere came up against Europe's new self-understanding in which it was everything Asia was not: non-despotic, increasingly urban and commercial, innovative and dynamic. (Mishra, 2012, p43)

Then, at the dawn of the twentieth century, things changed. There erupted an anomaly in the western imperialist paradigm. Japan defeated Russia in 1905, destroying its navy in one epic battle to which Mishra attaches such importance that the opening sentence of his Prologue runs: “The contemporary world first began to assume its decisive shape over two days in May 1905 in the narrow waters of the Tsushima Strait. . . For the first time since the Middle Ages, a non-European country had vanquished a European power in a major war” (Mishra, 2012, p1). Mishra quotes Gandhi: “so far and wide have the roots of Japanese victory spread that we cannot now visualize all the fruit it will put forth.” And more: “In Damascus, Mustafa Kemal, a young Ottoman soldier later known as Ataturk, was ecstatic.” Likewise Sun Yat-sen, China’s future leader, who was in London at the time.

Mishra’s latest book (2012), From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals who Remade Asia, follows the careers of several Asian intellectuals who wrestled with the choice of whether to westernize or not. Some of the names are familiar: Gandhi, Ataturk, Tagore. But some are not: Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, the hero of a long Chapter Two (p46–123), or China’s Liang Qichao (p124–183). We need to know more about these men and others like them if Mishra’s judgment is anywhere near correct: “It is impossible to imagine, for instance, that the recent protests and revolutions in the Arab world would have been possible without the intellectual and political foundation laid by al-Afghani’s assimilation of Western ideas and his rethinking of Muslim traditions” (Mishra, 2012, 119f).

So what are some of those intellectual and political foundations? And how do they put a new spin on the East/West dialogue of old? The answers to these questions are not simple, in part because, “He was not a systematic thinker and seems to have developed his ideas on the run” (Mishra, 2012, p119). Consistency was not his long suit: “He advocated both nationalism and pan-Islamism; he lamented the intolerance of Islam; he evoked its great glories in the past; he called for Muslim unity; he also asked Muslims to work with Hindus, Christians and Jews, and did so himself” (Mishra, 2012,
p119). In short, the dilemmas facing al-Afghani were so deep there seemed no way of resolving them short of working both sides of several streets as each new country and each new situation demanded.

Al-Afghani got around. Though he claimed to be a Sunni Muslim born in Afghanistan, he was actually “born in 1838 in the village of Asadabad near Hamadan in north-west Persia, and educated in Tehran, the seminaries of great Shiite cities, mainly Najaf, and then in India” (Mishra, 2012, p53). He spent almost two years in Istanbul before being expelled in 1871. Why? “Indian Muslims harassed by the British, and Muslim Tatars ill-treated by the Russians, were beginning to call for the Ottoman sultan to assume leadership of the Muslim world and declare jihad (holy war) on infidels” (Mishra, 2012, p69). But pan-Islamism was in its infancy and al-Afghani’s efforts in Istanbul were unsuccessful. In the late 1870s al-Afghani’s career as an outside agitator took him to Egypt where he gave speeches in Cairo and Alexandria in 1878 before being expelled back to India in 1879. In 1883 he arrived in Paris, “a Mecca for various political malcontents,” (p96) where he engaged in a new chapter of East/West dialogue with Ernest Renan.

During his debate with Renan, he argued that the original teachings of Islam were in accordance with modern rationalism but since then Muslim societies had become internally weak and intolerant; they needed a Martin Luther to reconcile themselves with the modern world . . . That Islam needed a Reformation, with himself as Luther, was gradually becoming a favorite theme of al-Afghani. (p102)

Then in 1886 he returned to his native Persia, now a famous man.

How does al-Afghani’s legacy, as opportunistic and inconsistent as it may be, put a new spin on the East/West dialogue of old? For one thing, al-Afghani is not a Gandhi. He did not preach non-violence: “Increasingly, al-Afghani veered towards armed struggle and violent resistance to the West” (94). For another, he was not a Tagore, not a vividly spiritual man, not a sage. As such, he upsets the stereotype that would oppose the spiritual East to the materialistic West. With his enthusiasm for an Islamic Reformation and his praise for rationalism, he holds out some hope for a moderate Islam. But don’t get your hopes up too fast, gringo, for the wounds and humiliations of empire struck so deep in al-Afghani’s soul that his deepest
and most abiding commitment was to anti-imperialism. Do we recognize some of these complex dynamics in the drama of the Arab Spring?

Mishra’s next iconic Asian intellectual, Liang Qichao, would be shaped by his struggles with the West and would cast a similarly long shadow on contemporary history.

Liang was to become China’s first iconic modern intellectual. His lucid and prolific writings, touching on all major concerns in his own time and anticipating many in the future inspired several generations of thinkers including the much younger Mao Zedong. A restless and intellectual seeker, Liang combined his Chinese classical learning with a great sensitivity to Western ideas and trends. (p135)

An avid reader of Hobbes, Rousseau, Spinoza, and the Greeks, Liang was, like al-Afghani, deeply touched by the humiliations and resentments of imperialism. And just as al-Afghani had struggled with both the backwardness and moral promise of Islam, so Liang struggled with what was worthy and what was stultifying in Confucianism.

Liang was certainly not going to allow the white children’s version of Asian history to prevail. . . Liang described the endless subtle ways in which European merchants and mine-owners had progressively infiltrated and undermined many societies and cultures. The essay detailed these methods which included cajoling countries into spiraling debt (Egypt), territorial partition (Poland), exploiting internal divisions (India), or simply overwhelming adversaries with military superiority (the Philippines and the Transvaal). (159)

And like al-Afghani, Liang also got around: not just around China, but also Japan, and a whirlwind tour “through Vancouver, Ottawa, Montana, Boston, New York, Washington, New Orleans, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Seattle, Los Angeles and San Francisco” (Mishra, 2012, p170).

**Globalization and Getting Around**
Here it’s worth taking a little detour to observe Mishra observing these Asian intellectuals, when Mishra writes of, “melting-pots of intellectual culture in such far-flung places as Chicago, Berlin, Johannesburg and
Yokohama. These broadened horizons of enquiry, reflection and polemic and committed many men and women to a restless nomadism, to ceaseless exploration and analysis of self and world” (Mishra, 2012, p166f), he is writing as much about himself as about these older Asian intellectuals. Throughout his several books, one gets the picture of precisely the sort of restless nomad on a “ceaseless exploration and analysis of self and world.” Part of the charm of his writing lies in the portrait he paints of his own quest, which takes him from a remote village in the foothills of the Himalayas, Mashobra, where he reads ceaselessly, to London, New York, California, Pakistan, Afghanistan, etc. He, too, gets around.

And this is part of the meaning of globalization: We are all in each other’s faces now. The Other is no longer remote, no longer quite so exotic. But the domestication of the exotic leaves us living in a kind of spiritual and ideological zoo . . . which can be confusing. This “ceaseless exploration and analysis of self and world” is bound to be challenging to the self when the world is as it is, so filled with tragedy and promise, complexity and diversity. And Mishra (2006) is appropriately humbled. In a book not yet mentioned, Temptations of the West: How to be Modern in India, Pakistan, Tibet, and Beyond, he speaks of “the many stages of drift and futility I was encountering and was yet to encounter in my own life” (p14).

Temptations of the West is a book of essays. Much of the material has been previously published in The New York Review of Books where Mishra has been a featured author for the past decade. Despite his elevation to such a lofty platform, however, Mishra retains an impressive blend of personal humility and public caution. Thus, he ends his essay on Pakistan:

But I was confused. I had thought Jamal an ally. His fate, however, was tied to the faceless people on the other side, people who were persecutors as much as victims. I couldn’t see how things, given the way they were now, could work out for them. But the thought of their failure was painful. I wanted these people to flourish. I wanted them to have as much dignity and freedom as I had been allowed in recent years, even though I couldn’t but feel the absurdity of my wish and increasingly doubted whether the kind of life I lived was what these apparently deprived people longed for or could be content with. (Mishra, 2006, p252)
When Mishra refers to “the kind of life I lived,” he is acknowledging having been bitten by the bug of western individualism with all of its impatience with tradition and ambition for something better. Part of what makes An End to Suffering so engaging is the way he’s woven three books into one: it is, first, a kind of introduction to Buddhism; second, it presents a new chapter in the dialogue between East and West; but third, it is a very personal story. The word “autobiography” doesn’t quite apply given Mishra’s relative youth, but the German term, “Bildungsroman,” fits perfectly. Like Goethe’s Sorrows of Young Werther (1774), Mishra’s An End to Suffering moves its hero from a remote village (Mashobra = Goethe’s Walheim) where life is simple into a more cosmopolitan world. The German word “Bildung” is ill translated as “education,” though Flaubert’s Sentimental Education (1869) was a paradigm case of the genre. “Cultivation” would be a better translation, as in the cultivation of character or the cultivation of the soul. It’s not just a cognitive or academic thing. It’s closer to the Greek Paideia, the shaping of the Greek character and culture as described in Werner Jaeger’s (1939) classic three volume work of the same title. It’s about what it takes to live the good life, and on that question, Mishra is acutely aware that there are different ideas, East and West. This is why he worries about whether the kind of life he lived “was what these apparently deprived people longed for or could be content with.” Maybe they didn’t want to be individuals of the sort discovered by Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. Maybe they didn’t want careers of the sort Mishra was pursuing.

There was, it seemed to me, no going back to the spiritually whole Indian past for people like me, even if that past existed somewhere, ready to be possessed. I had to look ahead, and, in some ways, my desire to be a writer had clarified my way. That ambition was inseparable from the modern bourgeois civilization of the West; and from my earliest days as a reader I had sought, consciously or not, my guides and inspirations and the polemics of Kierkegaard and Marx. It was clear from the works of these men that to be a writer was to engage rationally with, rather than retreat from, the world; it was to concern oneself particularly with the fate of the individual in society. (Mishra, 2004, p149)

Part of Mishra’s interest in Rabindranath Tagore, to whom he devotes one of the six chapters of From the Ruins of Empire, lies in Tagore’s sensitivity to these issues. He quotes Tagore:

East-West Affairs
The conflict between the individual and the state, labor and capital, the man and the woman; the conflict between the greed of material gain and the spiritual life of man, the organized selfishness of nations and the higher ideals of humanity; the conflict between all the ugly complexities inseparable from giant organizations of commerce and state and the natural instincts of man crying for simplicity and beauty and fullness of leisure. (Tagore, quoted in Mishra, 2004, p309)

These conflicts are evoked by the frictions between East and West, which cast the conflict between individual and society in a different light, a light that also bathes the work of Nobel Prize winning Turkish author, Orhan Pamuk.

**The Melancholy of Orhan Pamuk**

Like An End to Suffering, Pamuk’s Istanbul (2004) is something of a mash-up of different genres. It, too, is a Bildungsroman that records Pamuk’s coming of age; it, too, offers a fascinating chapter in the dialogue between East and West; and it, too, has a third dimension: in place of an introduction to Buddhism, Pamuk gives us an introduction to the city of Istanbul—a kind of dreamy, reflective, contemplative travelogue.

Like Mishra, Pamuk is a very literate man caught between East and West, and correspondingly confused. He begins his chapter, “Under Western Eyes:”

To some degree, we all worry about what foreigners and strangers think of us. But if anxiety brings us pain or clouds our relationship with reality, becoming more important than reality itself, this is a problem. My interest in how my city looks to western eyes is—as for most Istanbulus—very troubled; like all other Istanbul writers with one eye always on the West, I sometimes suffer in confusion. (Pamuk, 2004, p234)

But even more important than confusion is a deeply held, pervasive melancholy, or hüzün, that hangs over and infuses all of Pamuk’s work. He devotes an entire chapter of *Istanbul* to hüzün, a chapter followed by another on “Four lonely melancholic writers.”

His argument distinguishes two types of hüzün: the first is experienced,
“when we have invested too much in worldly pleasures;” the second, “the spiritual anguish we feel because we cannot be close enough to Allah.”

Istanbul’s melancholy, Pamuk argues, is unique to Istanbul is several respects. Ḥüzün may stem from the same “black passion” described in Robert Burton’s early seventeenth century tome, An Anatomy of Melancholy, but unlike Burton’s European melancholy that attached to individuals, Ḥüzün casts its pall over the collective. Pamuk draws a further comparison and contrast with tristesse, the sadness of the savage as described by Lévi-Strauss. “Tristesse is not a pain that affects a solitary individual; Ḥüzün and tristesse both suggest a communal feeling, an atmosphere and a culture shared by millions” (Pamuk 2005, p101). But unlike the tristesse that Lévi-Strauss finds in primitive societies, Ḥüzün is not just post-primitive; it is postmodern. “The difference lies in the fact that in Istanbul the remains of a glorious past civilization are everywhere visible.”

Because Istanbul’s Ḥüzün is so uniquely Istanbul’s, the best way for Pamuk to describe it is through an elegy that is Nabokovian in its attention to detail:

But what I am trying to describe now is not the melancholy of Istanbul but the Ḥüzün in which we see ourselves reflected, the Ḥüzün we absorb with pride and share as a community. To feel this Ḥüzün is to see the scenes, evoke the memories, in which the city itself becomes the very illustration, the very essence, of Ḥüzün. I am speaking of the evenings when the sun sets early, of the fathers under the streetlamps in the back streets returning home carrying plastic bags. Of the old Bosphorus ferries moored to deserted stations in the middle of winter, where sleepy sailors scrub the decks, pail in hand and one eye on the black-and-white television in the distance; of the old booksellers who lurch from one financial crisis to the next and then wait shivering all day for a customer to appear; of the barbers who complain that men don’t shave as much after an economic crisis; . . .

This sentence, this ode to Ḥüzün, extends to a length of five pages and contains, by my count, no less than 54 semicolons, and concludes: “of the crowds of men smoking cigarettes after the national soccer matches, which during my childhood never failed to end in abject defeat: I speak of them all” (Pamuk, 2005, p99).
Pamuk’s is a located voice, and its location, Istanbul, is poised on a razor’s edge between East and West, between Europe and Asia, between Christianity and Islam, between democracy and theocracy. Pamuk’s voice is different from Mishra’s: less tuned to the politics of anti-imperialism, more preoccupied with the minutiae of subjective feelings. But even from a perspective that is different from Mishra’s, Pamuk, like Mishra, calls out to a West he knows very well, and in a way that beckons toward shared human bonds, even across the gulfs that separate us. Without fatuous appeals to some universal human nature—appeals well buried under the “thick descriptions” of different cultures in the writings of Clifford Geertz—both Pamuk and Mishra tell tales of love and cruelty and kindness and humiliation that are instantly recognizable to any western reader.

In his novel, The Museum of Innocence, Pamuk (2009) paints a picture of grief at lost love to rival any in the tradition of western literature. If not quite as intensely, romantic love runs like a steady current through Pamuk’s other novels: My Name is Red (2001), Snow (2004), and The Black Book (2006), but rarely unshrouded by hüzün and the memories of lost empire. From Snow:

“We’re poor and insignificant,” said Fazul, with a strange fury in his voice. “Our wretched lives have no place in human history. One day all of us living now in Kars will be dead and gone. No one will remember us; no one will care what happened to us. We’ll spend the rest of our days arguing about what sort of scarf women should wrap around their heads, and no one will care in the slightest because we’re eaten up by our own petty, idiotic quarrels. When I see so many people around me leading such stupid lives and then vanishing without a trace, an anger runs through me because I know then that nothing really matters more in life than love.” (Pamuk, 2004, p287)

Pamuk’s character, Fazul, recalls Mishra’s character, Vinod, whose anger about his torched sister began this essay. The intervening quotations and details will have hopefully relocated the East/West dialogue from the saffron-and-incense-tinged chambers of old, with their syncretistic mixes of sitar music and Gregorian chants, to a newer, more politically realistic and economically acute confrontation between imperial powers and their former colonies. While the rhetoric of post-colonialism may seem obsolete to those of us in the West, we dare not forget it when making our latter day journeys to the East to reclaim some of its spiritual bounty. This is Mishra’s main message.
If we listen only to the Fazuls and Vinods, we might recoil from what they seem all too willing to leave behind forever. Perhaps history is at an end as Fukuyama, following Hegel, famously proclaimed, and that end marks not only the triumph of democratic capitalism over communism, but also the triumph of Christianity over the rest of the world's great religions. But this is absurd. Religions are not like ideologies . . . or are they? If Mishra's quest is “to concern oneself particularly with the fate of the individual in society” (Mishra, 2004, p149), doesn’t that concern fall under the dual influences of both religions and ideologies?

Once again, we are in one another’s faces today, not just those of us who get around and count ourselves citizens of the globe, but also the billions who live on little, but pull down TV signals from the countless satellite dishes perched on the roofs of the poorest shanties. De facto globalization is in tension with the failure of a de jure universalism of the sort that Huston Smith, among others, once sought. Whether or not we are all climbing the same spiritual mountain, albeit by different paths, we are competing in the same global economy. And the lack of consensus over the fate of the individual in society, derived in part from our religious differences, makes trade under the rule of law a challenge.

There’s a lot at stake in this East/West dialogue, old or new. In trying to update the dialogue by listening to voices like Mishra’s and Pamuk’s, I’m not just interested in finding a form of spirituality that could undergird a fair and just global economy. As noble as that aspiration might be, it begs the question about the relationship between the sacred and the profane, the religious and the secular, the spiritual and the mundane. In short, it’s a very western aspiration that puts the productive economy first: as Vinod posited, materialism prior to spirituality.

If we are truly to listen to these newer voices from the East, we cannot help but hear an anguish, a melancholy, a hüzün that stems from a profound ambivalence over whether to embrace the cornucopia of western wealth at the cost of ancient wisdom and soul, or to shun the Trojan Horse of western modernity, even at the cost of economic misery.

A New Polytheism
Perhaps there is a way out of this Hobson’s choice, both for our brothers
and sisters in the East, and for our own lost souls. Allow me to paint a picture that is absurdly simple in its outline and impossibly complex in its ultimate execution. Imagine a series of just three stages:

1. First: Innocence of the Other. For centuries, the lack of travel and communications left each great civilization and each of the world’s great religions pre- eminent and largely unchallenged in its own domain. Confucianism, for example, could survive for millennia in a Middle Kingdom that burned its own ships rather than suffer intercourse with barbarians.

2. Second: The contest of empires. From the first voyages of Vasco da Gama, through Admiral Perry’s “dark ships” off the coast of Japan, through the purported end of colonialism in the twentieth century, there was a contest for control of the seas and all the landmasses between. This contest of empires was a contest of competing universalisms, not just for political and economic power, but also for religious dominion. “Thou shalt have no other god before me . . .” quoth various scriptures in their own ways. Competing monotheisms mirrored competing ideologies with truth claims as purportedly universal as those of mathematics.

3. Third, and ever so simplistically: A new pluralism, but not one based on a retreat to the innocence of Stage One via some new isolationism; nor a pluralism that settles for an evisceration of spirituality, carving out so many little niches that are off limits to Caesar or the Emperor or the Pasha. No, the new pluralism has to be one that grants the infinite reach of many spirits into all corners of life in a way that pre-dates the Reformation, even as it allows for different spiritual imperiums. How can that be?

Here I can do no better than follow both Mishra and Pamuk by recalling my own crooked path toward spirituality, even as I draw on global travels and recorded histories that extend far beyond my own experience. Early on, at age 15, I fell in with a precocious group of friends who were reading Nietzsche and celebrating the death of God. For most of my life I’ve been pretty much an atheist. The Bible, at least, was a closed book.

In my twenties, back in the 1970s, I yielded to peer group pressure and dabbled in meditation. Despite a fair amount of reading on mysticism and
Zen, I knew that I didn’t know what I was getting into. For one thing, I
didn’t have a guru or master to guide me on my way, and the books told me
that without one I was lost. I remember reading Yogananda’s *Autobiography
of a Yogi* and thinking, somewhat wistfully, “I sure wish I could experience
some of the extraordinary *sidhis* that Yogananda describes.”

And then one day I had an experience that came close. I was in the middle
of a lake in a small sailboat. The wind went altogether calm, and in that
stillness, and still under the influence of my recent reading of Yogananda,
I “heard” what seemed like the voice of an old man. Somehow I knew that
it was my own voice speaking as if to a memory of that very moment, and
in a tone that was both bemused and compassionate: “Didn’t he know that
there would be time.” With a touch of paradox characteristic of such
moments, I was undergoing a quasi-mystical experience that was telling
me to drop my anxiety about not having mystical experiences. There would
be time for all that. Have patience.

For the following decades, despite a move to northern California into a
community where Buddhism ran rampant, I took this counsel to patience
quite literally. I abjured any consistent spiritual practice. I found myself for
the most part critical of those who wore their prayer beads quite literally on
their sleeves. But in recent years, throughout the decade of my sixties, I
couldn’t help noticing that time, future time, was less plentiful than it had
been on that afternoon in the middle of the lake.

Then I stumbled across a book that changed my life: Jorge Ferrer (2002),
*Revisioning Transpersonal Theory*. This is a very bad title for a very good book.
It is the revision of a dissertation written for the California Institute of
Integral Studies where transpersonal theory and the works of Ken Wilber
exercise considerable influence. The first half of the book is a carefully
annotated deconstruction of the universalism to be found not only in
Wilber’s work, but also in Huston Smith’s. To paraphrase this universalism:
There may be many ways up the mountain (comparable to the world’s great
religions), and many elevations on the path (charted not only in the
literatures of various mystical traditions, but also in the several
segmentation systems to be found in the texts of various developmental
psychologists), but there is only one mountain with one peak. This is the kind
of universalism that can prevail uncontested in Stage One where an
innocence of other cultures leaves a dominant religion uncontested. But it is precisely the sort of universalism that makes for so much trouble in Stage Two where competing universalisms meet in mortal combat over whose god will be king of that single mountain.

The last half of Ferrer’s book offers a way out that was new to me to the point of being revelatory. I’ve reduced his argument to a dense bumper sticker whose economy I’ll have to unpack: “According to Jorge Ferrer, the grammar of religion is hortatory, not declarative.” In grammar, the declarative voice is for truth claims, e.g., the cat is on the mat, or the cat is not on the mat. True or false. The hortatory voice, on the other hand, amounts to what Wittgenstein would call a different language game. An exhortation (note the root, “hort”) is not true or false. You obey it or you reject it. An invitation is not true or false. You accept, or you decline. Sounds simple; so simple that I was almost surprised when, over tea one afternoon in Berkeley, Jorge nodded his head in agreement with my harsh compression of his fairly elaborate argument. Its implications are enormous.

I had lived most of my life believing that the great religions of the world consist in a series of truth claims that just happen to be false: “Mary, mother of Jesus, was a virgin.” “God exists.” Blah, blah. If these were truth claims that happened to be false, who needs them?

If, on the other hand, as Ferrer tells it, the great religions of the world are a series of stories so designed that they exhort us away from evil and invite us to be a little less narcissistic, a little kinder, a little more compassionate . . . well then, I’ve got time for that.

Further, if Ferrer is right about the grammar of religion, then the pluralism of Stage Three can be a strong pluralism and not the weak pluralism of a wishy-washy, Californian whatever. Indeed, while Ferrer doesn’t put it quite this way, I take his argument as a splendid rationale for polytheism, an approach to divinity that has always appealed to me as a way of indulging a temptation toward the sacred even in the face of my staunch atheism. During the 1970s, I was much taken with James Hillman’s (1975) “polytheistic psychology” according to which the Greek gods and goddesses stand in for the various drives and complexes of the more mechanistic and monotheistic ego-psychologies of Freud and Adler.
Even Nietzsche could be enlisted as an advocate to this new polytheism. Hadn’t he written in his *Joyful Wisdom* (1971 [1882], p180), “In polytheism the free-spiriting and many-spiriting of man attained its first preliminary form—the strength to create for ourselves our own new eyes—and ever again new eyes that are even more our own: hence man alone among all the animals has no eternal horizons and perspectives”? And somewhere else (from memory): “The Greeks had the only satisfactory theodicy ever invented because their gods justify human life by living it themselves.” Nietzsche was ever suspicious of the Normalgott of “monotono-theism,” but it was more the monotony than the theism that bothered him.

I find in Ferrer’s and Nietzsche’s insights a newer, stronger pluralism that gives to the gods their sacred due, even as it widens the field for possible reverence. I can learn from stories about Shiva and Vishnu, even as I can accept the Christ’s invitation to love my neighbor. I can hear the Buddha’s exhortations against unruly attachments, even as I am humbled by the authority of the God of Abraham who, let us recall, binds Judaism, Islam, and Christianity in what could be an Abrahamic family reunion.

Polytheism is different from a wishy-washy pluralism that trends toward abject relativism. It doesn’t say anything goes. Instead it says, some things excel. Not one, not all, but some. There are some paths to holiness, not just one. There are some forms of enlightenment or salvation, not just one.

There are some spiritual practices that pry us loose from the precious self, not just one. Polytheism, especially with Ferrer’s grammatical twist, is at once aspirational and generous with respect to the possibilities for excellence.

Despite spending most of my life as an atheist, my reading of “the new atheists”—as they were officially dubbed by *WIRED* magazine after that flurry of publications 2005–2007: Richard Dawkins (2006), Dan Dennett (2006), Sam Harris (2005, 2006), and Christopher Hitchens (2007)—convinced me that I was not much of an atheist after all. Reading the new atheists, I found myself uncomfortable with their reductionism and their materialism. The world we live in contains more than matter in motion in space and time; more than mere physics. Aspiration, meaning, value, beauty, goodness—these are not just the fictions of folk psychology to be
eliminated under the withering rhetoric of an all-knowing and cynical nothing-but-ism. These new atheists don’t get it. They, like too many theologians of old, are making a series of truth claims: most emphatically, that God does not exist. But if Ferrer is right, truth claims, whether for or against god’s existence, miss the point. Wrong language game. Declarative rather than hortatory.

In place of a new atheism, aren’t we instead witnessing a new polytheism? Not one of the several polytheisms of old, Greek or Hindu. They tended to be culture bound on the one hand, and every bit as declarative in their voices as the old monotheisms. Many Greeks, not all, really did believe in the existence of Zeus, Athena, Ares, and the rest, gamoling away on Mt. Olympus. Many Hindus, though probably not all, really did believe in the existence of Shiva and Vishnu and Kali and any number of Hindu gods and goddesses. Like children who believe that there really is a Santa Claus with a workshop somewhere near the North Pole, many people take the stories about the gods and goddesses quite literally. So has it always been, and so will it probably always be.

The religious impulse is not about to wither away. Despite a marked decline in church attendance in Europe, and the expectations of some that modernity would witness a maturation of the species beyond child-like religious beliefs, such limited pockets of secularism should not give comfort to the new atheists. Religiosity worldwide is alive and all too well. All too often we still see the clash of competing monotheisms: the legacies of economic and cultural imperialism that are then met with the terror of jihad. Samuel Huntington (1996) was not altogether wrong to warn us of the danger.

But I would rather suggest that Huntington’s fears stem from a perception of today’s world very much in keeping with what I described as Stage Two competing monotheisms, and that a new polytheism could find room for many gods and goddesses. The real clash we see today is not so much among competing monotheisms from different cultures. The more important clash is the one taking place within each of the world’s great cultures: The clash between those who have in some sense made it, and those who have been left behind. It is a clash between the new polytheists who get around and experience much of what the globe has to offer, and
those who remain trapped in pockets of poverty and then turn to very simple, fundamentalist answers to the complex questions posed by globalization. The former are more sophisticated, more cosmopolitan, more global; the latter are often victims of the legacies of imperialism, and they have little reason to listen to the blandishments of alien faiths.

So what is one to do? In the space of this essay I can hardly begin to describe the choreography of engagement and practice that we postmodern polytheists can bring to a distinctly multi-cultural spirituality. How hesitantly we approach rituals that are unfamiliar! Whether to pray? How to meditate? The postures. The asanas. I cannot begin to claim any expertise in these matters.

But I am gaining increasing confidence in the following five propositions, with which I conclude:

1. The new atheists are mistaken; they are confused about religion's voice.
2. Fundamentalists of all faiths are equally mistaken; they, too, mistake their respective religions' stories for literal truth claims.
3. The Tao that can be spoken is not the Tao.
4. The religious impulse will not go away; the arrival of secular modernity is a myth. See the work of Bruno Latour (2010).
5. If we are to embrace some form of spirituality that does justice to the multi-cultural condition of a globalized world, a new polytheism is the way to go.

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Three Futures for Arab Spring

Long-term developments in the Middle East are best understood from the perspective of macrohistories of Ibn Khaldun, Pitirim Sorokin, and P.R. Sarkar

Sohail Inayatullah

The overthrow of President Muhammad Morsi in Egypt has apparently thrown the democratic project in the Middle East into chaos. It was a military coup that was not actually seen as a military coup. There was another contradiction: the armed forces’ part in bringing down the Egyptian president was initiated by a popular demand. Just as 2011 demonstrations in Tahrir Square brought down the autocratic regime of Hosni Mubarak, so the 2013 Tahrir demonstrations ended with the downfall of a democratically elected, but autocratic by nature, government of the Muslim Brotherhood. Fears have been raised that the new development could lead to “military fascism” (Kingsley, 2013). However, we should not jump to any definite conclusions. Contradictions are the norm in these postnormal times; and they do not permit easy predictions or complacent analysis.

While Egypt may have stalled, the revolutions in Tunisia, where the trigger events for the Arab Spring were first sparked, appear to be headed in the right direction. And despite initial problems, Libya too is coping with democratic change. However, the success or failure of revolutions can only be judged in the long term. We need to take a longer view of the Arab Spring, and macrohistory provides us with one possible way of exploring
long-term futures of the Middle East.

Citizens have commented that the nature of the new leadership is not crucial as long as the government is democratically elected and the governance is inclusive. As Egyptian student, Khaled Kamel, says “I don't care who ends up running the country, as long as I have the ability to change them if I don’t like them” (Ghosh, 2011). The issue is not just electoral reform but the desire to influence the future, to recover personal agency. This is pivotal, as agency is often the first to go when the circulation of the elites slows down or, as in the Arab world, is totally arrested (Pareto, 1968). Fatalism increases, often leading to a discourse of “Allah's will” or a narrowing of the zone of control. Agency with a positive image of the future, however, can lead to organizational and indeed civilizational progress. It is this issue that Fred Polak emphasized in his broad sweep of history, arguing that the worse possibility was a lack of agency (there is nothing I can do to influence the future) and a negative image of the future (the future is bleak) (Polak, 1973). The Arab Spring has been about the opposite: I can influence the future, and the future can be bright. If nothing else, the future has opened up and is now entering a second phase of decolonization: temporal and economic liberation.

In response to the Arab Spring, many leaders raised the banner of traditional narratives. However, this time the narratives of imperialism, recolonization, and westernization did not stick. While these were important to the post World War II generation, they are now considered tired excuses being used by aging tyrants to stay in power. Conspiracy theories—the ever powerful distant “foreign hand,” in the land that created them—suddenly have no traction even though some leaders continue to spout them. They are part of the discourse of why the future cannot change, and thus citizens should not challenge current leaders, as they have freed them from the yoke of Western colonialism.

More swaying have been the demands for liberty, freedom, and autonomy—the American ideals linked to individual agency. A few decades ago, it was a replica of the Statue of Liberty that stood tall in Tiananmen Square. The sacrifice of young people for an alternative future has been made possible by the new social media, which, as Ziauddin Sardar has argued, provide the Arab Spring with one of its main postnormal characteristics (Sardar, 2012).
Facebook, for instance, assert many young people in the Arab world, has made peaceful protest possible. Yemeni activist Atiaf Alwazir writes that social media certainly accelerated the Arab Spring, allowing the quick spread of news, as an easy and safe way to organize activists. It also served as a way to counter threats. After receiving an online threat from someone on YouTube after she uploaded video footage of a protest, says Alwazir, “I snapped a screenshot of the threat and put it on Twitter and two hours later on YouTube, people I didn’t know had messaged this person telling him or her you can’t threaten people and eventually the person’s account was so full they deleted it” (Parnell, 2011). YouTube functioned as a way to keep protests going, sending a message that protestors were not alone.

Al-Jazeera, the Global Arab cable station, has been instrumental in making daily Arab politics more transparent, and rightfully considers itself a champion of the Arab Spring. Governments are far less able to control not just the litany of news events, but the meanings people give to them. As with the overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic by, among others, the youth group Otpur, by having no clear leadership, no particular person could be targeted. (By the way, Otpur had a direct influence on the Arab Spring, providing consultancy and advice on non-violent politics). Social media have made what took years of careful planning occur in weekends, accelerating the rate of change. Having a peer-to-peer organizational structure ensured that the arrest of one did not lead to a closure of agency. The Arab Spring is not a movement led by heroes but has and is functioning as a network.

These have also been moral revolutions—fights against corruption and cronyism that have become entangled in Arab economies. Individuals have sought a better life. Globalization via the internet exposed young people in the Arab world to a world that is near but far. This is the classic “revolution of rising expectations.” And while Syria has launched a military offensive against the protestors and Bahrain and Iran engage in the torture of protesters, they are unable to hide their actions. The world’s eyes are on them. While we do not yet have an “Arab-leaks” phenomena, in the near future mobile phone “apps” focused on keeping governance transparent and open are likely to emerge, including applications that rate public officials.

Along with a new vision of the future, supportive technologies, dramatic individual sacrifice, there are the demographic shifts. The populations of
Middle Eastern countries are overwhelmingly young. An estimated 60% of the region’s population is under 30. And it is this young generation, with its own hopes and aspirations, needs, and requirements, that will shape the coming decades. Indeed, the “youth dam,” as the Arab Spring demonstrates so well, is already bust and nothing can stop the flow of water. With young people jobless, climate change impacting food prices (Johnson and Mazo, 2011), the continuing global financial crisis hurting the possibility of jobs overseas (and remittances sent home), and crony capitalism ensuring wealth is not spread except through State handouts, something had to give. The democratic impulse was not the only possibility. More cynical anticipations expected the young to migrate to Bin Ladenism, but the Arab Spring was his worst nightmare. Instead of an attack on the West and western technologies, the West is admired for its transparency. Hidden politics has receded for the time being in the Arab world, there has been a pause, however temporary. Islamic extremism has not eventuated. As the anti-Morsi demonstrations show, Arab youth want what everyone wants: health, education, housing, clean air and water, and the possibility for meaningful employment or income generation—a better life for their children. And traditionally closeted Arab governments have not been able to provide this future. Even when Islamist parties win elections, as we saw in Egypt, they find it difficult to restore the economy and their efforts to dismantle democracy are met with fierce resistance.

The Futures Triangle
As a framework to map the directions that the Arab Spring may take we can utilize the Futures triangle methodology (Inayatullah, 2007). The Futures triangle has three components: the pull of the future, the push of the present, and the weight of the past. The pull of the future is enhanced agency as expressed via participatory and even peer to peer democracy—the right to have a political say in their future. The push of the future include the youth quake, increased mobile phone subscriptions, the rise of social media, access to global media, and globalization itself. The weight of history includes corrupt and weak institutional structures as well as leaders who reject the democratic impulse and believe they have the right to govern as long as they wish. They use the discourse of the “foreign hand” and the possibility of national disintegration as a way to stay in power.

However, while the Futures triangle maps the current and emerging
situation, to understand alternative futures, the trajectories, we have to rely on macrohistory. Here, the ideas of Ibn Khaldun, Pitirim Sorokin, and P.R. Sarkar are pertinent.

THE FUTURES TRIANGLE

The Khaldunian Decline
While Ibn Khaldun wrote during the fourteenth century when Islamic power was in decline, the categories he gives have great use in understanding the future (Ibn Khaldun, 1967). For him, decline was natural, and it was generational. A great leader could create a new dynasty, however, over time. Because of overspending, a focus on luxury, and a loss of the original intent, unity or asabiya—the sinews that bind—would decline. The children or followers of the dynastic leader, generally, would lose legitimacy, until those outside of political power would challenge the system. They would be successful because they were “Bedouins” (for us, metaphorically) as they were outside the system, and thus saw the future with a different framework. They had suffered being outside of the
patronage system and were united in seeing it end. They did not have personal or institutional interests for it to continue. Those in power expand their family, and thus there were fewer spoils available for all. They became non-productive elites. Finances could be increased if they extended their territories but this leads to the problem of imperial overreach. In Egypt, the decline would be from Nasser to Sadat to Mubarak. The youth represent the “Bedouins” challenging official vertical power. In Libya, the generational decline from ascetic Muammar Gaddafi to far more extravagant children has been rapid, quicker than the four generations described by Khaldun. Charisma, as Weber borrowing from Khaldun would write, had become routinized (Scharmer, 1997). Remaining in power by creating a politics of fear became a less viable strategy in an era of globalization. Saudi Arabia is now ripe for a Khaldunian decline. The royal family, now reaching 22,000 members, is aging and riven with internal factions. The House of Saud may hold on as long the oil wealth lasts, but unless it accommodates to change it will follow the pattern predicted by Ibn Khaldun.

**Pitirim Sorokin and the Pendulum**

While Khaldun’s approach is cyclical and focused on the decline of asabiya, the legitimacy of group-feeling, Pitirim Sorokin sees historic changes in terms of the swing of the pendulum (Sorokin, 1957). Sorokin has three stages: the sensate, or secular-modernist; the ideational, or religious system; and the integrated, or “both/and” system. Sorokin devises his stages from empirical data, from asking the question: What is considered to be real? The possible answers which may emerge are as follows: (1) matter is real, (2) mind is real, (3) both are real, (4) nothing is real, (5) one cannot know. Responses four and five, even if true, cannot lead to a meaningful society. The other three can leading to the creation of the sensate, ideational, and integrated society. Change occurs since human beings have a richer spectrum of needs than any particular social formation can satisfy. Once society reaches the sensate extreme then the desire for the fulfilment of other needs pulls it upward again, until the next swing.

The crucial point here about alternative futures is that when one is in a particular phase of the pendulum other futures appear impossible. More sensate will be followed by more sensate, since there are mutually reinforcing patterns of carrots and sticks that keep society focused in that particular direction. The future thus imagined becomes inevitable, and
other possibilities are marginalized. However, once the pendulum goes too far in a particular direction then there is rapid swing back. The inevitable future rapidly loses its legitimacy; the alternate becomes the dominant. In Pakistan, for example, the pendulum has swung regularly between military (providing discipline and structure) and civilian (providing individual freedom). As each stays too long, the Khaldunian decline occurs; what begins as innovation eventually leads to mistake after mistake. Errors accumulate until the pendulum swings again. The Iran example is perhaps the best: from the extreme modernist regime of the Shah to the rule of the ayatollahs. Given the youth bulge and new peer-to-peer technologies, Iran’s leaders can either prepare for a swing to a secular-modernist state or slowly reform toward a more open and accountable model of state, where religion and science are equally important, as in the USA.

**Sarkar and the Social Cycle**

In Sarkar’s work, social reality consists of four classes and states in history. The worker/shudra (present oriented, dominated by the environment), the warrior/ksattriya (honour and past focused, seeks to dominate the environment through physical force), the intellectual/vipra (idea oriented, seeks to understand the world through religion, philosophy, and science, the study of space and time), and the accumulator of capital/vaeshyan (future focused, uses the other classes to create economic value). Each era organically leads to the next, until the capitalist era dominates and all classes find the heightening inequity unbearable. Since the needs of the other social classes are not met, a chaotic worker revolution or evolution results, which is then followed by the discipline of the warrior-based state. However, the cycle can be changed, and the exploitation phases of the cycle can be shortened and the innovation phases enhanced through wise leadership that integrates all aspects of the social cycle: the service dimension of labour and the protective dimension of the warrior; the truth seeking dimensions of the intellectual and the economic value creating dimension of the trader/investor. The Khaldunian decline occurs within each phase of history. From the perspective of Sarkar’s theory of the social cycle (Inayatullah, 2002), the Arab Spring is a vipran—an intellectual idea-based—revolution. Instead of the vipran religious revolution, this has been the vipran “Magna Carta” revolution with a focus on more rights for more people. The state exists for the people instead of for the Great leader. Youth are inspired by the European enlightenment that dramatically reduced the power of the
monarch, to begin with. Warrior power has become ossified; instead of protecting the weak it has become carnivorous, eating its own children. Elites are not circulating, inequity continues to increase. While it was important in the initial decolonization process, it is now decrepit. The honour-clan warrior based culture in the Middle East is nearing its end.

Over time, using Sarkar’s theory, the *vipran* will give way to the *vaeshyan*, to an economic revolution. At present, the Arab Spring remains a *vipran* revolution, focused on more individual rights and the ideals of solidarity, equality, and fraternity. It is a revolution against the “King” and not against the capitalist class. However, given that these *vipran* revolutions are occurring in the global context of a world *vaeshyan* system, a world capitalist system, the social cycle is likely to move rapidly. We can thus anticipate a flourishing of entrepreneurship in the Arab world. In Sarkar’s framework, this will be the *sadvipra* transformation: individuals enhancing their leadership qualities through the ability to serve others, protect others, innovate, and create economic value. Moreover, as the Arab world exists in a global context, it will have a global impact. The best scenario is that all the social classes will transform creating a global, simultaneous revolution of equity and aspiration, a better life for all—prosperity that does not harm others: a world economy where basic needs are met and there are incentives to create innovation. The Occupy Wall Street movement is one indicator of futures to come.

In the meantime though, along with resistance from Arab rulers, “the old men” and vested interests, we can also expect a renaissance of art, culture, and music, particularly hybrid forms of art—East and West. Notice just how art from the Middle East has mushroomed over the last few years—from Egypt’s “In Place of War” project, Tunisia’s “The After Revolution” exhibition, to the eye-opening Iraqi pavilion in the Venice Biennale (Allthorpe-Guyton, 2013). Listen to the rapper El Général, one of the inspiring figures of the Tunisian revolution:

Mr President, your people are dying
People are eating rubbish
Look at what is happening
Miseries everywhere,
Mr. President
I talk with no fear
Although I know I will get only trouble
I see injustice everywhere
(Ghosh, 2011, p20).

It is not just that the old story is being challenged. But a new story is also being fashioned. And now is precisely the time to create the new story, before the system congeals again and change becomes difficult.

**Neohumanism as an Intervention**

But taking a broader macro view, we can see that progressive changes are likely if not inevitable. But a change in worldview is necessary. Along with the social cycle, the natural evolutionary movement from worker (labour, chaotic power) to warrior (disciplined heroic power) to intellectual (ideational power, of religious and scientific types) to economic (innovation and accumulation) eras, Sarkar also offers a theory of neohumanism (Sarkar, 1982).

In this approach, a revolution can have a greater degree of longer lasting success, of meeting deeper and broader needs, if it moves from ego to family to religious to national to humanistic and then to neohumanistic sentiments, which includes the rights of the environment. For the Arab revolutions to endure over the long run, they must not reverse from the nation-state to ethnic (clan based) and religious divisions (Sunni versus Shia, the kind of divisions we see in Egypt and Syria) nor even stay confined at the national level but move to a global and planetary level. The uprising should not just be a revolution *against* tyranny but a revolution *for* the planet. This is a longer term and more subtle enterprise, a revolution of the spirit. Certainly the new social media technologies make it possible by globalizing the self, but more than technology a broadening of the mind is required. Merely adding more information to one’s data base is not enough; metaphorically speaking, the mind as hard drive must be expanded so it can hold more—new categories of reality must be constructed. Old pathways in the brain need to be reconstructed and new paths that “light up” the parts of the brain related to compassion need to be opened up. This involves an understanding of the perspectives of the Other, an inclination towards inclusiveness, and an inner revolution. Neohumanism thus, while
modernist in that it challenges feudal social relations, has a distinct spiritual dimension to it: evolutionary inner expansion goes hand in hand with expansion of social identity. If a neohumanistic approach does not develop, then we anticipate a return to the current Iranian model—freedom dramatically curtailed in the name of religion and a clergy stays in power in the name of God. Spirituality descends to instrumental religion, used as a weapon to stay in political power.

The Neohumanism Framework

![Neohumanism Diagram](image)

**Economic Transformation**
In the context of Sarkar’s social cycle, another reading of the Arab Spring is the Filipino Peoples’ power revolution of 1986. While Ferdinand Marcos is long gone, the crony capitalism he engineered on the foundation of feudalism has not been dismantled. The person was removed, but economic
mismanagement and the deep culture (“bow down to the Great Man”) remained. The next phase of the revolution must therefore move from a desire to end tyranny to an inner and outer renaissance of culture. Moreover, new economic organizations need to be created. These can be agencies that engage in regional infrastructure development, vocational education, and microcredit loans, and that reduce the size of the defence forces and over time move to regional economic cooperation. While external investment is always needed, a strategy based on cooperative structure may be the best. Traditional clan-based societies already excel at emotional intelligence, thus making cooperatives more likely to succeed. Cooperatives would enhance wealth and ensure that wealth is shared, that money keeps on rolling instead of being stuck with the few unable to catalyse wealth innovation.

Cooperatives would also protect against the worst effects of external crisis. Without an economic revolution, political freedom may simply lead to underdevelopment as in some Eastern European countries, who threw off the chokehold of communism only to find themselves unable to survive economically. Prior to the entering the Vaeshyan era, if the Arab world can move to a neohumanistic approach or at least soften the divisions of nations, ethnicities, and religious fundamentalism, then it will have a major competitive advantage as social inclusion leads to higher productivity. In this potential ideational renaissance, the goal must be economic experimentation and institutional innovation, using the new technologies to create alternative models of wealth generation.

But none of this will be possible without gender equity. Women played a pivotal role in the Arab Spring. Unfortunately, as the British Jordanian novelist Fadia Faqir notes, women have been and are being systematically marginalised and told to go home: “The Arab Spring will not endure, the shoots planted will not grow, without liberating the ‘last colony’: Arab women” (Faqir, 2012). For Sarkar, a bird cannot fly without two wings, nor can a revolution. As gender cooperation and equity is enhanced—through culture and political opportunities—productivity will increase: more jobs, more wealth, and more freedom of mobility. The pervasive tyranny that has been central to the Arab world has been patriarchy, while we are far away from ending that deep civilisational code, the next steps will not occur without women and men both playing major roles. Echoing Khaldun, women are the Bedouins, challenging the power of patriarchy. For Sorokin, the pendulum
of patriarchy is likely to swing toward a gender balanced society or even matriarchy though certainly the data does not suggest that today.

In postnormal times, change is rapid; and not infrequently chaotic. Each action does not lead to mere linear consequences but exponential impacts. Bifurcation is possible. History is being made. The Middle East and North Africa are not likely to remain the same. Many of the wealthier Arab nations already guarantee basic minimum necessities, but often only for their clan, their group. Regime change means a loss of income for some and a gain for others. Overnight a minority in power can be relegated to the margins of society or, worse, can be seen as the internal Other. Hence, the fight to the death to keep total control of power as, for example, in the case of Syria. Such struggles, including armed ones, may continue in the near future. But in the long term, three alternative futures for the Arab Spring are possible.

**Linear Progress**
The first is the American Enlightenment model. This is a long-term developmental process where modernization, individualism, and market economy will develop. The first phase was freedom from external powers, now the second phase is freedom for internal dictators. We can anticipate the following in this future: a more civil society, more positive market reforms, and more electoral democracy. Social media have created platforms for protest. The next phase as in the African silicon savannah is to use the web (2.0, peer-to-peer, and 3.0, wherein everything is a hyperlink) to create innovation and wealth. However, equity will likely remain an issue, and backsliding into the forces of totalitarianism is possible. This is certainly Polak’s theoretical framework: strong individual collective agency with a positive image of the future. The most contentious issue will be the following question: What is the vision of the future, particularly what is the role of Islam in this future? Conventionally, both Turkey and Malaysia were seen as the likely best models. But the Taksim Square demonstrations of 2013 have tarnished Turkey’s image and shown that autocracy and crony culture can easily seep in electoral democracies. Corruption is rampant in Malaysia, which essentially functions as a one party democracy! So, new models may have to be invented.

However, taking a macrohistorical approach, in this scenario the intellectuals work with new technologies and are inspired by enlightenment
(the European and within Islamic history) ideals of freedom to create a more viable outcome. Through equitable and transparent political systems and a focus on education, the Youth quake ensures that progress continues. The demographic dividend—a rising share of the working population prior to a silver tsunami of ageing—allows for prosperity. A truly progressive multicultural Islam, still family based and collectivist but far more focused on rational struggle of new ideas—ijtihad—emerges. Just as the American and French revolutions hundreds of years earlier, the Arab Spring becomes a historical watershed moment.

**Plus ça Change**
The second is the business as usual model. In this, the dictator is overthrown, but as there is no change in economy or deep culture, a malaise sets in. Revolution leads to a destabilization of the polity. Crony capitalism continues, and a long slow decline results. After the excitement of change, with peak-oil near, the Middle East slides back to peripheral status—the pendulum swing back. Essentially, this is plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose: the more things change, the more they stay the same. For the idealism of the young, agency over time decreases as protestors lose hope. With inequity increasing, most likely there will be a coup d’etat followed by another and then another, just like Pakistan: a decade of civilian populist rule followed by a mini-revolution leading to a return of the strong man. There would be moments of progress in each interchange—reduced corruption, greater rights for minorities—but politics-as-usual would then return. Economic decline and a sense of wasted possibilities would emerge. The liberators become the oppressors, much like Iran. Attempts to change fail. Surveillance and oppression becomes the norm. Instead of the opening of “the gates of ijtihad,” the clerics and the mullahs use the warriors to stay in power, not giving scope to the other classes. Or, the warriors strike back using the excuse of chaos caused by the revolution.

**Deep Transformation**
The third scenario is more idealistic. This seeks political revolution followed by economic revolution (cooperatives, economic democracy) and then a cultural renaissance. Inner change—the syncretic mystical part of all religions—is as important as external change. Political revolution creates increased participation and legitimacy. Economic democracy increases ownership and productivity. Productivity is also enhanced through gender
participation. Cultural change ensures agency creates more agency leading to innovation. Individuals and communities remain in cycles of enablement. Neohumanism becomes the guiding principle challenging and evoking the softer dimensions of the Abrahamic religions.

But will real-politics (Iran versus Saudi Arabia, the role of Israel, not to mention USA, Russian, and China) intervene making idealism a zero-sum game? Can the negative sides of globalization—corporate irresponsibility and cultural uniformity—be challenged through a quadruple bottom line: prosperity, plus environment, plus social inclusion, plus spirituality? (Inayatullah, 2005). In this future, real politics is ever present exists in the context of other forms of power: the smart and soft power of the intellectuals, the disruptive and innovative power of the youth and social entrepreneurs, and the guiding power of those with a spiritual ethical approach to life. Real politics is bracketed by idealism.

The move to economic democracy, not just political democracy, is likely to lead to dramatic economic productivity in the Arab world. In this future, the youth will unleash energies that will spread neohumanism and lead to the creation of a system where prosperity is not just for the few but for all. In terms of macrohistory, this is the spiral: the Islamic tradition is used critically to engage with other religious traditions as well as the wider world to create a synthesis of tradition and modernity—what Sardar describes as “transmodernity” (Sardar, 2006, 2010).

**Aspirations**

We cannot know which future will be created. We are in a period of flux, of bifurcation, with a number of possibilities. Even as the weight of history holds back transformation, the aspirations for greater freedom and expansion are pushing the boundaries. The pull of the future beckons and the drivers are favourable. As El Général says in his “Ode to Arab Revolution”:

Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Morocco, all must be liberated
Long live Free Tunisia.

How the structures and patterns of history will constrain and unfold these aspirations remains an unanswered question.
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East-West Affairs


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Disposable Labour and Structural Unemployment

Society faces deep transformations as robots steadily displace people at work

Jerome Ravetz

The prospect of long-term, perhaps permanent mass unemployment is becoming real. In the USA, the economic recovery has not produced a satisfactory regrowth in jobs. In Southern Europe, “austerity” takes its toll. The Pope has spoken of the evils of a “disposable culture,” in which the unemployed, along with the young and the old, are discarded (McClure, 2013). But if that is to be our future, what are its consequences, for those affected and for all of us? The problem is at last being recognised, with a spate of articles in both general and specialised media (Arthur, 2011a; Freeland, 2012; Nourbakhsh, 2013) and some reflective books (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2013; Muehlhauser, 2013). Their message is sufficiently clear, but it tends to be focused on immediate trends in replacement of jobs by robots. We need a deeper analysis of its technological roots and its political and cultural significance.

For some time now, permanent unemployment, particularly among the young, has been bad in all the European countries and is, of course, worst in the South. It is totally endemic in the Arab world. This time the unemployed are not being officially blamed for their plight, perhaps because so many of them come from previously secure, educated families. The
devastating consequences are fully appreciated, but aside from palliative “make work” or training schemes that depend on jobs being available, nothing is being done because nothing can be done. For a time, it was hoped that “growth” would solve the crisis, but now that “growth” itself is problematic, that idea too has faded.

What will the social world be like when we have had generations growing up without hope? There have always been some on the fringe of advanced, prosperous countries, recognised as a hard core of the multi-generation unemployed, perhaps unemployable people. Now we will have many of them, educated, articulate, not proposing to blame themselves, and who are well aware of how the social order is ruining their lives. The campaigns of “indignation” will develop a very clear focus. How it will play out politically is at this point impossible to predict; but the presence of a totally alienated large and growing minority, which moreover possesses advanced intellectual and practical skills as well as roots in the elites, is a recipe either for deep instability or for radical growth, or both.

Where there are no matured institutions to cushion the effects—material, social, and spiritual—of permanent unemployment, the reactions of the youth will be even more strident. Some will doubtless adopt simplistic solutions, political or religious. But in their debates, there can develop new understandings of the characteristic contradictions of modern market society, where the “cash nexus” serves to annihilate those without a legitimate claim to the cash, called a “job.” Religion and spirituality might well enter in these debates, as the plausibility of a dehumanised cosmos, interpreted in a dehumanised social vision, becomes challenged. Certainly, the “pie in the sky” solution of established churches will not gain support.

To gain perspective on the present problem, we should first recall that unemployment is not a new thing. It coexists and blends in with underemployment and working poverty. Throughout the history of civilisations, inequality, oppression, and expropriation, even enslavement and annihilation, have been the dominant story. In recent decades it seemed that “full employment” had been achieved, and so it became a right to be guaranteed in any society that thought itself civilised. But even this may have been due, in large part, to the special conditions of the earlier post-war period in the Euro-American Empire. Once the supply of cheap energy had stopped
when the oil suppliers took advantage of America's defeat in Vietnam and OPEC created a real market, the advanced economies went into a stasis that was masked by debt, speculation and eventually swindles on a global scale. Before then, there are memories of Depression, and of the miseries of industrialisation with Marx's "reserve army of the unemployed."

We might therefore see the present spasm of structural unemployment as something "normal" for capitalist economies. It would seem that just as the production of food and fibre on the land has required an ever decreasing proportion of the population, now the production of all commodities is able to dispense, increasingly, with human producers. Putting it crudely, jobs have been rapidly disappearing in most of the advanced economies, thanks to the increasing contribution of robots and coolies, the unskilled manual workers. The former take over ever more of the tasks involving information, and the latter are quite competent to do the more manual jobs, even using high-tech tools. In China now, with its growing shortages of skilled labour, the coolies are using more robots, and will doubtless eventually be swallowed up by them. How long will it be before an automated machine fastens a piece of cloth to a form and then cuts and binds it into a garment, even more cheaply than any human could afford to do? Then what?

Of course this process of displacement has its own history. It is best chronicled in the case of the independent textile workers of the earlier Industrial Revolution. Their skills and independence were progressively destroyed by the progress of mechanisation that moved from one phase to another of the process of turning fibre into clothes. And then those that survived in the mills were eventually made redundant when the machines were sold to the colonies, where cheaper labour was just as effective. Of course, clothes became cheaper everywhere, and so long as a European worker had a job, he could dress quite well. Some, including Karl Marx and Henry Ford, saw that the problem was not overproduction but under-consumption; and Ford had the insight to pay a wage that enabled his employees to buy the cars they were making! But not everyone could get a job for Ford, and the current fate of Detroit, as an icon of the American rustbelt, reminds us that the structural problem is deeper than Ford imagined.

How are we to make sense of it all? Marx had a vision of the structural
problem, when he spoke of the contradiction between social production and private appropriation. This manifested in the difference between the amount produced by the worker, and the amount he could buy with his wages. For (and this is the core of Marx’s theory), his labour-power is a commodity in a market, and it is (in the long run) worth only as much as is needed to reproduce itself. This can be more than brute-level subsistence, especially for work involving any measure of skill. But under modern conditions of production, it will always be less than he produces! So, in aggregate, in this very simple model, there will always be under-consumption, seen as overproduction, and hence periodic crises in “the business cycle.” Only a visionary like Henry Ford could try to correct the imbalance with high wages, and his vision collapsed when his workers wanted to have their union rather than depending on his personal benevolence.

Marx appreciated the significance of capitalist enterprise, not only more productive than ever before but also constantly self-transforming toward greater productivity. And through most of his career (after 1848) the leading European societies seemed to cope with their essential contradictions. In spite of periodic crises, the condition of the masses was improving through later Victorian times, thanks to technology, both in cheaper commodities and in public-health reforms. But the First World War and the Depression showed that something still seriously needed correction. And then came a pace of development that would have astounded even Marx: information technology, described by Moore’s Law, with a doubling of just about everything every year-and-a-half. This is the key to the working out in our postnormal times of Marx’s root contradiction of capitalism, and it is worth considering some responses.

The role of revolutionary technology in eliminating employment has been analysed by George Spencer. According to him, the key difference between the technologies of information and all previous technologies is that this one is independent of any particular material realisation (Spencer, 1996). It is about pure control. No particular properties of matter or energy, as in earlier technologies, set limits to its powers; hence in principle there are no limits. This means that any “job” that involves the routine processing of information can in principle be replaced by the computer-driven machine. Spencer gives no time-lines and made no predictions. Those are to be learned empirically, and that is what we are starting to do now.
A clear statement of the prospect has come from the distinguished philosopher of economics, W. Brian Arthur. In a recent exchange on “structural joblessness,” he gives a vivid image of the effects of the new technology: “Certainly in advanced economies, automation and digitization are like an ever-rising-tide causing whole categories of jobs to disappear under water. What is left are islands of jobs—being a lawyer, or medical diagnostician, or scientist, or musician, or therapist—that require intuition and human judgment. When computers eventually develop these faculties, the waters will rise still higher.” He goes on to say; “I hope jobs will be created, and maybe they will. More likely, the system, as so many times before in history, will have to readjust radically. It needs to find new ways to distribute the wealth” (Arthur, 2011b). It was not part of his remit to discuss how “the system” could accomplish this task.

If we keep Spencer’s explanatory thesis in mind, we are better able to appreciate some earlier visions that provide perspective on the problem. The first is from Norbert Wiener, one of the founders of “cybernetics” and control theory, and himself a visionary and prophet. The title of his popular book tells it all: The Human Use of Human Beings (1950). He was well aware that throughout the history of civilisation, the conditions of productive work made life “nasty, brutish, and short”—although not solitary as in Hobbes’ model. With the new technologies that degradation would no longer be necessary. Hard physical labour, as in digging, loading, and carrying, would be done by machines, and dangerous or polluting factory environments would be sealed off from humans. A similar vision with an explicitly social dimension was expressed by Murray Bookchin in his Post-Scarcity Anarchism (1971). Wiener was not naïve about the prospect; in his God and Golem, Inc. (1964) he warned of the selfish and irresponsible use of the powers of science. Since he claimed descent from the legendary Rabbi Loeb of Prague (the master of the Golem), Wiener was particularly sensitive to the possibility of evil applications of scientific power.

It only takes a small shift in perspective to change from Wiener’s guarded optimism to Orwell’s pessimism in Nineteen Eighty-Four (1948). That scenario can be seen as a sort of social thought-experiment in a particular solution to Spencer’s problem: how does a ruling elite survive when the progress of technology has created the conditions of plenty for all, so that there is no reasonable objection to an egalitarian society? The answer is
simple: create artificial scarcity, through a permanent war society. And the politics of permanent war creates the perfect conditions for a totally repressive society, one where Big Brother always sees you through the ubiquitous TV screen. The masses are kept going at a level rather like Marx’s reproduction standard, and they are manipulated in all dimensions through the Ministries of Truth and of Love. There is a price to be paid for such social stability. Not only are freedom and dignity destroyed, but the system requires historical reality to be denied. The protagonist Winston Smith had the job of retouching photographs and sending the unwelcome earlier versions down the Memory Hole. By the end, it seemed that the Inner Party needed not merely doublethink, but even a denial of reason: if Big Brother needs $2 + 2$ to be equal to 5, then that’s what it has to be. Social stability in the age of structural unemployment can come at a very high price.

Up to now, such extreme measures have not been necessary. The “blacklist” is well known in free-market societies, whereby trade union activists can be kept away from their intended recruits in the workforce. Where the State regulates employment, it is even easier. In the Stalinist countries, dissident intellectuals would be assigned to menial jobs designed to kill their spirit. And in the bureaucratic-market societies where possession of a job is necessary for an adult existence in the systems of social security, denial of a job renders the victim a non-person as much as an unwanted asylum seeker. All such methods of social control are easier to apply under conditions of permanent mass unemployment. For then even the limited possibilities of the informal economy are more difficult to access.

Although such situations would require an imaginative exercise for readers in the rich countries, elsewhere some elements of them are all too realistic. In these, unemployment is just another component of a total syndrome of indignity and oppression in every aspect of life, of ordinary people in the grip of corrupt dictatorship. It was this coherent totality of death in life that led to the protests and revolutions of the Arab Spring. But regardless of how it works out in particular locations, we can be sure that a failure to solve the unemployment problem, regardless of progress on the political front, will eventually produce disillusion and alienation on a mass scale. In today’s world, Zbigniew Brzezinski notes, “the millions of university students are thus the equivalent of Marx’s concept of the ‘proletariat’ the restless, resentful post-peasant workers of the early industrial age, susceptible to
ideological agitation and revolutionary mobilisation” (Brzezinski, 2012). Brzezinski does not dwell on the key political difference. Marx’s proletarians lacked the instruments and skills of sophisticated coercive action, and so could be outmanoeuvred and defeated nearly all the time, except when the State was already collapsing as in Russia. Now the “indignant” computer-savvy graduate “precariat” is defined by just those skills, as we saw in the early stages of the “Arab Spring.”

We have considered the structural aspects of modern capitalism that might then come up for debate among these new proletarians; and there are others to be reviewed. We can ask the question that is certain to be raised in these debates: is there really something so special about being human that to achieve that status a person has to possess a ticket called a “job”? Viewed in its world cultural context, the cash market for labour is really very much a minority scene. Leaving aside the lessons of history and anthropology, even in modern societies there is much essential labour that is performed outside the market sector. Within households the tasks are defined and carried out without cash transfers. Occasionally issues are raised about the exploitation of unrewarded workers, be they mothers of the young, or the “carers” of the elderly whose contribution could simply not be paid for by the State systems. The most fervent advocates of the market do not recommend that such services be monetised; it would simply cost too much.

Contrasting the two sectors, we get some paradoxes. If a man cannot “find work” on the cash market, he is left in demoralising idleness; but a parent who is prevented from taking paid work because of childcare responsibilities is generally recognised as doing an essential job. By contrast, the economists’ estimates of the “value” of the work of a housewife normally put childcare down near the bottom of hypothetical wage rates, since on the market those jobs are normally performed by vulnerable people for a minimum wage or less. Considering society as a whole, the essential contribution of the voluntary and charitable sectors to social welfare is well recognised (and also exploited by the State ever since Margaret Thatcher in England). Their organisations are partly marketised in all sorts of ways (since jobs in the non-profit sector are a recognised step in the upward career progression); but without a governing non-market ethos, they would soon go corrupt and die.
The point of these examples is that even in modern market economies, society depends on a non-market labour sector for its wellbeing, even for its survival. The situation is reminiscent of that in the state-socialist countries, where the essential contribution of women to the planned workforce was enabled by the grandmothers doing child-minding for free. We can approach the conclusion that the necessity of “jobs” is to some extent, perhaps quite considerable, an artefact of a particular social order. And when it works badly, as now, it is a sign of a defect or pathology in that social order. In the case of unemployment, it is where human labour has been commodified as labour-power as Marx put it; and when it cannot be profitably bought it is, as the Pope Francis said, just disposable. In both of these cases, there is an ideology of contempt for the traditional virtues that have made civilisation, with all its defects, bearable and sometimes even creative.

With this civilisational perspective in mind, we can review some critical insights that were developed even before the present set of contradictions emerged. Foremost among these is Lewis Mumford, who started off as a great optimist, contrasting the sophisticated, clean electricity-based “neotechnic” of the twentieth century with its crude, barbarous “paleotechnic” antecedent. But the happy perspective of *Technics and Civilization* (1934) eventually gave way to a gloomy view. The essentially dehumanised bureaucratic society of the “megamachine,” from the pharaohs to Stalin, becomes devoid of ethics and capable, as we have seen, of the worst inhuman behaviour. Mumford’s politics was well expressed in the title of another book, *The Pentagon of Power* (1970). In such societies, the threat of universal plenty has a rational response in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. And structural unemployment would not have surprised Mumford at all.

What to do about these dehumanising, self-destructive tendencies of modern technological civilisation is not so easy to determine. I must tell an anecdote conveyed to me by a Professor in the German Democratic Republic, one of the great “capitalism-socialism” jokes. In this one, capitalism is likened to an express train, going at top speed without a driver, heading through a storm toward a river gorge with a washed-out bridge; “and the mission of Socialism is to catch up!” There can be inspiration from the writings of Jacques Ellul, who saw “la technique,” or really our making of means into ends, as the characteristic sin of our civilisation. And there is Ivan Illich, who didn’t attack unemployment as such, but who, in the
manner of the great prophets of the past, conveyed a vision of a society that could be truly “convivial.”

Such profound visions should not obscure the practical steps that can be taken, which could make a huge difference to individuals and societies. One of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s greatest achievements was the Works Projects Administration, which provided socially useful jobs for millions of Americans during the depression. Such a programme could be combined with a Guaranteed Minimum Income. Of course, there would be inconsistencies and anomalies at the borders with the market wage system, but such problems will always occur when the poor are kept above the semi-starvation level. Practical ideas such as this one are now coming into discussion. But it is unlikely that they will be adopted in practice simply as the result of rational debate. Total systems of value and of privilege will be involved. In the past there have been great movements of moral and political protest against particular cruel and dehumanising institutions. Slavery is the obvious case; but witchcraft is another. In the later twentieth century, moral indignation, allied to a non-violent conception of the good polity, became a great driving force. This was behind the campaigns against nuclear weapons, which, although they failed in the short run, did change the consciousness of generations. The “peace” symbol was everywhere, from civil rights and anti-war protests, to movements for the liberation of all sorts of oppressed beings, including whales and rainforests and now the unemployed.

Let us imagine that structural unemployment comes to be broadly accepted as a moral outrage, a totally unnecessary situation where people, families, and communities of all cultures and classes are deemed disposable by a socio-technical system run by and for the elites. Then, the choice between Nineteen Eighty-Four and a cooperative commonwealth could become clear. What would be done about it is the big question for our century.
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Postnormal Imaginings in Wes Anderson’s *The Darjeeling Limited*

Perpetuating Orientalist and neocolonial representations, biases, and stereotypes as pretentious comedy is the new creed of the American New Wave Movement

**John A. Sweeney**

*The history of the Indian railway system presents a fable some 150 years old—one that helped to define the very topography of the sub-continent and its people.* Emphasizing the lasting impact of trains on India, Srinivasan observes, “Railways made India a working and recognizable structure and political and economic entity, at a time when many other forces militated against unity. Through their own internal logic, their transformation of speed and the new dynamic of the economic changes they made possible, the railways definitively altered the Indian way of life” (Srinivasan, 2006, pxiii). While assisting in the alteration of identities, Indian railways simultaneously united and partitioned the sub-continent on a seemingly unimaginable scale. “If you dug up all the rail track in India and laid it along the equator,” writes Reeves, “you could ride around the world one-and-a-half times.” This enormous enterprise, which occurred when the idea of “India” as an integrated political unit “remained very much an imaginary notion,” originated as the fanciful legacy of British rule, which sought a material means to coalesce its occupation (Reeves, 2006, pxiii). The railway was both the cause and effect of Britain’s colonial sovereignty; the very “idea of establishing and expanding a railway system in India offered the most vibrant excitement in colonial mind” (Iqbal, 2006, p173). The vast colonial
project was “the work of the capitalist interest in Britain” but it “flourished and expanded first on ground which was essentially ‘mental’” (Iqbal, 2006, p183). While Iqbal establishes colonial consciousness as the basis for the materiality of the Indian railway, it is certainly the case that this colonial imagining has yet to cease, if not evolve, as railways remain integral to India.

With this colonial legacy in mind, it is notable, if not fitting, that Wes Anderson located his 2007 dramedy, The Darjeeling Limited (hereafter Darjeeling), primarily upon a fictional train, which traverses the equally imaginary wilds of Indian identity, alterity, and spirituality. Although depictions of otherness and emotive sojourns serve as recurring themes across many of Anderson’s films, Darjeeling highlights his penchant for capturing and exhibiting the spiritual struggles of the contemporary West, specifically a broken American family embroiled within the igneous milieu of Late Capitalism, which Fredric Jameson conceives of as “catastrophe and progress all together” (Jameson, 1992, p55). As his often well-to-do characters suffer from pathological conditions that limit their capacity to cope with the norms of modern life, Anderson “is the quintessential ‘postnormal’ director. Indeed, as one of the pillars of the ‘American New Wave’ movement, Anderson’s infamous use of slow-motion, close up shots, and sweeping doll-house camera pans, which are often set to a sentimentally retro score, buttresses his spry style and playful portrayal of decidedly adult subjects and concerns, which has garnered the director both critical and popular acclaim” (Hill, 2008, p35). In light of his popularity,
Anderson’s postnormal imaginings, especially of India, which has long held a special place in the American imagination, merits examination.

Unfolding amidst the bustling backdrop of contemporary India, Darjeeling follows the bodily, spiritual, and psychological journeying of the three Whitman brothers—all of whom seek to find meaning in their lives following the death of the family patriarch, Jimmy Whitman, whose passing kept the brothers apart from one another, not to mention aspects of their own lives, since his unexpected demise. While idiosyncratically grieving the loss of their beloved father both comedy and tragedy ensues as Francis (Owen Wilson), Peter (Adrian Brody), and Jack (Jason Schwartzman) set out to re-establish somewhat (dis)functional relations with one another as siblings and eventually their estranged mother—now a nun. It is through often humorous and harrowing connections both onboard and off the imaginary train that the brothers begin to weigh the relative gravity of their individual and collective odyssey.

Passing through the southern Himalayas, the train as medium and metaphor encases the (dis)continuous movement of the three brothers upon the terra incognita of what King sardonically entitles the “cultural symbolic of the mystic East” (1999, p1). Deploying the “exotic fantasy of Indian religions as deeply mystical, introspective, and otherworldly in nature,” Anderson’s imagining of India within Darjeeling “demonstrates the ongoing cultural significance of the idea of the ‘Mystic East’” (King, 1999, p142). As King, and Said before him, point out, the establishment of the “Mystic East” or “the Orient” as fixed, and imagined, categories of mastery can and might be used to reveal much about “Western,” or more specifically American, perceptions of Indian identity, spirituality, and alterity. If, as Sardar contends, “the postnormal world is a world of disproportion” (Sardar, 2010, p444), then Anderson’s work certainly captures this dynamic and exploits it as fodder for his protagonists’ development.

Tracking spirituality through Darjeeling, one finds an affirmation of neo-colonialist sensibilities, and the imaginative element of the film’s spiritual sites remain subservient to Anderson’s aggregate aesthetic, which foregrounds a truly othered space. As such, the composition of a “heterotopia,” or an othered place that exists “entirely consecrated” to “activities of purification,” drives the spatial and linguistic ordering of the
film, and the brothers, even when they are intimately intertwined within the subtleties of life in modern India, and maintain a modicum of ideological and material distance to their surroundings (Fautgault, 1986, p26). In an interview with Rosenberg, the director reflects, “Well...we don’t ever say India. (silence...followed by laughter) I don’t know if we do actually, we may. It’s hard to argue that this is a mythical India. I thought during the movie about this issue. I kind of like not specifying the place. I guess it’s just because India is so much the subject matter of the movie to me in the end, I just wouldn’t want to give it a fake name” (Rosenberg, 2007). It is precisely this silent imagining of a “realist” place, however, that makes Darjeeling’s India so “mythical,” and consequently, even if in name only, decidedly “fake.”

Juxtaposing the protagonists’ imagined identity as pilgrims with Anderson’s othered space, the Whitman brothers embody the Andersonian archetype of the well-to-do American whose burdensome being-in-the-world resides in the void of spiritual meaning emanating from the comforts of his material existence, and it is only when faced with the breakdown of their elevated status that the brothers are faced with spiritual angst. Francis, the principal organizer behind their journey, expresses outrage when a local boy steals one of his “$3,000 loafers.” While Anderson uses this scene to advance the rapidly diminishing spiritual core of the three brothers, Francis’s reaction, which includes an impassioned “Get ‘em,” falls on deaf ears within the semiotics of this othered place—thus, reaffirming it as heterotopia. Indeed, after exiting “one of the most spiritual places in the entire world,” as Francis puts it, the brothers enter the merchant-filled streets of Jodhpur where Francis quixotically reflects, “Wow, right?” to which Peter and Jack mutter in return, “great” and “amazing,” respectively. This transcendent moment, however, is fleeting as Francis returns to his archetypal identity in exclaiming, “Let’s get a shoe shine.” It is only after the loss of one of his shoes, which he angrily states could “pay for this whole building,” that Francis declares, “We are in an emergency here,” as a means to express his anxiety over their dire spiritual situation. Using this material tragedy as an opportunity to air the many secrets between them and as an affirmation of the postnormal otherness of the director’s “fake” India, Francis feverishly declares, “Let’s get into it,” and indeed they do.
As the intricacies of the systemic poverty clearly fueling the boy’s theft remain outside of their purview, the Whitman Brother’s encounter with child criminality only deepens their identity within the confines of this “fake” space, which serves as a place for them to heal, in spite of the others who occasionally steal. For the Whitman brothers, Anderson’s “fake” India paradoxically serves as a liminal place both to lose and find themselves, and each brother demonstrates his willingness to use this “life-changing experience” to reawaken dormant facets of his life, albeit in vastly different ways. This othered “spatiality,” which is “never primordially given or permanently fixed” (Soja, 1989, p122), provokes and perhaps necessitates transformation, but Anderson’s protagonists reify their surroundings by willfully enacting the past in the present, which is to say that they are not interested, and perhaps even capable, of meaningful personal change. The foundational and shared significance of their sojourn hinges on achieving some semblance of catharsis with the agents, including one another, and events, primarily their mother’s absence, surrounding their father’s funeral, which their own neurotic hijinks led them to miss. As the film progresses, the Whitman brothers have the opportunity to re-experience symbolically his burial as attendees at the obsequies of a young boy, which is the only formulaic religious ritual in the film and which plays a central role in the sanctification of their pilgrimage, which actually begins when they are forced to leave the train.

**Incipit Trageodia: India as Othered Space**

When linguistic posturing over who exactly was their father’s “favorite” escalates into a physical altercation, the Whitman brothers get booted from
the comforts of their deluxe railway cabin and begin to explore the wilds of India as spiritual heterotopia. Traveling along with their sizable entourage of possessions, the brothers come across three local boys struggling to cross a rushing river—to which Francis trenchantly comments, “Look at these assholes.” The jocular mood of the scene quickly shifts, however, as the young boys’ makeshift vessel capsizes, compelling the now heroic Whitman brothers to brave the dangerous waters. For Anderson, the equations of spiritual journeying have no remainder—three boys for three brothers. Serving as the film’s climactic turn, the Whitman brothers’ apparent sacrifice of their own well-being, perhaps their most selfless act in the entire film, actually grants them the film’s most obvious oblation—one of the boys does not survive the river’s torrent. Emerging out of the water with blood trickling down his head, Peter sobs, “I didn’t save mine.” While Peter is clearly in a state of shock, his words reinforce the abject imagining of otherness necessary to maintain the brother’s spiritual identity, and although it seems obvious to link the dead Indian boy with the loss of their own innocence, one might also decode Peter’s confession as an expression of exclusion.

The value of the three local boys exists in their imagined identity as othered objects from an othered place, and Peter’s initial despair seems to stem, at least in part, from his separation from his brothers, who successfully saved theirs. Deconstructing this necessary martyrdom, Weiner observes, “in a grisly little bit of developing-world outsourcing, the child does the bothersome work of dying so that the American heroes won’t have to die spiritually” (Weiner, 2007). As the bus leading them out of the rural village
arrives, the Whitman brothers pack up their belongings and appear to be headed home in defeat. Quietly sitting in the back of the overcrowded coach, a local man, himself dressed as a pilgrim inquires, “What are you doing in this place?” Taking a moment of pause, Francis responds, “Well, originally, I guess we came here on a spiritual journey...but that didn't really pan out.” With little regard for the deceased boy, Francis’s reply syncs with Peter’s egoism back at the river bank. In asking one of the boy’s friends, who just experienced a great loss and who likely cannot understand a word of English, to “explain that I almost had him” because he “wants them to know that,” Peter effectively reframes the tragedy—the boy’s death becomes secondary to his inability to save him. Again, the protagonists’ narcissism demonstrates that the solemn posture with which the brothers comport themselves has little to do with the people and the place they inhabit; and the brothers are redeemed, both literally and figuratively, when the two surviving boys rush back onto the bus to invite them to the funeral ceremony of their departed friend.

In depicting a traditional Hindu funeral, Anderson relies upon familiar cinematic techniques, primarily slow-motion pans and a familiar American soundtrack, which re-orient the very space in which the ritual occurs. Further substantiating this othered space, specifically ritual space, as mere object of the colonial imagination, Anderson takes this narrative juncture to demonstrate, through a flashback, the embattled events of Jimmy Whitman’s burial, especially the brothers’ comically neurotic efforts to free his red Porsche from Luftwaffe Automotive. Although the spatial and contextual contrasts between New York City and a rural Indian village are substantial, Anderson’s forfeiture of the young boy provides a continuous temporality to re-imagine the three brothers’ own tragedy on the day of the elder Whitman’s passing. “The cultural styles of advanced capitalism,” as Appadurai notes, “have done much to show Americans that the past is usually another country” (Appadurai, 1996, p31). Anderson’s India, consequently, functions as a portal for the brothers to re-live past experiences while imagining, with little or no regard for others, a postnormal place where the cycles of life and death are absurdly and conveniently ever-present.
As a means to delimit \textit{Darjeeling’s} depictions of the “spiritual journey” to the “Mystic East,” the work of Gita Mehta, whose interrogations of “spiritual tourism” in \textit{Karma Cola}, complicate and elucidate Anderson’s imagining of spirituality, identity, and alterity, is very useful. Writing in response to the common sight of foreigners lined up along side the banks of the Ganges, “the place where all devout Hindus hope to be cremated,” Mehta observes, “India is probably the only country in the world that allows the tourist to treat death as a spectator sport, and nowadays tourists increasingly look for the experience” (Mehta, 1981, p142). Encountering disappointed disciples, perhaps similar to the Whitman brothers sitting on the bus before their redemption, Mehta’s pseudo-historical prose relays the inevitable tensions between spiritual tourists and the place of their journeying. Exploring the
breakdown of “illusion.” Mehta reports a dialogue between the guru and the disciples:

“What’s happening?” asks the guru.
“We have this headache,” say the disillusioned disciples. “Maybe it’s the climate or the food or something. We think we’ll go home for a while. How do we leave?”
“That’s an interesting question,” says the guru, with a smile.
“You’re the tourists. You find out.” (Mehta, 1981, p195)

Capturing the “contagions of the American Age” in India, Mehta’s text exposes the lingering results of the Western invasion that occurred during the late 1960s and early 1970s. She ultimately concludes that this mass movement of seekers left an indelible mark upon the faces of India that “all is not well in the lands of plenty” (Mehta, 1981, p71). What was not well in the lands of plenty were the earliest machinations of postnormality—leading many to sojourn elsewhere to find some semblance of meaning, even if imagined. Capturing the telos of this spiritual diaspora, Metha evinces, “the metaphysical tourist wants that smile on the Buddha’s face, the serenity of the cosmic orgasm” (Mehta, 1981, p190). It was, in fact, this impotence of meaning that led generations to (re)imagine the “mystic East” as a site of transcendental contentment—simply picking up where their colonial antecedents left off. As the Whitman brothers’ attendance at the young boy’s funeral suggests, the past may always be found in othered spaces.

**Anderson’s Others: Imaginings of Native Identity**
In support of the film’s primary narrative of self-discovery within India as an othered space, *Darjeeling* offers re-presentations of native identity from an unmistakably altered perspective. Anderson’s representations enact subjects-in-relation-to the narcissistic protagonists, and native characters double as enigmas of spiritual sangfroid and repositories of an invitingly exotic, and yet unnervingly reflective, otherness. In examining the film’s myriad re-presentations, there are three supporting characters that stand out: an absent guru who supplies the brothers with an ornate ritual to be performed at precisely the right moment of their journey; Rita, the female cabin attendant who faithfully “services” the brothers, especially Jack, and earns the moniker “Sweet Lime” for the refreshing libation she amply provides; and Kumar Pallana, an actor who simply plays “Old Man on Train”
and functions as a recurring bit character, or native foible, in Anderson’s work—appearing in four of his seven films. When amalgamated, the above subjects render the sanctimonious trifecta of archetypal imagining: the erudite, yet intractable, sage; the exotic, yet familiar, “Asian girl”; and the silent, yet ubiquitous, other. From this perspective, Darjeeling’s profane trinity imagines that native identity exists solely for the brothers’ journey.

During the Whitman brothers’ first spiritual excursion, Francis confesses to Peter and Jack: “I was going to save this for later in the itinerary, but I think it’s time. There’s a ceremony I want us to do where we each take on of these peacock feathers...we’re going to go off into the wilderness and meditate for...Dammit, I gave them to Brendan. It’s all right, we’ll do it after the next stop.” From the outset, Anderson makes it clear that the brothers’ sense of ritual propriety is severely lacking, if not completely absent, as is the guru himself. In the next scene where the impetus to perform the ceremony arises, the train is not where it should be—clearly a metaphor for the hapless journeying of the Whitman brothers. Remarkong on the numerous problems in pursuing a formulaic spiritual journey, Anderson intimates to Tobias:

Well, I don’t know if it would work anywhere, but India would be the last place in the world it would. India is a place where one of the great pleasures for a foreigner is that you’re constantly surprised. Everywhere you look is something that is either funny, or very moving, but there is always so much that is so unexpected. That’s part of the reason why people who like it tend to love it. (Tobias, 2007)

Confessing his desire to setup the Whitman brothers for failure, Anderson’s sentiments seem to provide some well-needed context for the film’s many (neo)colonial depictions, particularly of the place and the people within it, and although he shows the audience many scenes that are “either funny, or very moving,” it is what Anderson chooses not to show that best speaks to “the reason why people who like it tend to love it,” which might refer as much to his films as to his “fake,” yet decidedly postnormal, India.

In the following scene, the Whitman brothers are surprised to find that the train has made an unexpected stop. Leaving their cabin and approaching Brendan, Francis’s assistant, they inquire:
FRANCIS: Brendan, what’s going on?
BRENDAN: I don’t know. I guess the train is lost.
JACK: What did he say?
PETER: He says the train is lost?
JACK: How can a train be lost? It’s on rails.
BRENDAN: Apparently, we took a wrong turn at some point last night.
FRANCIS: That’s crazy!
JACK: How far off course are we?
BRENDAN: Nobody knows. We haven’t located us yet.
FRANCIS: What did you just say?
BRENDAN: What?
FRANCIS: What you just said? Say it again.
BRENDAN: We haven’t located us yet.
FRANCIS: Ha! Is that symbolic? We. Haven’t. Located. Us. Yet! (speaking to Brendan) Where’s those feathers at?
BRENDAN: In the envelope I gave you this morning?
FRANCIS: (speaking to Peter and Jack) Meet me on top of that thing out there.

As the principal organizer of their sojourn, Francis first sought the counsel of a guru, who never appears on screen and is never named, to ritualize their brotherly reconciliation, but many obstacles, particularly the brothers themselves, stand in the way. While Anderson spends many scenes showing the brothers efforts to enact the ornate ritual proceedings, the film does not depict the meeting between the guru and Francis. Why? What is at stake in showing or not showing this exchange? As Mehta’s writings elucidate, the “spiritual tourist” does not always get what they expect from the guru, but there appears to be something else at work within Anderson’s (non)imagining of the erudite, yet intractable, sage.
“Hinduism” is an amalgamated, highly problematic and contested term. “It is often asserted that no such thing as Hinduism exists but rather a great variety of heterogeneous practices of a devotional and ritual nature as well as metaphysical schools that are only lumped together by the foreign term *Hinduism* in the early nineteenth century” (van der Veer, 2001, p26). As Pennington notes, “in the printed word and in visual image, through the transmission of artifact and anecdote, across the desk of colonial functionaries and across the shrinking oceanic divide, Britain and India came more and more to craft a shared religious world of their own making” (Pennington, 2007, p167). Echoing this contention, Aravamudan orchestrates an analysis of the various colonial-era processes of transliteration that diffused Indian religious traditions, enabling “productivity, agency, and cumulative consequences” through the widespread utilization of the English language (Aravamudan, 2006, p260). Ultimately, Aravamudan argues that the (neo)colonial project of *Guru English* remains lodged between “authenticity and modernity,” which situates it as a “new type of orientalism” (Aravamudan, 2006, p266). In *Darjeeling*, the guru’s absence certainly gestures toward the artificial nature of Hinduism, but, like most of Anderson’s films, it also has much to do with family dynamics.

In confronting their mother, Patricia, within a rural mountain convent about her absence from their father’s funeral, the brothers finally have the chance to give voice to the central crisis driving their sojourn, which also illustrates the guru’s visual absence from the film. They converse:
FRANCIS: What are you doing here?
PATRICIA: I live here. These people need me.
JACK: What about us?
PATRICIA: (turns around to look behind her, then faces forward) You’re talking to her. You’re talking to someone else. You’re not talking to me. I don’t know the answers to these questions. I don’t see myself this way. Listen, I’m sorry we lost your father. We’ll never get over it, but it’s ok. There are greater forces at work. Yes, the past happened, but it’s over. Isn’t it?
FRANCIS: Not for us.
PATRICIA: I told you not to come here.

For Francis, Peter and Jack, the past remains viscerally alive and far from “ok,” and, as previously outlined, Anderson’s postnormal India is merely a site of ritualized abreaction for the lost. As such, Anderson cannot make the guru present within the film—as a spiritual figure, he must remain as spatio-temporal absentee as their estranged mother, since he effectively symbolizes her. The ornate actions required to carry out the guru’s ritual are more than the bumbling brothers can manage, and after a less than satisfying encounter with their mother, who abandons them again in the morning, the Whitman’s take leave of their breakfast with the last remaining peacock feather—since the rest were lost during previous misguided attempts to perform the sacred ritual. As the brothers re-sanctify their own positions in the performance of a ritual—one that is loosely derived from the spiritual abyss of the mother/guru figure—the spiritual becomes mere coping mechanism. Anderson, then, presents his audience with a guru whose very authority is subverted through his own mastery—Francis, Peter, and Jack simply cannot bear the weight of this profound existential understanding nor could they follow the absent guru’s instructions. The brothers’ spiritual ineptitude is doubled in the figure of their guru-like mother, who imparts wisdom upon her sons that they simply do not want to hear—particularly that the past is just that. They have chosen, as Francis’s confession to his mother suggests, to extend their suffering, and in so doing, the brothers necessarily formulate a ceremony that demonstrates and delivers their longing for the “serenity of the cosmic orgasm,” which has an embodied corollary in the figure of the exotic, yet familiar, Asian girl.

When Rita enters the Whitman brothers’ cabin to offer them some “sweet
lime” to drink along with savory snacks, Francis, Peter, and Jack appear frozen by her beauty. Releasing a faint smile as she closes their cabin door, Rita’s entrance onto the screen seems to come without incident, and the brothers are quick to turn to more pressing matters, namely, numbing themselves and hammering out the specifics of their reunion, upon her exit. Hence, Francis exclaims, “Let’s go get a drink and smoke a cigarette.” It is not until the three brothers are awkwardly conversing over dinner that she re-emerges as an object of desire and as an imagined subject of native identity. Feeling dejected at his brothers’ flagrant narcissism and general lack of interest in reading his short story, Jack catches a glimpse of the diligent Rita on the dinner car and longingly remarks, “I want that stewardess.” As his brothers continue to spar over various eccentricities, namely, their deceased father’s car keys, in their cabin, Jack initiates a ploy to ensnare Rita. Struggling with a recent heartache, Jack’s individual sojourn clearly requires both escapism and catharsis at the somatic, and perhaps explicitly erotic, level. However, Rita as subject requires a more probing analysis to envision Anderson’s elaborate, yet decidedly elementary, imagining of her native identity.

In “The Darjeeling Limited: Critiquing Orientalism on the Train to Nowhere,” Bose argues that the film “represents a significant contribution towards de-mystifying the Orient and critiquing Orientalism through farce, self-reflexivity and comic, intertextual resonances” (Bose, 2008, p1). She argues that Darjeeling rather convincingly “shows the innate stupidity and futility of Westerners who are naive enough to embark on a so-called spiritual
journey.” Employing her own subjectivity within the investigation, she intimates, “from a non-Western, Indian perspective, I contend that *The Darjeeling Limited* turns Orientalism and its inherent notions of the exotic East/‘Other’ on its head.” Following a lengthy exegesis of the farcical facets of Anderson’s imagining of India, Bose turns to examine the character of Rita as a means to enshrine her argument concerning the film’s critical, and self-reflexive, “comic irony.” She observes, “Rita, played by the luscious-lipped Amara Khan, undercuts romantic expectations traditionally associated with the Oriental woman by the ordinariness of her sexual encounter. Thus her traditional, “authentic” Indian appearance is incompatible with her brazen, “Western” behavior, and this contrast is yet another source of comic irony” (Bose, 2008, p5). In Bose’s configuration, Rita’s humorous incompatibility must be indicative of her status as “a reformed, recognizable Other: as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha, 266). As the discursive product of Anderson’s own imagining, however, Rita mimics the myriad neuroses of colonial desiring—she is as much empowered as her imagining envisions power over her. As Homi Bhabha argues, “Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation: a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which “appropriates” the Other as it visualizes power” (Bhabha, 266). As such, Anderson’s envisioning empowers the audience to imagine native identity within this relational construct—and it is precisely her “Western behavior” that illuminates that fact that she is almost the same but not white. Bose, nevertheless, argues for the “ordinariness” of Jack’s erotic/exotic imagining of Rita, who casually whispers just before penetration, “Don’t come into me,” which Bose seems to take as an utterance of “comic irony.” Hu, however, argues that such exchanges suspend her liminally as the exotic, yet familiar, “Asian girl” (Hu, 2007). For Jack, she is as much an object, which becomes evident in his immediate return to his ex-girlfriend’s perfume following their passionate encounter, as Said’s “model of the Oriental women” (Said, 1979, p6).
Consequently, the youngest Whitman brother simply moves from one fragrant vessel to the next. Ultimately, Bose’s analysis ignores the subtle, yet tactile, dimensions of this complex imagining that ultimately situates Rita as the quintessential “Third World Woman.” As Spivak observes, “between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the women disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violence shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the “third-world-woman” caught between tradition and modernization” (Spivak, 1988, p306). Rita is indeed caught between two worlds, represented in her unsatisfying relations with her less-than ideal boyfriend and the equally, if not more, unappealing Jack, who she tearfully sends off with a parting gift of opiates when the brothers are dispelled from the train—a sign of her subjectification to his true desire: the cosmic orgasm. Again, Bose observes:

Rita’s overt markers of Indian-ness—her sultry and earthy features and skin tone accentuated by her huge kohl-lined eyes—confound Orientalist depictions of women as she has sex with a stranger (Jack) in a lavatory, smokes, is fluent in English, and has a boyfriend (the unfathomable, snake-catchling, chief steward of the train played by Waris Ahluwalia) who she plans to break up with. She speaks her mind, is impatient when Jack wants to talk to her, and shows more sense than him in covering up their tryst in the toilet. (Bose, 2008, p5)

Overlooking the contention that the “model of the Oriental women” was exactly what the colonizers wanted her to be, Bose fails to recognize that
Rita, who subsists in a neocolonial context, is imagined with the same representational pattern—she is only what her imaginers, including both Jack and Anderson, want her to be and nothing more. Although Bose applauds the way in which the film “explodes the myth of the elusive, seductive yet paradoxically chaste Indian/Oriental woman,” Darjeeling distributes a much more subversive element in the character of Rita, who eventually becomes mere archetype.

The closing scene of the film shows the brothers safely on board another imaginary train, the Bengal Lancer, which employs a strikingly similar jejune chief steward as well as an erotic/exotic female cabin attendant, who also offers the sweet lime drink to the Whitman brothers upon check-in. Both Francis and Peter turn to a smirking Jack, who agrees to the offer with a wily, “Why not?” As she turns to leave the brothers’ cabin, this edition of “Sweet Lime” offers an alluring glance and seductive smile towards Peter, whose facial contortions—mainly his raised eyebrows and inward turning lips—give away his delight at this fleeting exchange. This second encounter, which complicates—if not subverts—Bose’s reading of Rita, establishes an archetype of the Third World Woman that speaks to the combined, and perhaps progressive, work of Said, Bhabha, and Spivak. Within an Orientalist framework, this theoretical continuity illuminates Anderson’s reliance upon an archetypal assemblage for native identity—indeed, any subjectivity Rita garners throughout the film is pillaged in this secondary, and more telling, erotic/exotic spectacle. As such, Rita only has value as a subject-in-relation-to, which positions her subjectivity somewhere between the “Oriental” and “Third World” women—both of which, however, rely upon the representation of alterity inherent to (neo)colonial imagining.
To say that Kumar Pallana is a fixture in the films of Wes Anderson would be a gross understatement, and the director is known for retaining a clique of thespians—Owen Wilson, Bill Murray, and Jason Schwartzman, to name just a few. Horowitz opens an interview with Pallana for The Believer by pointing out that he is best known for his indelible performances in the three Wes Anderson–Owen Wilson movies: as Kumar the faltering safecracker in Bottle Rocket; as the enigmatic, ecstatic Mr. Littlejeans in Rushmore; and as Pagoda, the family butler in The Royal Tenenbaums (Horowitz, 2003). These roles have given the actor the status of cult celebrity in the last decade. What is striking, however, about Pallana’s iconic status is that Anderson only uses him in exceedingly bit parts, certainly in comparison to some of Pallana’s other films—particularly 2004’s The Terminal. Excerpts from the actor’s interview with Horowitz illuminate an ongoing dynamic of representative identity, even if imagined, that comes to fruition within Darjeeling. When asked by Horowitz if he favored any of Anderson’s films, Pallana reflects:

Well, this was a very good, successful movie, The Royal Tenenbaums, and of course I got a good response from that. People ask me, “Oh, you’ve been a good comic?” What’s the comedy? I never did anything, they never gave me a line—what are you talking about? I wish they had given me something so that I could show that I could do the comedy! [Laughs] (2003).

Giving voice to his character’s dispersion as a visible, yet speechless, other,
Pallana’s intimation goes further in showing the performativity inherent to Anderson’s imagining of him as a native foible, or subject-in-relation-to whose sole function is itself a delicate balance of self-reflective imagining mediated through comedic alterity. The actor’s value lies not in what he says or what he does; rather, it is inherent to who he is, which is also to say how he is.

In his usage of Pallana, Anderson relies upon this how, which is also to say the actions that give value to his identity as other. When Horowitz mentions one scene that “features” the actor in another film, Pallana recounts, “it was very nice of Wes Anderson. He knows my work. He said, ‘what do you want to do?’ and I said, ‘whatever you want to do.’ He said, ‘You want to do the headstand?’ and I said, ‘Yes.’ And I did the headstand, and Gene Hackman, he said, ‘Look at this guy! Look at this!’” In light of these statements, it is evident that Pallana, who sincerely calls himself a “really good friend” of Anderson, remains fully supportive of the director’s work, and while one cannot discount his perspective as a subject, these revelations help to locate his role in Darjeeling as “Old Man on Train.”

As the Whitman brothers gather for their first meal together, they are joined by a voiceless, and nearly faceless, Pallana whose sprawling newspaper covers him for a majority of the scene. As a portrayal of native identity, Anderson’s selection of Pallana seems rather curious, but when it is contextualized within the above passages and the overall aesthetic imagining of the film, it becomes clear that Anderson inserts Pallana as
mere backdrop—a way to mediate the “feeling of chaos that you feel when you are in India” for the audience, who is certainly comfortable with his presence from previous films. Thus, for Anderson, Pallana, a U.S. Resident who grew up in British-occupied India, serves as an endearing and commonplace other—one whose value exists in his easily identifiable, yet pleasingly routine, alterity. Commenting on his intended gaze for the film, Anderson reflects, “the movie’s from the point of view of a Western tourist, and that’s what I’ve always felt like there” (Tobias, 2007). While Anderson uses the actor’s “not quite/not white” status to maintain the film’s self-reflective gaze, one might wonder how he manages to maintain the “tourist view” when this otherness, specifically Pallana’s “Old Man on Train,” imagines carefully crafted agents of native identity, rather than the living “characters” that one might find on an actual train traveling in India. This, however, cements the overall point of the film—Anderson’s feeling of being a Western tourist turns India into a playground for postnormal imaginings.

Postnormal Imaginings and the Not-So-New Wave

In an extremely unfavorable review of Darjeeling the appeared on Slate.com, Weiner suggests that “Wes Anderson situates his art squarely in a world of whiteness: privileged, bookish, prudish, woebegone, tennis-playing, Kinks-scored, dusty. He’s wise enough to make fun of it here and there, but in the end, there’s something enamored and uncritical about his attitude toward the gaffes, crises, prejudices, and insularities of those he portrays” (Weiner, 2007). Writing in defense of Anderson, Hill contends:

There is an air of cultural exoticism to the portrayal of minorities that can often come across as patronizing because Anderson consistently simplifies them as inherently good people. However, what makes the accusations hollow is the fact that Anderson views all of his characters through the same elastic, comedic lens, not turning them into caricatures so much as exaggerating the inherent goodness he sees within all of his misfits. (2008, p107)

Clearly, the divergence between the two readings of Anderson’s work has much to do with his style, which, to paraphrase Hill, laughingly gazes at everyone equally thus making such imaginings tolerable, if not laudable, from his perspective. This point is taken up with great tenacity by Bose in her rendering of “Anderson’s quirky universe” (Bose, 2008, p3). She observes, “the film takes
an overtly Orientalist premise of seeking spiritual growth in India as its starting point and then subverts it through the course of the film by ridiculing such an intent through comic characterization and the farcical situations, actions and reactions of its main protagonists—three white men desperately seeking shortcuts to salvation or nirvana” (Bose, 2008, p6). In her assessment of Darjeeling, Bose clearly sides with Hill, finding Anderson’s satirical gaze as evidence of his self-reflexivity and sensitivity to Orientalist configurations.

Whether or not one finds Anderson’s style palatable has much to do with one’s perspective on the past, present, and future, which is to say the degree to which one feels that postnormal times are worth taking seriously. As Sardar observes:

> Ours is a transitional age, a time without the confidence that we can return to any past we have known and with no confidence in any path to a desirable, attainable or sustainable future. It is a time when all choices seem perilous, likely to lead to ruin, if not entirely over the edge of the abyss. In our time it is possible to dream all dreams of visionary futures but almost impossible to believe we have the capability or commitment to make any of them a reality. (Sardar, 2010, p435)

Darjeeling suspends the audience between an imagined world and the real-world misgivings and misfortunes of a family in crisis, and it is only through demystifying the neo-colonialist apparitions besetting Anderson’s imagining of India that one might illuminate the film’s decidedly postnormal imaginings of spirituality, identity, and alterity. For Francis, Peter, and Jack crisis has become normative, but the Whitman brothers have no prospect for spiritual, emotional, and ethical maturation, even, and perhaps especially, in the othered space of India. Indeed, Anderson never intended for them to transcend tragedy as this serves as Darjeeling’s foundation for comedy. Upon entering their mother’s convent, the three brothers find that life, even at its most intense, offers endless moments of frivolity. Warning her sons of the man-eating tiger prowling the village, Patricia solemnly states: “he ate one of the sisters’ brothers.” Upon hearing this, Francis, Peter, and Jack laugh wildly until their conciliatory mother sternly asserts, “I’m not kidding.” In the American New Wave Movement, it is difficult to discern between tragedy and comedy, and Anderson’s protagonists seem incapable of differentiating between the two.
Anderson’s *Darjeeling* epitomizes the American New Wave Movement, which, as Hill notes, “captures the angst of its characters and the times in which we live, but with a wryness, imagination, earnestness, irony, and stylish wit that makes the slide into existential despair a little more amusing than it should be” (Hill, 2008, p35). Given the array of challenges that lie ahead and the colonial legacies that continue to haunt India and elsewhere, it is precisely the comedic antics of the American New Wave Movement’s postnormal imaginings that should be taken seriously, especially as they bear a distinct resemblance to neocolonial imaginaries and, as Hill confesses, are more amusing than they ought to be. Offering a counterpoint to Hill’s defense and a call for what is needed to confront the diffuse challenges of the postnormal, Sardar argues, “we need not only imagination but an ethical imagination that can acknowledge the uncertainty and risks we face and work through complexity and diversity cherishing the virtues we are most in need of: humility, modesty and accountability. It is our best hope of taking responsibility for the choices we will have to make to ensure we can arrive at our imagined futures with our humanity and our planet intact” (Sardar, 2010, p444). As Anderson’s protagonists display a severe paucity of humility, modesty, and accountability, *Darjeeling* takes no responsibility for perpetuating Orientalist and neocolonial representations, biases, and stereotypes, which raises a critical question: What’s so new about the American New Wave Movement?
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Idea-Forces: The Power of Marginal Notions

Ideas that highlight the inherent dangers in prevailing order and transform history often emerge from the least expected areas

Pedro L. Sotolongo

It is my purpose to share with the readers of the EWA some considerations about a process I call “idea forces.” Witnessed throughout history, it emerges from a social movement, often led by a charismatic and visionary person, and proceeds to have a significant, even totally revolutionary impact, on the society and culture. Sometimes idea-forces end up changing radically, that is in a qualitative way, the prevailing social order and worldview. I think it is not possible for us to examine “the relationship between the East and the West” or for that matter between the South and the North “in our rapidly changing world, where power is shifting from the West to the East” and for that matter from the North to the South—where “uncertainty and complexity are the norms—what is generally being described as ‘post-normal times’” as EWA sees its aims, without taking into account some contemporary idea-forces, or at least some ideas with the potential to become idea-forces, that are currently emerging from different areas of our world.

As history demonstrates, these idea-forces are commonly not fostered intentionally by the prevailing social strata of a particular epoch but, on the contrary, emerge due to that epoch’s shortcomings. They are a product of the lack of understanding of social realities, the fact that social problems are either
ignored or not solved, and the inherent contradictions of the prevailing social strata, which more often than not, benefits from the status quo. It is from a fresh understanding of such social realities and from the efforts of solving those social problems that the new idea-forces arise. And for the same reasons, more often than not, these “idea-forces” make their original impact in the least expected territories and/or social strata of the prevailing society.

The emergence of the Christian faith is as good an example: in a faraway corner of the then prevailing Roman Empire, a single man, Jesus of Nazareth, with his deeds and his preaching to a small group of followers, the Apostles, in spite of having been vilified and crucified by his powerful contemporaries, ended up changing the overwhelmingly reigning slave ideology of his time. In fact, his beliefs had to be, mutatis mutandis, “adopted” by the empire that killed him. Such was the impact of the Christian “idea-force”: All human beings are created as equals in the image of God!

Even now, it is not too difficult to appreciate the impact that such an idea-force had, for example, on the one hand, on the enslaved and on the other hand on their enslavers. It was able to show their enslaved contemporaries the unjust social order which enslaved them and made them “different” from their masters, in spite of “all being created as equals.” It fostered their efforts for overcoming the unjust order and achieving “a better world.” Thus, we can understand, although not justify, all the persecutions and deprivations that the first Christians endured from those who saw their dominance threatened by the power of such an “idea-force.”

Sounds familiar? I am sure we can all think, without much difficulty, of other examples of such “idea-forces” stemming from religious or secular movements and their leaders, emerging throughout history from previously underestimated and “forgotten” places and peoples—and not only from the history, but also from contemporary times.

The conclusion is thus obvious: we need to pay more attention to the contemporary potential or actual emergence of current “idea-forces” and their transformative potentials. And we have to look for them in underestimated and often forgotten (even in this globalized contemporary epoch) places, regions, and excluded social strata of our planet. Otherwise, we may end up one day asking ourselves: how could this have happened to us?
Why do idea-forces often come from undervalued regions and peoples? And why do they carry the potential-of-change, and in some case are able to actualize it, even against the strongest resistance of their epoch's dominant social forces?

We need to appreciate that a main feature of idea-forces is their “trans” character: that is, they take us “over and above” the existing norms to a new dimension. But we should not see their trans character purely in chronological terms. This would be to trivialize them, because sooner or later every epoch gives way to the next, new one. The trans character of the idea-force stems precisely from the peripheral situation of a region or from the marginalized situation of a people; from their previous history, often a formally colonized region and its marginalized people and/or an informally subdued or neo-colonized one, with its very specific sociality, culture, and traditions, all of which constitute that region’s or people’s social, cultural, and historical legacy.

The trans character emerges from these circumstances and serves as the driving force of idea-forces. In other words, the “trans” character and the “force” of such “idea-forces” both come from the claim of such regions or peoples to re-insert themselves in history—past, current and future history—with their own cultural and social specificity; from their claim not to be considered as totally “subsumed” or “integrated,” under the impact of the reigning culture and social order.

If we direct our attention to the current epoch and look for such regions and peoples, it is not very hard to identify them: these regions and their people are the ones which formerly belonged to the modern colonial—European—empires, or in more contemporary times, to the neo or post-colonized (by more economically developed ones) countries. Two words immediately come to our minds: the South and the East. More precisely, those regions and peoples in the South and in the East, that are often considered (by the North and the West) to have been completely subsumed, culturally and socially, under the impact of modernity and through the colonialism and/or neo or post-colonialism suffered by them. But still, they have not been subsumed at all.

A good example emerged only a few years ago in the deep Andean South America. Several centuries ago Tupac Katari, an indigenous inhabitant of that
region, led a rebellion against the atrocities committed by his European foes. Just before being executed, he declared: “I will come back....turned into millions.” These words inspired the cultural and social resistance of many indigenous communities in the Andean region (Aymaras, Quechuas, Guaranis, and others), although it was, and still remains, mostly unnoticed by westerners and northerners. But, at the beginning of the 21st century, millions of Bolivians, most of them indigenous people, because they constitute almost two-thirds of the population of that country, elected an indigenous President for the first time in the history of the Americas (and re-elected him after four years, by more votes than on the previous occasion). And that indigenous President was himself inspired by Tupac Katari’s words and in the widespread ancient Andean notion of “Living Well” (“El Vivir Bien,” which is referred to as “Well Living” in other Andean countries like Peru and Ecuador where it is “El Bien Vivir”) that represents a different conception of social communitarian everyday interactions and respect for other human beings and for Mother Nature (the Pacha Mama). Such ancient words and way of thinking have returned to completely change the life of multiethnic and multicultural Bolivia and have also inspired, and continue inspiring, much of the current social change in other Andean countries.

This case of re-birth of an ancient idea-force reveals another characteristic: their latent potential. The southern and eastern idea-forces do not always emerge immediately as a reaction to the circumstances of their actual days, but they might re-emerge after quite a long period of time; and thus, we should always pay attention not only to intermediate periods of time, but even to the forgotten “deep-history,” stemming from past centuries, but still influential through other shorter time-scales, and thus posing relevant issues for the present and the future of the people of these regions. Jointly considered these three scales of time—contemporary, intermediate, and “deep history”—always constitute our legacy.

But idea-forces are not a romantic longing for past realities that never come back, or indeed should not come back. Rather, with renewed way of looking at and acting in the world, and in alliance with advances and developments of emergent knowledge, and other driving forces of social change, they acquire a new dynamic and meaning. In the Andean South American region, the “Well Living” ancient traditions are being merged with one of the most contemporary forms of advanced knowledge: complexity thinking.
The synthesis of the ancient and the new becomes a powerful driver of social change.

Similar synthesis could emerge in other regions of Latin America, in the Muslim World, in Sub-Saharan Africa and in South-East Asia (perhaps even in some of the Eastern-European regions). These are region whose peoples, cultures, and traditions—different from the modern West-European and North American ones—are often assumed as either erased or replaced by modernity or completely integrated into western and northern ways-of-life. But we need to move beyond these false assumptions and reinvigorate these different-from-the-prevailing-modern regions, peoples, cultures, and traditions, because current day’s idea-forces are already emerging, and it is foreseeable that others will emerge, precisely from such regions.

The reason is very simple: although dominated and peripheral, the peoples, cultures, and traditions of these regions have not been “eliminated”; nor have they lost their specific characteristic features, “external,” “foreign,” or “strange” though they may appear to the people of western and northern dominant and “central” regions. Neither have they disappeared or been “modernized.” On the contrary, they are very much alive and fighting to create spaces for their cultures and traditions to remain intact, if not also to flower. And let us not forget that it is precisely in these regions where the majority of humankind still lives.

It is not correct that the path of development that has been established thus far, and the way-of-life of modernity in the more-developed western and northern countries—which at the same time were the colonial powers of those times and/or are the neo-colonial or post-colonial powers of present days—have established themselves as “unavoidable” cultural and social conditions to go through and to which every society ought to be unfavorably compared. And it is also not true that such a cultural and social “standard” can be achieved only in some distorted or subnormal form in these “external” or “foreign” regions because they have not “succeeded” in “modernizing,” or have been modernized only “partially” or “not enough” (due to reasons that are sometimes attributed to their ethnicity, sometimes to their racial characteristics, and even sometimes to an intrinsic cultural flaw or even an inferiority of character). The corollary is, of course, the unacceptable dilemma: either the Southern and Eastern regions, peoples,
cultures, and traditions “westernize” themselves through “modernization,” inserting themselves (or deepening their already begun but “incomplete” insertion) in the current globalization process, guided by neoliberal values, or they are condemned to backwardness or even to disappear irremediably.

But, does any other alternative to this unacceptable dilemma really exist for those undervalued regions, peoples, cultures, and traditions? The answer is a firm yes. And it is indeed centered on the revitalization and validation of those regions, peoples, cultures, and traditions on their own terms; not as superior to others’ traditions, but of course, not inferior to any other either. It is just different simply because it belongs to a particular region and to a particular people, who have the same right to be respected, valued, and to have their sustainable present and their thriving future.

It is through the invigoration and validation (economic, sociological, political, and cultural) stemming from several loci of southern and eastern Latin American, African, and Asian regions, peoples, cultures, and traditions, that we are witnessing the emergence of a diversity of idea-forces of our times, with what we have called their “trans” character or “potential-for-social-change.” As people from those regions begin to take themselves, their cherished cultural and social traditions as their meaning-horizon and the conditions for their sustainable present and viable futures as their reference point, they nurse and nourish ideas with transformative potentials. These cultures and traditions do not drive their meaning from or are centered on technology, competition, efficiency, profitability, political, and military power of one or the other “empire” or country, and on the depredation of the resources of nature. On the contrary, they are centered on solidarity, reciprocity, and cooperative values and the care for nature. They are thus fostering the emergence of idea-forces that, in our judgment, carry with themselves the potential to a true change of epoch.

In the western/northern perspective, we are going through epoch of changes—everything is changing, and changing rapidly, to an extent that change has now become the only constant! But which epoch is without change? By “change of epoch,” I mean change in our times that takes humanity beyond the prevailing neoliberal globalization.

The neoliberal consensus and the consequent globalization have not only
globalized communications, information, financial and commercial transactions, and knowledge systems (while millions still do not know how to read and write mostly in the South and in the East), but have also globalized a whole range of crises:

Climate-change crisis—brought about by the modern and mistaken cultural notion of humans as the “masters of nature”;

Energy crisis—brought about by the depredation in a brief historical period by an insatiable economic system of non-renewable natural resources that took millions of years to take shape;

Financial-economic crisis—brought about by the current implementation, by that same system, of neo-classical economic policies based on the premises of unsustainable growth;

Food crisis—brought about mostly through financial, non-productive-speculation, and not by offer/demand correlations;

Political, ethical, and educational crisis—brought about by the exhaustion and/or deformation of once progressive representative democracy, political parties, humanitarian values, and educational systems;

Humans-living-together crisis—brought about by massive drug consumption and trafficking, organized criminality, people trafficking, money-laundering, massive forced migrations, and structural unemployment.

This range of crises is seen by many as the result of the inherent logic of a transnational “savage or gone-wild capitalism,” to quote Cristina Fernandez, the President of Argentina. The consequences of these social extreme conditions could be dire. And they could go the way of other social experiments (some of which have ceased to exist), with their inaccurate initial models of a hyperbolized social-property-oriented state-socialism, bringing with it a paralyzing bureaucratic centralization and a propensity to totalitarian forms. But these first “social experiments” for a new kind of society have lessons for us and their experiences can be used for better social experiments for creating non-capitalist societies.
With this in mind, another idea-force, albeit one that certain constituencies in the West may find uncomfortable, is emerging from the South as well as the East, from Latin America and from China: “The New Socialism of the 21st Century” (“El Nuevo Socialismo del siglo XXI”) from Latin America (Mackerras et al., 1998) and “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” from China), which emphasize “socially owned” rather than “state owned” means of production. This idea-force is already shaping social change in a number of Latin American countries and is driving the most successful contemporary economy of our time in the Asian giant.

When we consider the serious as well as complex and interconnected nature of global crisis, it is no wonder that more and more communities forge a living beyond any kind of market, even in an epoch such as ours, in which the market is supposedly hegemonic. Those communities, because of their impoverishment and their absence of “solvency,” do not have money, and by not playing the role of “buyers,” they simply “do not exist” for the market. But their people still have to live, and although sometimes some of their members engage in illegal and self-harming activities because of their misery, most gain an awareness of their dignity, of their own value, of their “externality” to other societies centered at all costs on private property and the market, with all their increasing consumption which undermine social, public, and human needs and is thus not oriented towards the “common good.”

Dignity is behind the revival of hitherto neglected ideas. Some of them have their base in historical resistance-traditions (such as in the re-emergence of former great Latin American regions). Some of them show impressive economic advances, (such as China and India). Others with cultural and religious claims (the current “Arab spring,” which is more and more turning itself into an “Islamic autumn”) aim not only at political reforms, but also to critically reconstruct their cultural and social heritage. And still others (as those of the Andean mountain range and plateau) are based on “Well Living” indigenous Andean culture, with strong social movements in several countries that are implementing new—and very different from one another—non-capitalist “social experiments.” All of it in spite of Francis Fukuyama’s call for the “end of history” in his boastful book (Fukuyama, 1992), that proclaimed a future for everybody where a market-centered-economy and a neoliberal-democracy would be “the only games in town.”
And it is not too risky to foresee (which is not the same as to “forecast”) the emergence of strong future idea-forces from more than one sub-Saharan or Caribbean-Creole cultures. One needs only to glance at the social situation in Mali or for that matter in several other sub-Saharan African nations; or to Haiti and its unfortunate post-earthquake nightmare. We ought to remember the saying: “there is no evil that lasts a hundred years and no human body (or people) that could resist it.”

Having said all that, we should also be aware of at least two dangers. One of them comes from unrealistically despising the values and the legitimate influence of western modernity’s dominant culture and social order. The other one comes from a mystical exaltation of non-western culture and traditions, as if they were the only salvation. In other words, we should avoid both, any modern artificial homogenization, and also any new—or renewed—fundamentalism. On the contrary, we should strive for a realistic, historically situated, intelligent, alternatives that could help us transcend the prevailing social, political, economic, and cultural order. We should aim at a balanced diagnosis of our current global, regional and local situation and creatively find the answers and solutions to the imposed unjust historic and present exclusion to which many of our southern and eastern countries have been subjected for centuries.

The “peripheral”—southern and eastern—cultures and social realities have never ceased to evolve and transform themselves, even in the most disadvantageous circumstances. They have not “stood still” but have developed their creative potential. We should take advantage of this fact to steer our course through this “change-of-epoch,” towards a much needed “multi-polar” world—with no hegemonic “pole” (old or new)—but instead with a healthy and mutually sustainable interdependence among all “poles.”

The idea-forces emerging from the South and the East are neither “western” nor “modern.” They are products of different histories, cultures, and traditions. They contribute not just to the diversity of this planet but also to its health. They will enable the creation and maintenance of a multipolar world where the people of the North and the West can be their legitimate selves. It would be a world where no single way-of-life would serve as a universal model. It would be a world of pluralistic outlooks and lifestyles where every culture can be true to itself.
Such a world could even avoid what Edgar Morin, that paradigmatic figure of complexity thinking, characterizes metaphorically as our “Planetary Titanic” (Morin, 2001) crashing into an approaching iceberg. In other words, it could be a world that could create the conditions for our engendered humankind to survive.

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Is there space for Green Politics in South Asia?

Rather than establish political parties, the Green Movement needs to build new alliances with slum dwellers, rural farmers, and female factory workers

Farid Bakht

In November 2007, a devastating cyclone in Bangladesh killed 15,000 people and destroyed the homes and livelihoods of seven million people. Previous cyclones had killed over half a million people in 1970 and 143,000 people in 1991. In May 2013, Tropical Cyclone Mahasen threatened the cost of Bangladesh and Myanmar (Burma) and hundreds of thousands of people were evacuated from the region. Fortunately, the cyclone weakened and was downgraded to a Category 1 storm.

Environmental disasters are a common occurrence in South Asia. The region is beset with conflicts fought over disappearing glaciers, depleting rivers, deforestation, pollution, and soil erosion. It is utterly dependent on the monsoons and projected to be one of the largest casualties of climate changes. Conventionally predictable and well behaved, the monsoons have now gone postnormal: global rising temperatures have made the monsoon erratic and unpredictable, and both its frequency and magnitude have changed drastically. In 2011, sixteen million people were affected by flooding caused by heavy and sustained monsoon rains falling across South Asia. The floods caused massive displacement of populations across Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Nepal and brought widespread destruction to homes,
livelihoods, and agricultural cropland. In Pakistan alone, five million were directly affected by floods which struck areas across most of the country.

Given this background, one would expect environmental issues and Green politics to be high on the agenda of South Asian countries. But Green is one colour that is conspicuously absent in the political discourse of South Asia—unless it refers to a religion, Islam. Elections were recently held in Pakistan on 11 May 2013. Elections are planned for Bangladesh in December 2013 while India goes to the polls in April 2014. Green politics features in none of them. So the most important existential issue facing the region is not even on the political agenda. The language, issues, and deliberations of the international conference halls, grandstanding over the environment and climate change, have no resonance in the cut and thrust of politics on the sub-continent.

Yet the issues do lurk in the background and appear in forms that are recognisable. Take, for example, the war being fought in the heartlands of India. There are over a hundred million indigenous or adivasi people in India, many living in one of the most resource rich areas in Asia. In the so-called Maoist corridor, or as Arundhati Roy puts it, MOUist corridor because “there is an MOU on every mountain, river and forest glade” (Roy, 2011) there are millions of tonnes of high-quality iron ore in the states of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, as well as 28 other precious mineral resources, including uranium, copper, tin, and gold. Bauxite alone in Orissa is worth an estimated $4 trillion. Mining in these areas is having a disastrous effect on the livelihood and traditional lands of indigenous people. Often, the adivasi people are excluded from the decision making processes that will devastate the very land on which they depend for food, water, and their way of life. Not surprisingly, the adivasi are standing up against the mining companies and have launched several court cases.

On 19 April 2013, the Supreme Court of India issued a ruling on the connection between governments, mining corporations, and the rights of adivasi communities. It came after years of legal, administrative, and political tinkering over a mining project in the Indian State of Orissa. The mining corporation argued that there was no human habitation in the mining area. Moreover, it suggested that the indigenous communities had no religious or spiritual rights over the land they have inhabited for thousands of years. The government argued that it had full and absolute
ownership of the mineral deposits beneath the forests. However, the Supreme Court ruled that even though the indigenous community was not directly living on the concerned land, it was an important part of their religion, culture, and tradition; and their right to practice their religion and way of life should be protected before mining could be allowed.

Similar cases and issues abound in the gas fields of Assam, the coal deposits in North Bengal and the hidden treasures deep in the deserts of Baluchistan, where there is a full scale uprising against the Pakistani state. There is a political consensus among all the major parties in South Asia that these resources need to be exploited to propel the sub-continent to its place at the economic top table. We can expect strong resistance, and even armed uprisings, from most indigenous communities. Water conflicts over rivers, criss-crossing borders that separate China, India, and Bangladesh over the Brahmaputra, are also likely to come to the fore. Big Dams and projects to divert rivers always cause controversy: in India, which has more poor people within its borders than in the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa, sixty million people have been displaced by 3300 dams build since independence. And new dams in India or Pakistan could lead to further displacements and associated conflicts.

South Asia thus seems ripe for Green politics. But what is preventing Green politics from taking roots in South Asia? And what is Green politics anyway?

**What is Green Politics?**

Like all political discourses, Green politics is fragmented and contested. However, we can identify four pillars of Green politics that most Greens subscribe to: ecology, social justice, grassroots democracy, and non-violence (Schreurs and Papadakis, 2009). Renewable and clean energy, such as wind and solar, rather than fossil fuels, are seen as capable of powering a modern economy. In the Green perspective, nuclear energy is considered dangerous as the true costs of waste disposal have never been taken into account and is usually discarded as an option due to the enormous subsidies it receives from governments. It is also centralised in contrast to distributed energy systems such as solar and wind power. The Greens also place emphasis on transport, especially publicly owned trains and buses, as well as cycling. Modernisation of cities does not automatically mean mechanisation and certainly does not necessitate the building of infrastructure where private vehicles have primacy.
The high-debt, low-cost economy is also rejected as it is seen to be financially sustainable for Western and other urban consumers, leads to environmental degradation, encourages overuse of fossil fuels, displaces workers in richer countries, and encourages exploitative wages in poor cities in Asia and Africa in atrocious conditions for work and housing. Greens prefer to reduce the distance travelled by resources and products, and thus favour local and regional markets rather than global markets. This emphasis on localism has raised suspicion in certain circles; and is seen as a cover for a new form of protectionism by the North. The wholesale privatisation of utilities, education, housing, and health advocated by the international finance institutions, such as IMF and the World Trade Organisation are also rejected. Small-scale agriculture, preferably ecological, is seen as best for farmers as well as consumers and the environment.

This vision is underpinned by the need to protect ecosystems and to not treat the Earth as merely a quarry whose sole purpose is exploitation. Climate change is seen as the number one threat to humanity and unbridled capitalism is seen as its cause. Understanding that the majority of the world needs to climb out of poverty, Greens do not demand a halt to those countries’ development. Instead, they call for the rich, industrialised countries (who caused the bulk of the rise in carbon emissions) to reduce their carbon footprint and economic growth while the poorer countries expand their use of energy and grow. Naturally, a cleaner road to economic development for the likes of South Asia is preferred, but the costs of this transition and associated transfer of technology is expected to be picked up by the rich countries.

Of course, there is no one uniform type of Green. Even on the issue of non-violence there is disagreement and a difference in emphasis. While the English Greens were opposed to the war in Afghanistan, the German Die Grünen supported it. There are divisions too on where China and India fit since their carbon footprint is larger than most nations. This is controversial because on a per capita basis, the Chinese and Indians are the least polluting in terms of carbon, on top of which one must add historical responsibility of the West. Finally, population control also causes problems. Some Greens, supporters of “Deep Green” philosophy, advocate draconian measures. But most are vehemently against the “Deep Green” ideology, which implies coercion and headline numbers—rarely do these
campaigners seriously suggest population reduction in the West while content to cut growth in the rest of the world.

**Political Variables in South Asia**
There are tiny Green Parties in the sub-continent. The oldest is the Green Party of Pakistan, established in 2002. It campaigns for grassroots democracy, gender equality, and respect for diversity. Both the Green Party of India and the Sri Lankan Green Alliance were established in 2009. The political goal of the Green Party of India is “an India where decisions are made by the people and not by a few super-rich individuals, corrupted politicians, bureaucrats and families associated with them” and “a sustainable world where nature and human society co-exist in harmony.” The Sri Lanka Green Alliance is a network of Green groups and Green activists in the country. But they have no elected representatives, have negligible networks, and are largely ignored.

There are, however, vigorous environmental protest movements such as the Narmado Bachao Andolon, the movement to save the Narvada River against a giant dam, and the Goa Foundation, founded in 1986, one of the most influential Green organisations in India. The Goa Foundation has led many successful campaigns, most notably against mining in Goa, and has earned the respect of judiciary and government as well as the citizens. On the whole, the protest movements have been more successful than the political parties.

In a region with a population three times as large as Europe, there are wide variations in what constitutes politics. In India alone, there are over a billion people, speaking 4,600 languages or dialects spread over 2,800 ethnic communities. India and Pakistan still over spend on their militaries in their decades long face off over Kashmir, two wars over East Pakistan (Bangladesh), and proxy manoeuvres in Afghanistan and Baluchistan. Bangladesh has been convulsed by widespread violence over the issue of war crimes trials committed during the Liberation War of 1971, a by-product of the 1947 Partition. Religion, caste, identity, and language are the preferred arenas for much of the political classes as the elites have bought into the neo-liberal project. Occasionally, class comes into the fore. Separatist groups, both democratic and armed, continue to challenge the Indian as well as the Pakistani state.
The elites across the region are essentially trying to imitate what they see as the western success story and have bought into neo-liberal globalisation and free-market ideologies. India’s so-called “Great Transformation” has seen the market replace the state at the commanding heights of the economy, and its economic success, full of contradictions, has hardly touched the vast majority of its poor population (Sen and Dreze, 2013). There is an unwritten social contract based on the virtues of “trickle down economics.” While China and East Asia are often presented as model state-led economies, the politicians and decision makers have nevertheless followed the advice of IMF and World Bank in avoiding the East Asian model of state-led development. Agriculture has been neglected leading to a long agricultural crisis that has relegated the power and status of land. The poor are forced to depend on off-farm employment in the villages or increasingly in the urban slums. Urban interests are trumping rural needs leading to the ecological footprint of the former expanding to the detriment of the latter. This has manifested itself in water campaigns against privatised utilities. The middle classes, increasingly feeling disenchanted by corrupt party politics, are veering toward right wing nationalist and religious politics. The poor in their slums are shunned and excluded by the middle classes. Hostility toward other classes, neighbourhoods, and nations has become the norm.

All these developments constitute major obstacle to the growth of a Green movement and Green politics. There is also an extra hurdle. Most Green institutions in South Asia function as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which are seen as pro-West and fighting only for the rights of middle classes. It is frequently argued that professional NGOs reinforce capitalism and colonialism rather than challenging it and are part of an imperialist design pitting environmental concerns against the interests of the poor and the marginalised (Choudry and Kappor, 2013).

**Locating Green Politics**

With this background, setting up regional and national Green parties is probably not the most productive way forward. The Greens have no resources to compete in elections and no hope of raising appropriate finances: the Indian election of 2009, for example, cast a whopping Rs. 80 billion in 2009 (approximately $1.5 billion). The constituencies for the parties promoting religion, identity, language, class struggle, independence, and capitalists are very clear. The Greens on the other hand have no such
natural constituency. Garnering agreement on a particular issue or leading a successful campaign has not produced alternative visions or movements to counter the neo-liberal consensus across most of the region either. However, the building blocks of a powerful Green movement are already there—though it includes not just the political parties and Green organisations but also the movements by farmers, women, and slums dwellers, who are peripheral in the imagination of the middle classes and the mainstream media, even social media. The challenge will be to try and connect them together.

The best option is to develop an influence in all the major existing parties rather than create a new Green brand. It is impossible to imagine a Green party being able to successfully challenge the Congress or BJP in India, the Muslim League or the Peoples’ Party in India, or the Awami League–BNP dominance in Bangladesh. The political terrain across the subcontinent could not be more inhospitable. To establish a viable Green political force against long established, entrenched political opposition will take generations. In the second and third most populous countries, namely, Pakistan and Bangladesh, it seems sensible to work out whether there is a way of greening an existing party.

Moreover, the Green movement cannot function all over the regions. It will have traction in certain specific regions. Green politics could find a receptive audience in Nepal and Sri Lanka, as both recover from civil wars. Other examples are north Bengal in Bangladesh and the Seven Sister states of north-eastern India: regions that have been neglected for decades and used by central governments as resource banks to extract and transfer resources elsewhere. Another fertile region is west Bengal, which has been in flux after the land protests in Nandigram, and the collapse of over three decades of communist rule after it tried to “go Chinese.” Green thinking can revitalise the Left leaning parties as well as the grassroots All India Trinamul Congress, which has so far ignored environmental issues.

But any involvement in the political discourse of the region requires the Green movement to offer clear and viable alternatives. If it wishes to whole-heartedly stand up for the indigenous people in India, then it has to offer a peaceful alternative to the Maoist violence and convince the urban populations of Eastern India that they would benefit from a different set of parameters to
the current devastation wrought by giant corporations and low-intensity warfare. The Green movement has also to decide where it positions itself on the burning questions of independence, separation, and autonomy.

It must find a way of promoting industrialisation, the creation of jobs, and the spread of prosperity, without falling into the trap of Chinese style mega-pollution. Given that neo-liberal, free-market capitalism is not going to bring about change according to Green principles, the Greens have to offer convincing arguments for state-led development rather than the current move toward a retreat of the state. This will be very hard to sell in the region given the woeful history of bureaucratic governments across Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh since independence. The obvious models are the governments of East Asia ranging from Japan to Malaysia, Thailand, and China. But there are problems with these models too, not least their appalling record on the environment.

This then leads the Greens to a conundrum. How can one have growth and still be Green? Moreover, if the Schumacher style of small-scale industries are promoted (Schumacher, 1993) how can they compete on the world stage with the might of the multinationals? An often ignored side of global Green politics is the concept of “contraction and convergence.” What it means is that Europe and North America must reduce carbon emissions, contracting their ecological footprints on the planet while South Asia has to converge toward the prosperity of Europe. The concept is not highlighted as much as it needs to be partly because many European Greens are moving away from this idea and insisting that countries such as India and China must cut back their carbon emissions. But a convincing case can be built for the notion that cutting global carbon emissions has to start with the rich countries of the North while the South builds economies which can offer a modicum of prosperity, progress, and the fruits of development to its citizens. A Green South Asia would benefit all—not just the urban and rural poor of the region.

Technology presents a similar challenge to the Greens. While the Greens are associated with renewable technologies, the likely constituencies would prefer to hear a message about high and modern technology. Renewable energy technologies, such as solar and wind, have been viewed as amusing, second-rate technologies for off-grid areas. To counter this, the example of Germany and its choice of energy resources is pertinent. Germany has been
able to create one of the most highly industrialised and high-technology economies in the world with widespread use of renewable technologies, especially solar, while reducing its reliance on nuclear power. The German example shows that renewable technologies can be as sophisticated and “modern,” which should make it more attractive to aspiring populations, especially to a sceptical white-collar class. In some Green circles this is referred to as the “Bright Green” brand.

Perception also plays a part in thwarting the spread of modern light industrial structures, offering mass employment, permaculture, and organic and ecological agriculture. These are viewed as anathema by the urban business classes. However, the prejudices of the urban classes does not mean wholesale import of high-octane chemicals and genetically modified organisms (GMO) into agriculture and the rural hinterland, as promoted by such corporations as Monsanto and Cargill. “Bright Green” solutions resonate with hundreds of millions of peasants as they remove the burden of debt (which sometimes ends in suicides), return control to farmers, and offer much needed employment.

One of the major challenges for the Greens is to stand up to the ravages of globalisation.

Green philosophy rejects the urban-biased policy of removing “surplus” from the countryside and rural areas to fund urban development. This flies in the face of current trends in globalisation where unemployed and underemployed labourers are forced to migrate to cities and fill the bursting shanties and slums, serving as a reserve army of cheap labour waiting to be exploited, drive down wages, and produce goods for western consumption at absurdly cheap prices. The dangers inherent in such policies are well illustrated in the collapse of the Rana Plaza in Bangladesh in April 2013. The eight-story building housed five clothing factories where fashion garments were being made for retail groups like Primark. It was a sweat shop dedicated to the altar of globalisation. Health and safety of the mostly female workers was not on the agenda. It collapsed killing 1,127 workers; and is regarded as one of the deadliest garment-factory accidents in history. Sweat-shop industries, such as ready-made garments, primarily employ women. There are more than ten million in this rapidly growing sector. Bangladesh, with three million, depends on these workers to finance the
bulk of its imports. Yet, the trade unions of these workers have been deliberately weakened by the state and have no significant movements backing them. This dovetails with the slums dotting all the great urban conurbations. The challenge for the Greens is to demonstrate the limits of export-led industrialisation and articulate a policy to rebalance regional economies toward the domestic sector.

Crossing the huge divide between the rising urban professional middle classes and the slums would require something quite extraordinary. Cultural, class, and social reasons suggest that a Green movement would need to make a choice between the two: perhaps opts to work for social justice, equality, and distribution for slums and rural areas, while holding an olive branch to white collar office workers by outlining the possibilities of prosperous cohabitation.

If this strategy is followed, the Greens need to create a coalition of interest from rural, small-scale farmers to slum dwellers, female factory workers to indigenous people—what we may call the “precariat.”

While it may not have a specific constituency, Green politics, if it veers to the “Bright Green, social justice” end of the Green spectrum, may yet create a vast, open space for itself.

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REVI EWS

Multiculturalism: Abort, retry, or upgrade?

People’s lives are enriched when they engage meaningfully with others of different backgrounds

SH ANON SHAH

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British athlete Mo Farah created history at the 2012 London Olympics—he was the first British man since Albert Hill in 1924 to win two Olympic track and field titles at the same Games. Yet, how many of those cheering Farah on to his first gold knew that “Mo” is short for “Mohamed”? That Farah identifies as a believing, practising Muslim and says he tries to pray five times a day? That the 10,000 metres final was held smack in the middle of Ramadan on 4 August – which during summer in Britain can be gruelling for Muslims who choose to observe their fast? Did they even care? Did it even matter?
The Telegraph beamed: “Mo Farah completed a glorious day for British athletes by becoming the first Briton to win an Olympic 10,000 metres final.” No reference to “Mo” standing for “Mohamed” in the article. Lots, however, was made of how Mo came to Britain as an eight year-old refugee who could hardly speak any English. About a week later, Mo was doing his signature Mobot dance for reporters and photographers outside Downing Street. He was flanked by Prime Minister David Cameron who, according to the Daily Mail, “responded with a rather less inspiring thumbs up.”

Did the London Olympics single-handedly resurrect British multiculturalism? After all, besides Farah’s stunning performance, Oscar-winning filmmaker Danny Boyle got British Bengali dancer Akram Khan to choreograph a piece midway during the opening ceremony in memory of the London 7/7 bombing victims. The ensemble performance was accompanied by the hymn Abide with Me, sung by Emeli Sande who is of Zambian and English parentage. Boyle also dared to invite civil liberties advocate Shami Chakrabarti, another Bengali Brit, to be one of the eight Olympic flag bearers later that night. Boyle’s team did all this while keeping the pace up with spectacular music and pyrotechnics. The audience went wild.

Kudos for the opening ceremony aside, it might be more revealing to look at the criticisms that it unleashed, for example, on Twitter. According to left-wing politics blog Liberal Conspiracy, Tory MP Aidan Burley tweeted on the night: “The most leftie opening ceremony I have ever seen - more than Beijing, the capital of a communist state! Welfare tribute next?” He followed this swiftly with: “Thank God the athletes have arrived! Now we can move on from leftie multi-cultural crap. Bring back red arrows, Shakespeare and the Stones!” After others in the Twitterverse objected, Burnley tweeted a follow-up: “Seems my tweet has been misunderstood. I was talking about the way it was handled in the show, not multiculturalism itself.”

Was Burnley’s response an isolated phenomenon? Liberal Conspiracy’s monitoring of other tweets suggests not. The Sun columnist Toby Young said: “I feel like I’ve just watched a £27 million Party Political Broadcast for the Labour Party.” Documentary filmmaker and TV producer Martin Durkin said: “Oh Danny Boyle! Miserable leftist version of British history is wholly in tune with the Olympic vision.” Speaking of media personalities, even in the midst of the phone-hacking scandal, Rupert Murdoch deigned to
describe the ceremony as “a little too politically correct,” but went on to call Danny Boyle a “creative genius.” And speaking of people tainted by the phone-hacking scandal, Murdoch-appointed former *News of the World* editor Piers Morgan said: “We need to be an Empire again – seriously.”

These responses offer a tiny peek into how the 2012 London Olympics has surprisingly redirected public discourse and public feeling about what it means to be British. It is telling that Boyle’s vision of British multiculturalism and the welfare state came under attack as too left-wing from prominent commentators on the political right, although many like Burnley stopped short of condemning “multiculturalism itself.” And, as political philosopher John Gray wrote in *The Guardian* in September 2012, “It is telling that it has been a film-maker who has given us a fresh picture of what it means to be British” (Gray, 2012).

The question is: What was that picture before? Particularly, what was that picture in relation to multiculturalism? Here’s a clue. Back in February 2011, at the Munich Security Conference, Prime Minister David Cameron said: “Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream. We’ve failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to belong. We’ve even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values.” In effect, “we” let immigrants get away with things “our” own people cannot get away with. When a “white person” says anything “racist,” Cameron says, “we rightly condemn them.” But when someone who is not white—Cameron does not say it in this part of the speech, but we can just imagine that this hypothetical non-white person is a brown or black Muslim immigrant—says something similar, “we’ve been too cautious...to stand up to them.” In the second half of his speech, Cameron confirms this—he embarks on a long critique of “Islamist extremism” (Cameron, 2011).

What horrible world is this that condemns white racists but exonerates brown and black bigots? Is this world in Luton, where on the same day Cameron delivered his speech, the English Defence League (EDL) marched, carrying signs screaming “Muslim bombers off our streets” and “Allah, Allah, who the f***k is Allah”? Is it a world where one EDL supporter was quoted as saying of Cameron that day: “If he wants to start sticking up for
us, that’s great?” Nope, probably not this world—too many people see the EDL as too far right and extremist to represent the rest of Britain. Besides, it is difficult to tell to what extent sentiments like these result in actual anti-Muslim acts—for now in the UK, anti-Muslim hate crimes are grouped together under faith hate crimes against Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs.

The anti-multiculturalism brigade in Britain has acquired some common bedfellow: the British Prime Minister, the EDL, and the National Theatre and many of its audiences (on the later, see Shah, 2013). They do not represent the depth or breadth of discourses on multiculturalism, but they demonstrate that suspicion and even hostility towards multiculturalism cuts across socio-political institutions, affiliations, and leanings.

So what gives? Is multiculturalism dead or not? Wherefore Cameron’s abandonment of multiculturalism now that the Olympics are over?

To be fair to Cameron, he did not condemn Islam or Muslims per se in his Munich speech. In fact, he took great pains to differentiate Islam as a “religion” and “Islamist extremism” as a “political ideology.” Yet this is what makes his conceptual leaps even more confusing. If Islam itself is not the problem and Islamic extremism only a minority ideology among the British Muslim minority, then how or why is multiculturalism the problem? Why single out Islam and Muslims in a critique of multiculturalism? What exactly does Cameron mean by “Islam,” “Islamic extremism,” and “multiculturalism”? Without even sketching key facts, figures or examples of life stories to clarify these concepts or demonstrate the links between them, Cameron proposes a solution—a more “muscular liberalism” that is “hard-nosed” about defending “our liberty.” Again, what exactly does a word like “liberalism” mean when it is used by a Conservative prime minister like Cameron in a speech about the failures of “multiculturalism” and the dangers of “Islamic extremism”?

Enter the up-and-coming Australian political theorist Tim Soutphomassane, described by The Australian as “one of the Australian Left’s intellectual heavy-lifters.” In his latest book, The Virtuous Citizen: Patriotism in a Multicultural Society, Soutphommasane aims to harmonise “patriotism” and “multiculturalism” via a practise of “liberal nationalism.” In the introduction, Soutphommasane makes three sets of claims: “(1) that
political solidarity in a multicultural society can be grounded in liberal nationalism; (2) that national membership requires a specific conception of civic virtue; and (3) that liberal nationalism implies a concern with institutional design.” Soutphommasane spends a bit of time addressing what he calls typically liberal fears about nationalism going down the path of ethno-political violence. True, he says, liberal nationalism needs to be grounded in a genuine love and loyalty for one’s own country, but there is “a difference between loving one’s country and having an inflated conception of its merits.”

Thus, patriotism should always result in good faith, not “bad faith,” in one’s nation. For example, what if one’s country demonstrably perpetrated wartime atrocities against another country’s citizens? What stand is a patriot supposed to take in this instance? A patriot “may deny that what her country has done is really an atrocity, justify the atrocity as something necessary for the achievement of international peace in the long run, or may simply turn a blind eye.” This is an example of “patriotic bad faith.” An example of patriotic good faith would be if a patriot recognises these atrocities, regrets them, and is motivated to set his or her country right out of love and loyalty. Yet, this love and loyalty to one’s country cannot appear out of thin air. It requires “institutional design,” that is, non-coercive state policies backed by political commitment. Multiculturalism is a two-way street, according to Soutphommasane. It requires “acculturation,” or the state’s encouragement of immigrants to embrace key aspects of the national culture, and “accommodation,” or the state’s conscious inclusion of minority perspectives in public institutions and practices. Thus, in Soutphommasane’s formulation, the nation ceases to be a fixed entity but is rather a societal unit that is dynamic and ever-changing. Migrants have as much opportunity to influence the direction of the nation as do more settled citizens. All this, however, has to happen within a context where there is mutual understanding of what citizenship entails, and in which citizens genuinely love their country and are loyal to it.

This is why Soutphommasane has some caveats in his promotion of “liberal nationalism.” It cannot work for communities “with histories of ethnic conflict and entrenched discord, where nationalism has legitimised an appeal to blood loyalty and has sanctified bloody violence.” It requires “citizens who are not merely versed in democratic politics and constitutional government,
but who are also disposed to negotiating moral disagreements.” He continues, “this presupposes a highly stable and sophisticated liberal political culture that is not always readily found in reality.” In other words, liberal nationalism can only work in societies that have settled the questions of statehood, nationhood, and democratic government. This then begs the question: Exactly which societies qualify for this?

This is arguably the most frustrating aspect of Soutphommasane’s argument. It sounds like a philosophical exercise, yet it is clear that Soutphommasane does not intend for it to be a mere philosophical exercise. He peppers his argument with several examples—from Tiger Woods’s complex self-articulation of identity, to the burqa/niqab/hijab bans in Western Europe, to the tussle between fundamentalist Christian and secular advocates in the United States’ education system. In other words, he wants to grapple with real, albeit Eurocentric, examples. One problem with this is that these examples require us to accept Soutphommasane’s earlier caveat that contemporary European states do not have “histories of ethnic conflict and entrenched discord, where nationalism has legitimised an appeal to blood loyalty and has sanctified bloody violence.” We only have to remember Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. Still, this unelaborated caveat on Soutphommasane’s part is not the sole problem—he hardly treats any of his examples with satisfactory depth and usually skips to the next one just when the discussion gets complicated.

For example, in his analysis of former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams’s call in 2008 for the accommodation of parts of sharia law in England, Soutphommasane calls this “protective multiculturalism.” It would only serve to “insulate an Islamic group identity from scrutiny from the British community at large.” Thus, Williams’s proposal does not bode well for liberal nationalism. Soutphommasane, however, does not entertain existing and complex socio-legal debates about the nature of legal pluralism and whether it, in fact, already exists in Europe and whether this actually constitutes a threat to liberal democracies. True, Soutphommasane’s is a work of political philosophy, not socio-legal analysis. Yet, he quotes the anthropologist Clifford Geertz and the sociologist Rogers Brubaker. No reason why he cannot refer to, for example, Maleiha Malik of King’s College London’s work on minority legal orders in the UK.
This kind of selective eclecticism and crude argumentation also mars other crucial parts of the book. For instance, in the same section that he exhorts two-way multiculturalism, Soutphommasane has yet another caveat—“the community should not be apologetic about discouraging or forbidding cultural practices that...offend important liberal values” because “respecting all cultural practices and values would mean, among other things, accepting racism and sexism and other forms of inequality or prejudice.” Here, Soutphommasane gives the example of homophobic cultural practices among certain cultural minorities. Again, it is something that is difficult to discuss, yet Soutphommasane appears quick to err on the dominant “liberal” culture’s right to not accommodate cultural practices it deems “offensive.”

But why stop at the state’s duty to outlaw culturally “incompatible” practices by migrant communities? It is very easy and might even sound reasonable to say, “We accept all minorities as long as they comply with our values.” It is much more difficult to say, “I might find a certain person’s cultural practices unintelligible or even abhorrent, but since I am in a privileged position I’ll try to understand this culture from that person’s point of view before I make any judgements.” There is no guarantee that this gesture might yield a quick, clean compromise, but it can certainly humanise difference and incentivise the other party to reciprocate with a similarly meaningful gesture. Thus, while the state is responsible for acting when its laws are violated, it should also play the role of a neutral facilitator of inter- and intra-cultural dialogue at all levels of society.

Besides, we should also be attentive to how “troublesome” minorities sometimes force the state to expand on its provision and protection of civil liberties, for example, past legal challenges by some pacifist religious minorities to be exempted from military service. This is not to excuse homophobia wherever it appears. But perhaps, rather than knee-jerk reactions condemning homophobia within ethnic minorities, it would be better to create more opportunities for dialogue that aims to build mutual respect between “conflicting” minorities, for example, ethnic and sexual minorities. This then leaves learning open to all parties to the dialogue and might improve the collective notion of how everyone’s civil liberties can be provided for and protected.

Here also lies the other frustrating aspect of Soutphommasane’s thesis. He
can be commended for including some tricky examples relating to Muslims in his defence of liberal nationalism. But nowhere in the book does he adequately address how criticisms against multiculturalism so often mask widespread prejudices and fears about Islam and Muslims in Europe. He also does not examine how multiculturalism relates to another lightning rod in contemporary political discourse in “Western” liberal democracies which also relates to Islam and Muslims—secularism.

These unelaborated points make Soutphommasane’s “liberal nationalism” appear not very different from Cameron’s “muscular liberalism.” Ironic, since Cameron’s starting premise is that state multiculturalism has failed, while Soutphommasane’s is that there is plenty that is still good and useable regarding state multiculturalism. Still more ironic because Soutphommasane is now the public intellectual of choice for Labour leader Ed Miliband’s advisers, and has also worked closely with the Australian Labour Party in the past.

Nevertheless, Soutphommasane’s argument has some merit, specifically his description of multiculturalism and nation-building as interactive processes. However, detailed and nuanced examples of nation-building and multiculturalism at work are not to be found in his book. In fact, Soutphommasane does not mention two intriguing examples of European liberal democracies trying to harmonise nation-building and multiculturalism—Portugal and Spain. For this, we have to turn to journalist Marvine Howe’s *Al-Andalus Rediscovered: Iberia’s New Muslims*.

According to Howe, in the past two decades, Portugal and Spain have been experimenting with friendlier policies on immigration and Muslim minorities compared to, say, Germany, France, and Britain, with surprisingly positive results. True, the global war on terror did hit Spain in 2004 when Muslim terrorists bombed Madrid’s rail system. Yet, the Spanish government and society’s response was atypical. For one thing, Spain’s conservative government at the time was not quite sure whether the violence was perpetrated by Muslims or Basque separatists. In fact, the Spanish government was inclined to blame the Basque separatists.

When it emerged that the terrorists were Muslims, Spanish public opinion did not turn anti-Muslim. Instead, on the eve of national elections, more
than a million Madrileños marched—against terrorism, yes, but overwhelmingly also against Prime Minister José María Aznar for supporting the US invasion of Iraq. The Socialists won the elections with an easy majority, worrying Washington because of their opposition to the invasion of Iraq. There were few anti-Muslim reprisals in Spain, either by state or non-state actors. In fact, Spanish Muslim leaders responded with swift and strong condemnations of terrorism. The Islamic Center in Madrid organised three blood donation drives in solidarity with the people of Madrid, and took part in anti-terrorism demonstrations. Of course, there were scattered anti-Muslim attacks by neo-Nazis in Madrid, Cataluña, and Valencia, but the police reacted swiftly.

In neighbouring Portugal, the Madrid attacks triggered mild nervousness since Lisbon was hosting the Euro Cup football championship some months later. Lisbon officials were inclined to brush off these fears, confident that they were well-prepared for the event. For example, they had already banned 2,000 people from entering Lisbon—but these were English football fans with violent records, not Arabs or Muslims. Police also raided a Neo-Nazi hideaway, since the group had threatened trouble, too. During the championship, police did arrest 15 North Africans suspected of links to Al-Qaeda. Other than that, however, the Euro Cup was a success. There was one fatality—an English fan died after being stabbed by a Ukrainian pickpocket who was subsequently arrested.

In short, there were no anti-Muslim reprisals, state or non-state, in Portugal either, even though Muslims acquired new visibility after the Madrid bombings. In fact, Portuguese Muslims and non-Muslims continue to contend that Portuguese Muslims are different from other European, including Spanish Muslims. According to this perspective, Portuguese Muslims are more cohesive and insulated from “radical currents sweeping other parts of the world.” Like Spain, Portugal’s more engaging attitude towards its Muslim minorities appears to have been helped by a landslide Socialist victory in the 2005 elections. Howe, therefore, contends that Portugal and Spain have a recent history of being more welcoming towards migrants compared to other European liberal democracies. This includes attitudes towards Muslim migrants, in Portugal’s case from its former African colonies and South Asia and in Spain’s case mostly from North Africa.
Firstly, this is because both countries have a legacy of emigration to other parts of Europe during the Franco and Salazar dictatorships. During this period, Iberian migrants were largely on the receiving end of anti-immigrant sentiment in the rest of Western Europe. This experience translates into common empathy now that Spain and Portugal are migrant-receiving countries. Secondly, the relatively recent anti-totalitarian struggles of Spain and Portugal make their current societies more attuned to upholding civil liberties for all. Most of their citizens oppose any kind of secret service or surveillance of citizens because of their traumatic experiences under dictatorial regimes. Also, Howe does not mention this, but the same Socialist governments that were so accommodating towards migrants and Muslims were also equally accommodating towards recognising same-sex relationships and eliminating homophobia. An example, perhaps, for those European liberal democracies that see very few possibilities for respecting both Muslim and sexual minorities? Thirdly, both countries do not seem to have experienced major religious sectarianism in recent times. For example, unlike France, Spain and Portugal do not ban the hijab and burqa—these religious symbols are not seen as problems.

According to Howe’s narrative, these experiences ensure that the Spanish and Portuguese governments repeatedly demonstrate political will to engage and dialogue with immigrants and religious minorities. They are particularly aware of the “failures” of multiculturalism in Britain and France, such that the Portuguese high commissioner for immigration, for example, talks about her country’s model of interculturalism rather than multiculturalism. “This means that we encourage migrants to preserve their own culture while learning about the culture of the host country and thereby growing with both [cultures],” she tells Howe via email. Thus, even after both countries moved to the political right after national elections in 2011, Howe says this was not accompanied by strident anti-immigrant or anti-Muslim rhetoric.

Howe notes that this move by the state is actively reciprocated by the various Muslim groups in both countries. For example, Said Ratbi of the Higher Islamic Council of Valencia says that the aim of the council is “to promote integration and peaceful convivencia by transforming Muslims into real citizens of Valencia.” Convivencia—referring to the period of peaceful inter-
religious coexistence and engagement in Al-Andalus, or Muslim Iberia, between the eighth and fifteenth centuries—is a term that Iberian, particularly Spanish, Muslims are increasingly using to match the state’s promotion of intercultural dialogue. For example, Howe highlights the “first ever Hispano-Moroccan Festival” held in Madrid in 2006 with its theme, “Consolidating la Convivencia.”

Howe does not dismiss the difficulties faced by both the state and its Muslim migrants in achieving social cohesion. One telling example is how the late Mansur Escudero of Spain’s Islamic Commission tried repeatedly to campaign for the rights of Muslims and Christians to worship in the Grand Mosque-turned-Cathedral of Córdoba. A Spanish convert to Islam, Escudero even wrote to Pope Benedict XVI in 2004 to explain his ecumenical dream. The Vatican responded that it was up to the Bishop of Córdoba to decide what to do. The Bishop rejected Escudero’s request, saying it would only confuse the faithful.

On Friday, 29 December 2006, Escudero took off his shoes, approached the southern wall of the mosque, faced Mecca and performed the ritual midday prayer. It took five minutes, but it was enough to shock the world, especially the Roman Catholic Church. In 2010, the new Bishop of Córdoba reiterated the Church’s support for interfaith dialogue, but that “sharing the cathedral is not possible.” To some, Escudero’s action seemed over-the-top. It is particularly moving in a country like Spain, though, considering that even its second largest city, Barcelona, does not have a single dedicated mosque to worship in.

This is where Howe’s nuanced and detailed narrative gets a bit jarring. If the Iberian model of interculturalism is so wonderful, how do we explain the 2008 Washington-based Pew Research Center’s findings that out of 24 countries surveyed, Spain topped the list with its “anti-Semitism” and “Islamophobia”? Fifty-two percent of Spaniards polled had an unfavourable opinion of Muslims, followed by 50% of Germans, compared with only 23% of Britons, those unfortunate recipients of what Prime Minister Cameron calls a failed “state multiculturalism.” Spaniards also led with 46% having an unfavourable opinion of Jews, compared with only 9% of Britons being anti-Semitic.
This is the most obvious gap in Howe's narrative. While she provides copious examples of state-led policies of interculturalism and eager responses by the several Spanish and Portuguese Muslim organisations, she never really shows us how these translate into everyday experiences. Of course, this is to be expected with a narrative that focuses on official points of view—whether from state officials or official representatives of minority communities. It is not that these official viewpoints are unimportant or irrelevant—they are, and it is important to record them as meticulously as Howe has done. Yet, official points of view often do not and cannot reflect subjective and subtle day-to-day interactions within society.

Howe is aware of this, and points out herself that there is more to these survey statistics than meets the eye. For example, she reports that during a course for imams Mustafa Snabi Himri of the Federation of Muslim Communities of Castilla La Mancha said, “no, we cannot say the Spanish are Islamophobic. Their problem is a historical fear, a fear of the return of Islamic rule. But that was the past. They must understand these are new times of multiculturalism. They should recognize that Islam is part of their history.” Indeed, Howe dedicates her second chapter, “Moorish Legacy,” to this long Islamic history of Iberia and the discomfort it causes contemporary, nominally Catholic Spain and Portugal. This discomfort is matched by recent terrorist rhetoric, for example, from Al-Qaeda, about reconquering Al-Andalus.

That Spain and Portugal were once vibrant centres of Islamic civilisation is increasingly common knowledge. That they were reconquered by the Catholic monarchs Isabella and Ferdinand who either converted or purged their Jewish minorities is also increasingly common knowledge. What is less known is how the new Catholic monarchy embarked on a much more ambitious and protracted programme of forcibly converting or expelling Iberian Muslims. This episode is given book-length treatment by journalist Matthew Carr in Blood and Faith: The Purging of Muslim Spain 1492–1614.

Like Southommasane and Howe, Carr is explicit about wanting to address contemporary rhetoric in Europe that multiculturalism has failed. His method, though, is via historical corrective. Carr writes, “among the general public, there is a tendency to conflate the end of Muslim Spain with the momentous year of 1492, when Spain was unified under Christian rule,
and the fact that more than half a million Muslims remained in the country afterward is often forgotten or overlooked.”

The de-Islamising of Iberia was of course preceded by a series of state actions, with the backing of the Catholic Church, to forcibly convert Jews to Christianity or expel them. Following the success of this operation, the state turned its gaze to its Muslim population. The problem with Iberia’s Muslims, however, was that they were far more internally diverse compared to the Sephardic Jews, and they very often occupied lower social ranks. Many were employed by Christian masters who were happy to leave them to their own devices as long as they were productive. The monarchy, however, initiated coerced mass conversions of Muslims to Christianity, often accompanied by mass burnings of the Qur’an—these converts were called Moriscos.

There was a problem with these mass baptisms, though. How could the authorities be sure that these converts would actually be loyal to their new religion? After all, these Iberian Muslims-turned-Christians had inherited their own distinct cultural practices and rituals—tied so strongly to their former religious identity—that differentiated them from Christians. For example, they liked going to public baths so much such that Iberian Christians became anti-bathing—it was seen as a Muslim and homosexual practise. Moriscos did not sit on chairs and eat their meals at the table like Christians, but sat and ate on the floor. To ensure conformity from all Moriscos, the monarchy eventually banned public bathing and eating on the floor. Many Christians were also resentful of the fact that Moriscos did not drink alcohol, because this meant that they were often sober, more hardworking, and therefore stole all the good jobs. According to these anti-Morisco narratives, this meant that Moriscos “enjoyed an unfair advantage” and were planning to “take over Spain by stealth.”

The monarchy’s policies towards Moriscos grew even more aggressive in the wake of the Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1529, which was swiftly followed by the spread of Lutheran Protestantism in Western Europe. This led to an intensification and expansion of the powers of the Spanish Inquisition, which was established in 1480 to ensure the strict compliance of converts from Islam and Judaism to Catholic orthodoxy. In fact, Howe points out in her book that apart from Jews and Protestants, many Muslims were also burned at the stake during this period.
This official policy of coercion resulted in a variety of outcomes. While many Christian employers tried to shield their Morisco workers from hostility, many used this as an opportunity to exploit Morisco labour. Many Moriscos also developed polemical anti-Christian texts in response to their experiences of persecution, and continued practising Islam secretly and defiantly. In fact, in 1566, the Spanish Hapsburg King Phillip II decreed a ban on Moorish songs, dances, and musical instruments, ordered the entire Morisco population of Granada to leave its doors open on Fridays (to ensure they were not performing Islamic prayers in secret), banned speaking and writing in Arabic, and ordered the burning of Arabic texts considered religiously offensive. Two years after this royal decree, a group of Granadan Moriscos crowned their own king, Aben Humeya, in accordance with Umayyad custom, and then launched a rebellion against Phillip II. The result was the bloody War of the Alpujarras, which saw horrific mutual atrocities between Moriscos and Christians.

Carr’s is a nuanced narrative, though, because he also points out that in the midst of all this, there were Moriscos who converted to Christianity voluntarily and complied with the requirements of their new faith. Some were happy enough to practise both Islam and Christianity simultaneously. Also, in the midst of all the Christian-Muslim hostility we can also find historical accounts of inspiring Christian-Muslim friendships, and of slightly more humane responses from the Catholic clergy.

After the failed Morisco rebellion, however, the monarchy and the Iberian Catholic hierarchy started developing a new paranoia about Muslims. When would the next Morisco rebellion strike? Carr also notes that the Granada rebellion coincided with some other major headaches for Spain—rebellions in Flanders and the Americas to impending conflict with France, for example. In fact, Carr reminds us that the reconquista of Al-Andalus and the Spanish monarchy’s transition to the House of Hapsburg were also contemporaneous with Spain’s “audacious subjugation of Aztec Mexico.” To add insult to injury, the expansionist Spanish Hapsburgs just could not shake off the rest of Europe’s suspicions about Spain as “many leading European Christians continued to regard Spain as a suspect country that had been fatally corrupted by the long centuries of Islamic domination.” A more exacting blow came when the Spanish expedition sent to aid Irish Catholics against England ended disastrously for Spain when its ships sank
in a storm and the survivors were either killed or captured. Following this, leaders like Juan de Ribera, the Archbishop of Valencia, attributed these disasters to the continued presence of the Morisco “fever,” and predicted even greater disasters unless the Morisco problem was dealt with.

Thus, after more than a century of forcibly extracting compliance—and failing—from the Moriscos, the Spanish rulers admitted that they had failed. The question now was, should they kill or expel all the Moriscos? In the end, the Crown decided on the more “humane” option and decreed the expulsion of all Moriscos—the voluntary and forced converts, the assimilated and unassimilated in 1609. On the way to being expelled, the Moriscos were subjected to more rapes, robberies, and murders, and tried to stage some last-ditch insurrections.

Carr’s narrative is jammed with historical detail, which makes it tough reading. But this attention to detail is what makes his last chapter, “Epilogue: A Warning from History?,” so persuasive. Here Carr uses his detailed rendition of history to demonstrate that contemporary “Islamic threat to the West” narratives are not new—they are inspired and informed by medieval anti-Muslim Christian polemics. Carr also notes that these contemporary narratives are not confined to the political right. For example, Carr notes that the rhetoric of the American literary critic, Bruce Bower—a gay Christian contributor to the New Yorker—who argues for a cleansing of Europe does not sound very different from the sixteenth century expulsion of the Moriscos. “European officials have a clear route out of this nightmare,” Bower writes. “They have armies. They have police. They have prisons. They’re in a position to deport planeloads of people every day. They could start rescuing Europe tomorrow.” Carr also quotes the novelist Martin Amis who said in a 2006 interview: “there’s a definite urge—don’t you have it?—to say, ‘The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.’ What sort of suffering? Not letting them travel. Deportation—further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people who look like they’re from the Middle East or from Pakistan…. Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children.”

This is exactly the can of worms that Prime Minister Cameron’s multiculturalism-has-failed lecture opens and feeds on, especially when he
singles out Muslims in this problem-solving mode. What is chilling is that these are exactly the kinds of “solutions” Europe has resorted to before in response to “failed” assimilation of minorities. Carr points out that “the Nazis originally saw the forced emigration and deportation of German Jewry as the solution.” Like the Spanish Hapsburgs, the Nazis were also torn between whether to exterminate or expel this troublesome minority. Unlike the Spanish Hapsburgs, the Nazis eventually settled on extermination, showing how thin the line can be between extermination and expulsion.

Furthermore, the example of the Holocaust is instructive, because even though it was a state project of Nazi Germany, it was also the culmination of centuries-long anti-Semitism in the rest of Europe. Like contemporary European Muslims, European Jewry was also once seen as defiant, cruel, and disrespectful of the majority’s values. They dressed differently, ate unpleasant food, and practised strange rituals and customs. They were seen as incompatible with other Europeans, and their refusal to assimilate exacerbated the majority’s hostility towards them.

Nevertheless, this line of argumentation should not be seized as an opportunity to reverse the blame. Many people cringe when European leaders and commentators blame Muslims for Europe’s “problems.” Should we blame Europeans—or that ambiguous entity, “the West”—for “Islamophobia” instead? Trading stereotypes like these does not make them any less crude or offensive on either side. Here is where Carr’s text also provides rich insights.

For example, he notes that the Spanish Hapsburgs had other contemporary models of multiculturalism that they could have followed. There was the Ottoman millet system, where religious minorities were “allowed religious autonomy and a certain degree of political, civil, and educational jurisdiction over their own communities.” The Mughal Empire also practised a similar kind of tolerance for multiculturalism and religious pluralism. These were by no means ideal standards from contemporary perspectives—sociologist of religion Steve Bruce recognises the millet system’s positives and constraints when he refers to it as “hierarchised pluralism” (Bruce, 2008).

Similarly, Carr never idealises these other systems either. Neither does he idealise Al-Andalus itself. Carr rightly lists all the glories and splendour of
Al-Andalus, and how the symbiosis between its various intellectual and religious traditions was integral to the coming of the Renaissance. But he is also unflinching in noting that Muslim anti-Semitism also existed during this fabled period of convivencia, for example, in the massacre of approximately 3,000 Jews in Granada in 1066. His description of the expulsion of the Moriscos also never descends into a “Muslim martyr versus Christian villain” dualism. For example, although Muslim rulers in Ottoman North Africa tried to provide refuge for them, many Moriscos were killed, robbed, and raped by Muslim tribes who saw them as “bad Muslims.” This was after being expelled from Europe for being “bad Christians.”

Ironically, then, although their books are more narrowly focused, Carr and Howe pose questions that are relevant outside of contemporary Europe, too. They tie the question of multiculturalism to the question of how society makes deviants out of its own minorities.

When I was reading Carr’s book especially, my mind kept going back to the news headlines in my native Malaysia in October 2012. Nasharuddin Mat Isa, the former deputy president of the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), which is part of the three-party federal opposition coalition Pakatan Rakyat, had accused PAS’s secular coalition partner, the Democratic Action Party (DAP), of wanting to set up a Christian state in Malaysia. Luckily, Nasharuddin’s fellow PAS member, Mujahid Yusof Rawa, retorted soon afterwards: “How can only 9.2 percent of the population, a minority group, set up a Christian state? Tell me how in the world this could happen?...There are about 67 percent of Muslims in Malaysia. It is not possible for 9.2 percent of the population to create such a state” (Loone, 2012).

This argument between two Malaysian “Islamists” needs to be placed within the wider context of the Malay-Muslim majority’s discourse about religious minorities—specifically Christians—in Malaysia. Like Muslims in Europe, many Christians in Malaysia are of relatively recent immigrant backgrounds—Chinese or Indian Malaysian. Many indigenous ethnic groups in East Malaysia are also Christian, as are many within the eclectic Eurasian community—hybrid indigenous Malaysians who have Portuguese, Dutch, British, or other European ancestry. Malaysian Christians are also diverse in that there are a variety of denominations in both East and West Malaysia—Anglican, Roman Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, Methodist,
independent Pentecostals, and so on. Yet they are often represented in the
government-controlled media and Malay-Muslim nationalist blogs as
threats to national security. For example, anti-Christian rhetoric reached
new heights in early 2010 after the High Court reversed the Malaysian
government’s ban on the Catholic Church’s use of the word “Allah” to refer
to God in its weekly newspaper. On 8 January, Muslim groups gathered at
ten different mosques around Malaysia protesting the use of the word
“Allah” by non-Muslims. One protester declared, “This name belongs to our
Almighty. We do not want it to be used by other religions.” Another
protester said, “Our patience has limits … don’t play with it until causes
chaos in this country. We don’t want any fights with other religions.” Within
days of the protest, several churches were subjected to arson attacks in
various Malaysian cities.

Clearly, many contemporary states are quick to view their religious
minorities as problematic, especially if their religious boundaries coincide
with ethnic, linguistic, and other cultural boundaries that set them apart
from the dominant majority. The problem with the British Prime Minister’s
“muscular liberalism” in response to an allegedly failed “state
multiculturalism” is that it places all the burden of integration on migrants
alone. Yes, the dominant society is also implicated but only because “we”
are not bold enough to set “them” right.

Thinkers on the political left like Soutphommasane struggle with how not
to place the entire burden on migrants and minorities, and yet the “liberal
nationalism” that he advocates still ends up looking not too different from
Cameron’s “muscular liberalism.” This is because “liberal nationalism” still
presumes a certain evolutionary superiority on the part of “Western” liberal
democracies—it merely seems to propose that although “they” still need to
follow “our” ways, “we” should use a carrot instead of a stick. The question
is, What if the carrot just keeps on dangling with no takers?
There might actually be no need to reinvent the wheel. Whether we call it
“multiculturalism” or “interculturalism,” the point is that people’s lives are
enriched when they engage meaningfully with others of different
backgrounds. This is perhaps the biggest takeaway message from Carr’s
and Howe’s historical and contemporary investigations into Muslim
experiences in Iberia. While Carr points towards the very obvious and
terrifying pitfalls of state-directed, coerced assimilation, Howe shows the
value of constant dialogue and interaction accompanied by political will. Both Carr and Howe also use real examples to show how it is not just “newcomers” who can and should learn from their “host” societies, but how the majority—any majority—can and should learn from its minorities.

This is how contemporary society can reclaim the legacies of Al-Andalus—the glorious and the tragic—without romanticising it. In the United Kingdom, we saw glimpses of what this reclaiming might look like during the London Olympics—Akram Khan, Emeli Sande, and Shami Chakrabarti sharing the stage with 32 Mary Poppins, the National Health Service, and the Arctic Monkeys, the nation celebrating with Mo Farah’s Mobot. Now we just have to figure out how we can go the distance.

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Shanon Shah, Malaysian musician and pop star, is completing his doctorate at King’s College, London.
Re-Viewing Revolutions: *Les Misérables* and the Case of Egypt

The message of Victor Hugo’s novel is equally relevant in the West as well as the East

Stephanie Wright


There is a small fortune to be made by any enterprising attendant working at a theatre showing *Les Misérables*. Across the world, hundreds are pouring out of the cinemas and into the bathrooms in a frantic search for Kleenex that ends embarrassingly in scavenged toilet paper. And who can blame them? While it’s easy to tire of Russell Crowe’s mechanical baritone or the sight of Hugh Jackman’s approaching uvula, it is indeed difficult to withstand the visceral impact of Tom Hooper’s adaptation of the long-running musical. Combining the volcanic emotion of the original score with the graphic detail of film visuals, Hooper’s production encapsulates the wretchedness of urban life in nineteenth-century France aptly. It has certainly succeeded in making a lot of people utterly miserable—at least for a few hours.

It is, of course, based on Victor Hugo’s historical novel, considered one of the great novels of the nineteenth century. It tells the story of struggles and
redemption of Jean Valjean, an ex-convict, and covers the period between 1815 and 1832, the year of the June Rebellion. The film follows the novel faithfully and captures the intentions of the original work. It tells a great story.

The film opens dramatically in the year 1815. Valjean, a convict sentenced to nineteen years of hard labor for stealing bread to feed his sister’s family, is summoned by stony-faced police officer Javert to be released on parole. Required by law to display the yellow ticket-of-leave that identifies him as a former criminal, Valjean is spurned by innkeepers and exploited by employers. Beaten and abused, he is taken in by a kindly bishop who shows him humanity and offers him food and shelter. Valjean, out of habit and desperation, returns the bishop’s charity by stealing his silverware. He is quickly captured by the police and brought before the bishop, who, to his unimaginable surprise, confirms Valjean’s fabricated story that the silverware was given to him as a gift. When the dumbfounded officers have departed, the bishop tells Valjean to see God’s plan in this good fortune, advising him that he must use the silver to become an honest man. Struck by the bishop’s humanity and moved to shame by his own misdemeanor, Valjean plunges into the depths of an intense inner conversion and resolves to renounce his former past and forge a new and honest life.

Years later, Valjean has erased all traces of his former existence. He is now Monsieur Madeleine, a respectable businessman and mayor of the town. The film lurches into the lives of Madeleine’s factory workers, a group of women toiling under a lecherous and ill-tempered foreman. Among them is Fantine, played by Anne Hathaway, a beautiful and tragic creature struggling to support her illegitimate child after being abandoned by her former lover. When Fantine’s situation is discovered, the factory women paint her as a loose woman, and she is summarily dismissed by the foreman. Deceived by her daughter’s carers, the Thénardiers, into believing her child is ill and in need of money for medicine, Fantine becomes increasingly desperate. She sells her hair, her teeth, and finally her body to raise the money for her beloved daughter, Cosette. When one night a young man puts snow down her dress to torment her, Fantine attacks him and is brought to the attention of none other than Inspector Javert, who arrests her. As Monsieur Madeleine, unaware of Fantine’s identity, intervenes to save her, Fantine makes a heart-wrenching plea: “Please Monsieur, don’t mock me now, I pray; it’s hard enough I’ve lost my pride. You let your
foreman send me away.” Filled with remorse, Madeleine takes the desperately ill Fantine to a hospital and, when it becomes clear that she is dying, promises to take her daughter into his care. Meanwhile, the relentless Inspector Javert begins to suspect that Monsieur Madeleine may be the escaped convict he has hunted for years. Yet when word comes from Paris that Valjean has been found, Javert confesses his suspicions to the real Valjean, who resolves to reveal his true identity to prevent the conviction of the innocent. After making his confession before the court, Valjean rushes home to attend to the dying Fantine. He is confronted there by the triumphant Javert, who has come to arrest him in the name of the law. Valjean evades him and manages to recover the child Cosette from the care of the callous Thénardiers before finding refuge as a gardener in a monastery in Paris.

The movie leaps forward again nine years to the summer of 1832. Only two years after the overthrow of the unpopular King Charles X in the 1830 July Revolution, discontent with the government of the new monarch Louis-Philippe is already rife. The streets of Paris are swarming with the angry poor and the city is on the brink of rebellion. The popular Member of Parliament, champion of the poor, and outspoken critic of the Restoration monarchy, General Lamarque, is on his deathbed. As Cosette passes through the crowds that throng to listen to the speeches of the revolutionaries with her adoptive father, the young and idealistic student Marius catches a glimpse of her and falls instantly in love. He is led to the home of Cosette by the Thénardiers’ daughter, Eponine who is herself hopelessly besotted with Marius. Cosette and Marius declare their love for each other at the gate of her home. Later that evening Marius gathers with his fellow revolutionaries, who tease him for his obvious state of distraction. The mood turns serious, however, when a student announces that Lamarque is dead. The students resolve to stage their revolution at his state funeral, to be held a few days later.

Meanwhile, Valjean resolves to flee Paris with Cosette. Marius, unaware that Cosette is about to leave Paris, sends her a letter telling her of his decision to commit himself to the revolutionary cause, as does the hapless and fatalistic Eponine. They proceed to erect barricades in the streets with furniture flung down from apartments above. At Lamarque’s funeral procession, the students dramatically hijack the cortege and direct it toward
the Place de la Bastille. As gunfire breaks out, the students retreat to the barricades and prepare for battle. Javert, disguised in civilian clothing, manages to infiltrate the rebels’ camp but is exposed by the clever street urchin, Gavroche and made a prisoner. Eponine, disguised as a boy, sneaks through the barricade to inform Marius of Cosette’s impending departure, which she had been keeping from him. As she climbs over the barricade, she takes a bullet for Marius and manages to deliver the letter from Cosette before dying in his arms.

Meanwhile, Marius’s letter to Cosette is intercepted by Valjean, who resolves to protect his adoptive daughter’s beloved. Arriving at the barricade, Valjean quickly proves his worth by saving the life of one of the student leaders, who then grants Valjean’s request to be allowed to execute the prisoner Javert. Left alone with the inspector, Valjean releases him and tells him to run. Javert, unable to reconcile Valjean’s act of humanity with the image of the criminal he has hunted for so long, falls into despair and confusion. Thrown into doubt about a moral world he had never questioned and knowing he can live no longer in the vision of justice and order on which he had based his life’s work, Javert resolves instead to die, casting himself into the river of the Seine.

Back at the barricades, Marius and his student friends receive word that the people of Paris have not joined in their revolution. Knowing that their cause is doomed, they resolve to fight to the death, raising the tricolor flag of the Revolution from the windows and on the barricades. The valiant Gavroche is deliberately shot dead by an officer in the ensuing battle. Marius, unconscious and badly wounded, is dragged through the sewers to safety by a valiant Valjean. He awakes with no recollection of his saviour, the sole survivor of the failed rebellion. Valjean reveals his past to Marius and tells him of his intention to leave, and enjoins him to keep his identity a secret from Cosette. Marius agrees to tell Cosette that Valjean has embarked on a long journey abroad. Later, at the couple’s wedding reception, the identity of Marius’s savior is revealed to him. He takes Cosette to the monastery where Valjean is close to death and explains to his new wife that his mysterious savior was in fact her father. Valjean confesses his past to Cosette and, perceiving the spirit of Fantine, resigns himself peacefully to his death. The movie closes with a powerful final rendition of “Do You Hear the People Sing,” in which the chorus of the departed rises up to proclaim
the eventual triumph of truth, justice, and love, in this life or the next.

The tragedy of Hugo’s *Les Misérables* is at once personal and social, yet the imperatives of engaging story-telling lead inevitably to the privileging of the former over the latter. It’s also easy for Western audiences to sympathize with the variously unfortunate protagonists of the work. They are actors in our history, part of our legacy, naive martyrs to a cause we hold dear. But as tears well over the sight of students’ bodies and bloodied flags fallen years ago for democracy, dignity, and equality, the Western gaze remains far from the youths who struggle for these ideals today—with as much passion, and often as much futility.

Two years have now passed since the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. Between the outbreak of the unrest and the resignation of Hosni Mubarak—a period of just 18 days—841 civilians were killed, and over 6,000 wounded. In contrast, there were around 496 civilian deaths in the July Revolution of 1830 (Harsin, 2002, p41). At least 40 were killed and around 500 wounded in the two-year anniversary protests held in Egypt in January 2013 compared with approximately 90 civilians killed and 250 wounded in the June Rebellion portrayed in *Les Misérables* (Harsin, 2002, p60). Over 50 Muslim Brotherhood members died when the army opened fire on pro-Morsi demonstrations after the President Mohammad Morsi was ousted on 3 July 2013. Among the Egyptian casualties were many students, who sacrificed their lives in the hope of freeing their country of injustice and oppression. Those who shed tears over the death of the spirited Gavroche should be reminded of the role of Cairo’s street children in the events of 2011. Egypt’s capital is home to an estimated 50,000 homeless children, many of whom were involved in the protests and some of whom were arrested, wounded, or killed. Like the ill-fated Eponine, 16-year-old Amira el-Sayyed fell victim to a bullet intended for others, dying in her home from errant gunfire intended to intimidate protesters and discourage participants. Sally Zahran, a 23-year-old not affiliated with the movement’s political wings, was clubbed to death during her first and only protest march. The callous and abusive treatment of Fantine pales in comparison to the explosion of violent mob sexual assaults to which women protesters in Tahrir have been increasingly subjected. Whereas prostitution in Egypt carries a penalty of up to three years imprisonment, not a single arrest has been made to date for the countless and brutal acts of sexual violence committed against women.
protesters, and the government’s unresponsiveness has led some to believe that the mob attacks may in fact be a political tool to deter women from participating in the protests (Fathi, 2013; Kingsley, 2013). Women, children, students, and the poor, inspired by hopes for a better future, brutalized by oppressive governments, autocratic and democratically elected, have been martyrs to a cause whose fate remains to be determined but appears dismal. Like the French in 1830, the Egyptian people in 2011 succeeded in toppling their unpopular leader. Like the French, Egyptians have been quick to wonder whether the change had made any real difference. More than two years after the Revolution in Egypt, as in France in 1832, the injustice of justice remains a salient reality.

It does not seem entirely irrelevant to ask why Les Misérables tends not to remind Western audiences of recent events in the East—the Arab world. This was the question I posed to the people with whom I had endured the Titanic-length epic. The consensus, it appeared, was that something in the movie seemed different from the Arab uprisings to Westerners. In spite of this, certain important similarities could be generally agreed upon. The seeming difference, I want to suggest, is not so much to do with our imagination of the two events; rather, it is to do with a certain unidirectionality of that imagination, a notion of the West as precedent in the two senses of the word: as both a model for, and as a coming-before, the East. Liberal Western minds, which had no difficulty in relating to the “pro-democracy” Arab protestors on the six o’clock news, are rather less inclined to see these individuals in the image of their forebears. Westerners seem, in other words, to be more capable of seeing themselves in the Arabs, than in seeing the Arabs in themselves.

One can be equally criticized today for creating similarities as for constructing difference, although it seems impossible to broach any comparative issue without doing one or the other. Yet in both cases, and perhaps unsurprisingly, it is the West that is implicitly taken as the standard, the model that non-Western events are seen to conform with or deviate from. Moments from what we perceive as our own history, our own heritage, do not tend to be related “outward” or other-wise; they are instead linked back to the ossified monolith of what are assumed to be Western values, ideals, and aspirations. We sympathize with the doomed ambitions of the radical students; we are moved by the extraordinary humanity of the
bishop who treats with respect and kindness the scorned convict Jean Valjean; we pity Valjean, seeing him as an innocent victim of a barbarous police state; we applaud his sober morality while the more secular-minded among us ignore the inconveniently religious motivations of his actions; and we observe with incredulity and abhorrence the rigid callousness of Javert. In every instance, our reactions respond to an imagination of Western justice, human equality, and the enshrinement of universal rights in law.

Yet this way of thinking, which serves here to arouse our deepest sympathies, impels us in other instances toward the same callousness and rigid apathy that we so condemn in the character of Javert. Indeed, perhaps the greatest achievement of Hugo’s novel at the time was to demonstrate the hypocrisy of that Victorian breed of sympathy, avowedly universal yet demonstrably conditional, which viewed as undeserving the masses who cry out unheard for mercy. This image is powerfully evoked in the film’s rendition of “Look Down,” where the admittedly repulsive poor who gather in throngs at the gates of Paris are sent sprawling by the trotting stallion of the righteous and immovable Inspector Javert. Hugo’s radically humanist move in the novel Les Misérables was to suggest the hypocrisy of any compassion that operated on an assumed distinction between the deserving and the undeserving. This is a message that remains relevant today—particularly among those who have felt their sympathies harden toward those citizens of Arab nations whom they have ceased to view as “pro-democracy.” We are less moved by the news of the death of an “Islamist” or a “member of the Muslim brotherhood” for the same reason that Javert is unmoved by the suffering of the masses: they are agents against an order we perceive as natural, necessary, and central to the promotion of the good of mankind.

In a letter to his publisher, Hugo explained his ambitions for the novel with the following words: “I don’t know whether it will be read by everyone, but it is meant for everyone. It addresses England as well as Spain, Italy as well as France, Germany as well as Ireland, the republics that harbour slaves as well as empires that have serfs. Social problems go beyond frontiers. Humankind’s wounds, those huge sores that litter the world, do not stop at the blue and red lines drawn on maps. Wherever men go in ignorance or despair, wherever women sell themselves for bread, wherever children lack a book to learn from or a warm hearth, Les Misérables knocks at the door and says: ‘open up, I am here for you’” (Behr, 1989, pp39–42).
The film adaptation of *Les Misérables* is a timely reminder of the need for a human compassion that transcends perceptions of difference—a reminder that sincere convictions and good intentions can lead to injustice and suffering, that injustice and suffering can make criminals out of honest men, and finally, to paraphrase a passage from the novel that is absent from the film, that humanity is our common lot, however different humans may individually appear. The various labels with which the media opt to classify political actors in the Muslim world should not allow us to forget this fact.

**REFERENCES**


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