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Steps to a Global Thought: Thinking from Elsewhere

Introduction

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Starting Points: Questions and a Sense of Disquiet

This special issue began with a workshop at the Center for Contemporary South Asia, Brown University, in 2017. We gathered a small group of scholars from anthropology, philosophy, religious studies, literature, and political theory with the open-ended aim of investigating what a non-Eurocentric 'global' thought might look like, and what the stakes of such an endeavor may be. The starting point for our conversation was a sense of disquiet with available pictures of 'comparative' thought, either simply as an inclusion of nationally representative texts ('Chinese' literature, 'Indian' philosophy, etc.) in western curricula, or with directional orientations that mark out some regions with a tonality of otherness (theory from the South, the ontological turn), or with claims for a world (world religion, world literature, etc.) that reduce thought from outside Europe essentially as examples of local variations.

Our conversation was framed around a set of interconnected questions, which we asked our contributors to consider, including the following: How do concepts relate to and exceed territories? What is 'western' about western thought? What comes after postcolonial theory? In what ways might one work with a range of traditions of thought, in ways that are not looking for comparison or sameness? And if not correspondence, or representation, then what kinds of other movements of thought can one imagine? Or is it impossible today to even speak of different traditions of thought? How might one think of elsewhere(s) as a disruption of gridlocked, falsely coherent pictures of the 'west' and 'non-west'? Our aim in posing these questions was not to posit another 'post-,' which often leaves still fecund modes of thought as somehow tainted or obsolete. Nor do we appeal to an idea of cosmopolitanism,

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which we also find unappealing for its implicitly provincial remainder. Instead, our papers seek to chart a picture of global thought as a diversity of arcs with contingent and yet specific connections across regions of thought, life, texts, and species, with openings into a range of resources not marked by their non-negotiable otherness, as 'ancient' or 'classical' or narrowly theological, or as representatives of a bounded national tradition but rather as part of a wider intellectual landscape, and a challenge to what might count as the contemporary, without necessarily having to negate given ideas of Europe or the West. Similarly, our picture of an 'elsewhere' is not defined spatially or temporally.

In opening ourselves to this range of questions, we do not find ourselves alone, but rather as part of an undetermined tectonic shift, which finds expression across a range of fields in different parts of the world, expressed at times in constructive forms, or in other instances as variably inchoate or specific dissatisfactions with the continuing Eurocentrism of curricula in the humanities and social sciences, or as resentful cracks about dead white men. Afforded the opportunity to proceed without resentment, what did we find? Looking at our own arcs of thought, we found that the impulse to the decolonial is not necessarily new, and nor is it resolved by entirely negating disciplinary pasts.

Many of us in this collection continue to feel a deep fidelity to the genealogies and methods of our scholarly disciplines in their 'modern' and contemporary forms, without thinking of these fidelities as entirely western. That said, our invocation of thought, and thinking, is not cast in disciplinary terms, but rather as a seed or a generative energy, that may be expressed in a variety of times, in scholarly traditions, and in everyday forms of expression, some of which our essays draw on, from music, to literature, to the study of grammar, and aspects of ordinary life. Our way of thinking about movements across territories that emerge in the articles ahead is not necessarily as 'comparative' thought, since in our view concepts and thinkers cannot be self-evidently plotted and bound within national geographies. What, then, are the kinds of maps and arcs that the articles ahead collectively express?

On Being Joined to Other Times and Bodies of Thought

Rather than claiming a globally shared coevalness (in Johannes Fabian's well-known usage of the term), as if we all securely belong to one time, the essays ahead examine ways of departing from one's 'own' time. Such departures need not be an escape but rather a deeper engagement with specific times, for instance with colonial realities, as in the articles by Shahzad Bashir and Ruth Vanita. Bashir's essay takes us towards popular historical fiction in late nineteenth century South Asia, as a kind of morale-restoring engagement for an Urdu reading public in the decades following the War of Independence of 1857, at a time of the triumph and entrenchment of Victorian-era British colonialism. Focusing on a courtly romance set in the Crusades, with a Muslim (male) and Christian (female) protagonist, rather than an anti-colonial phantasy, Bashir allows us to read this as a form of a *munazara* (an Arabic term denoting formal religious argument among members of different religions or sects), and a way of imagining the world otherwise, in a vernacular but also a global

genre of inhabiting pasts, that emerged in the same period when academic history started to make claims to represent the 'real' past.

Ruth Vanita's essay alerts us to a differently global anti-colonial resonance, with the 'anti-' here, not as a sign of negation but of attractions to more geographically distant bodies of knowledge. Such attractions are often retrospectively undermined as 'Orientalism' on Euro-American shores, or as a 'derivative discourse' in the 'non-West.' Differently oriented, Vanita's essay examines the affinities and distance between two continentally and temporally distinct inheritors of Vaishnavism, Tagore, and Thoreau. Strange as it may sound to describe Thoreau as a Vaishnava, Vanita allows for this possibility anchored in a theme that has come to be at the center of much contemporary scholarly discourse, namely, the human relation to the non-human. Vanita emphasizes Thoreau's sustained proximity to specific Sanskrit texts, in particular his retranslation of the *Harivamsa*. Rather than just an avocation, Vanita argues, this 'elsewhere' allowed Thoreau to depart from conceptions of the non-human within an American Protestant Christian milieu. As Vanita suggests, this engagement with the non-human helps scaffold Thoreau's polemical views against slavery, meat-eating, and various forms of economy and industry, in ways that Gandhi was famously drawn to in reading Thoreau.

On Crossing Boundaries, Not Necessarily via Europe

Within these interconnected histories, how do narrower borders come to be reconstituted despite good intentions? In a recent, groundbreaking collaborative work, *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (2014), despite the acknowledged inspiration of global map-making predecessors like Émile Benveniste, other languages and geographies recede, and the horizon of networks of language and thought is reduced to a particular form of 'western' Europe. As Brandel, Das, and Puett point out in their essay, in the book's English version, the word 'Europe' is removed. In the translator's preface, Emily Apter writes that the decision to remove it was taken in the hope that future editions might include entries on 'philosophy hailing from countries and languages cartographically zoned outside of Europe…' and that the diffusion of the book to other parts of the world might generate not just translations, but 'spin-off versions appropriate to different cultural sites and medial forms.' Why 'spin-offs'? Confronting such a term not with a spirit of resentment, or a desire for belated inclusion, but with a deeper sense of global pasts, Brandel, Das, and Puett point out that a multiplicity of languages was not only essential to literary production across south, east, and west Asia, but was the stuff of everyday experiences through the presence of different varieties of Sanskrit, Prakrit, Chinese, Persian, Arabic, and more 'local' languages, the differential pressures of which may still be felt by serious attention to, say, the grammar of the deep case (event makers) in Sanskrit, or the sparseness of grammatical rules in the specification of tense or number in case of nouns or verbs. Movement is not only recognized as essential to the survival of thought (as in Buddhism) but is to be found in the making of words, sentences, and discourse across territories. When European scholars write as if translation was primarily the technical work of experts, such as scholars, missionaries, or administrators, they forget

the centuries of experience of translation as an everyday activity, and the history of translations across and within neighboring regions such as India, Tibet, China, Iran, and elsewhere. This essay raises and differently answers a critical question of renegotiating the place of Europe as the 'master' mediator in cross-territorial conceptual relations, with a longer and wider horizon of scholastic traditions than, for instance, in ideas of 'provincializing Europe' which remain bound to European colonial pictures of knowledge formation.

Taken together, we might situate this collection of essays at an uncertain distance, not only from earlier and newer forms of Eurocentrism, but also from modes of postcolonial critique that would locate themselves primarily in opposition to ideas of Europe or the 'west.' As Kaviraj provocatively asks in his essay: what exactly is 'western' about western thought? And what might we find dissatisfactory about forms of 'anti'-western thought that attempt to decolonize, while still holding themselves captive to such fictions? Kaviraj offers what one might call an insider's criticism of the ways in which well-known postcolonial thinkers nevertheless end up partaking of the same cognitive or epistemic architecture that they critique. In this regard, we might ask: what would it mean to decolonize if this is not just a refusal of European or 'western' thinkers per se? Kaviraj offers a very specific answer. What has been 'western,' at least in the 'modern' era, is a kind of self-elevation, or inflation, that is, to take a pattern of historical experience that may indeed tentatively resonate across particular regions, and to elevate this pattern from a 'mezzanine' level, as Kaviraj calls it, to the position of a general, moral, world-historical value. Geist as a global gaslight, as the negation of other voices, temporalities, and forms of life. In this idea of degrees of resonance, Kaviraj suggests an alternative to circular debates on the universal versus particular, and invites us instead to disaggregate territories. The alternative to self-elevation and conceptual inflation is not to make everyone territorially bound with their national philosophical passports in place, but rather to measure and enable movements across territories differently. What might such disaggregations look like in practice, even for the 'west?'.

Sandra Laugier's essay shows us how a particular picture of 'western' philosophy, even the seemingly straightforward and institutionally entrenched divide between analytic and continental traditions of philosophy, has devalued particular philosophers, withholding, for instance, the possibility of recognition for the achievements of Emerson or Thoreau, on the grounds that they can hardly count as philosophical. In considering movements across territories, Laugier brings in Quine's famous thesis on the indeterminacy of translation, with the impulse to find philosophical concepts of the ordinary in Emerson, Thoreau, and Cavell, and to find threads of connection between these regions or seemingly distinct traditions of thought, separated and joined by the Atlantic and other shores. For these connections to become available, one has to find what Laugier calls the 'anthropological tone' in Quine, whose work is usually understood as analytic orthodoxy, in using the apparatus of logic to determine the relation between, say, sentences, facts, truth, and their relation to problems of existence. In contrast, Laugier shows that in Quine's essay on indeterminacy in translation, it is not logical equivalences of words or sentences that count, but conveying how meaning arises within forms of life that become relevant for understanding how translation, for all its indeterminacy, becomes possible at

all. As a further step onwards in the journey of global thought, let us ask: are such movements possible only among humans? What might relays with other species and forms of life look like?

On Being Joined to Other Species

Naveeda Khan's essay dwells in a particular historical moment, that of the poet-philosopher, Muhammad Iqbal, visiting the Mosque of Cordoba in Spain in 1933, and writing a ghazal that recounts his experience of this journey. Khan suggests that Iqbal's poem introduces something new in the genre of the Urdu ghazal and that this newness is generated through Iqbal's engagement with Goethe, in particular Goethe's *Metamorphosis of Plant*s, which challenged the boundary between animal and plant life, and showed how phases of contraction and expansion reveal nature at work, and examined what human modes of participation in such activity might be. For Iqbal, Khan argues, the crucial transfiguration comes in the possibility of finding a theological urgency in Goethe's insights, in ways that comes from an elsewhere within Islam, a Muslim from a 'kafir' land, whose mode of devotion poetically receives and relays these insights to unsettle the boundaries between animate and inanimate, seeing the inside of things, and sensing in the ruins of the mosque a form of time, which is prior to the divisions of past, present, and future. This image of the Muslim attuned to this form of time introduces a new subject within the *ghazal* form, distinct from its signature affective tones of longing or loss. Standing beside a mosque, or a church, rather than scholastic or theological argument, as with the genre of the *munazara* above, perhaps this moment connects in an uncanny way to the theme that what human societies expel or divide, nature may receive and return to them as poetry.

How might these forms of reception and relays across species be expressed in other, ordinary aesthetic forms? In their respective essays, Palchoudhuri and Singh amplify the call of particular birds, the *koyal* (cuckoo) in the former case, and cranes in the latter. In Palchoudhuri's essay, the global takes the form not of the universal, or of that which transcends the local, but rather a form of attunement, or a striving for attunement to the earth and rain, through singing, which we might conceive as one among other forms of thinking aloud. Palchoudhuri studies Raag Malhar, commonly described as a rain-related raag, as an apprentice to a teacher in the Bishnupur gharana, located in a drought-prone region of West Bengal. Rather than reducing music solely to its social and political formations, or to the techno-auratic, a guiding thought of Palchoudhuri's article is to investigate the lived experience of a basic principle of the form, namely, the classical system of raags as a response to the rhythms of seasonal and diurnal life. Palchoudhuri undertakes this investigation not as the fulfillment of a fixed rain-making devotional form, but through a question that is central to European Romanticism as well, namely, how do arrangements of words, images, and sounds gain or lose vitality? The loss of life is not necessarily the disappearance of a form. Loss may also be expressed through forms of emptiness, as with the picturesque in art, or political posturing in scholarship, or in the case of a raag, when Malhar

is introduced with what Palchoudhuri calls the 'requisite histrionics': 'the dark brooding clouds swirl,' 'the koyal lets out its plaintive cry.' How do relays gain or lose their vitality? And what becomes of our picture of thought, or thinking, if it includes, or begins with such cries and calls?

On Darśan, and the Making of Paths

In his article on what comes after postcolonial theory, Bhrigupati Singh asks: what images of thinking may need to be unsettled or resettled, as a step towards a global thought? One such resettlement may be around the idea of 'theory,' in reexamining what such a word means, and how secular so-called western reason may be. More combatively put, one might ask: is modern social theory a 'Christian church in disguise'? As Singh suggests, there is a case to be made, from within recent critical and social theory, for the variably latent Eurocentric Christian values of the founding figures of social theory. With such a premise in mind, Singh suggests that if we take theory and 'theos' as having a shared root, then, rather than taking the enduring presence of theos as a conspiracy, we might say that theoretical categories are implicitly or at times explicitly imbued with theological values and genealogies, in a Nietzschean sense. A concept's underlying theos need not only be European Christian. As an instance of a conceptual transfiguration within a more global inheritance of theos, Singh examines the word theory, understood in one possible valence, that crosses India and Greece, through its root word, *theoria*, which was used to denote a form of pilgrimage, in ways resonant with the Indic *darśan* denoting both a form of thought, as with the six *darśanas* or 'schools' of Indian philosophy, and a way of seeing the divine. Building on this meaning of theory as journeying or path-making, Singh traces the journey of Stanley Cavell, as an instance of a path-maker who inventively reopens the question of what constitutes a philosophical territory, and how genealogies may be created by inheritance rather than birth, in ways that could be significant for what comes after postcolonial theory. As Singh asks, how might we create our own, further *darśanas*? As an instance of a *darśan*, Singh sets out three coordinates of a world map that could be continued in other directions, located in three poetically enshrined bird killings, in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, in Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and in Richard Power's *The Echo Maker*, each of which incants a curse of unsettlement, and conditions of human finitude, in ways that might be read as a movement along a threshold between so-called religious and secular formations.

In tracing the journey of the eight essays in this collection, we might say that the place of the so-called non-West cannot be changed without changing the direction of the West as well. And that decolonization may be a diurnal task, rather than a once and for all eternal, or even a historical settlement, since as we have shown in this introduction, just as there are many ways of being joined to other times, and to other bodies of thought, there are also ways in which forms of

separateness, hierarchy, violence, and new boundaries are recurrently reborn. We write in the hope of paths and illuminations yet to come. To end with an incantation that Thoreau borrowed from elsewhere: the sun is but a morning star.

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