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Sitharthan Sriharan

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NOTES ON INSURGENT UNIVERSALITY IN AMBEDKAR'S SOCIAL AND POLITICAL  
THOUGHT: A CRITIQUE OF POSTCOLONIAL ANTI-UNIVERSALISM

by

SITHARTHAN SRIHARAN

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2023

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APPROVAL

Notes on Insurgent Universality In Ambedkar's Social and Political Thought: A Critique Of

Postcolonial Anti-Universalism

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

Approved: January 2023

Uday Mehta, Thesis Advisor

Jack Jacobs, Program Director

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

## ABSTRACT

Notes on Insurgent Universality In Ambedkar's Social and Political Thought: A Critique Of  
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Advisor: Uday Mehta

In this thesis, we seek to take steps towards problematizing postcolonial theory and its frequent anti-universalism. Towards this end, my initial focus will be some of the productive and problematic aspects of what Getachew and Mantena term the “decolonization of political theory”. Here, we highlight how some comparative political theory scholars have methodologically overemphasized ‘difference’ in their studies of non-western political thought as an overcorrection to Eurocentrism. In supporting this claim, we review literature in comparative political theory, postcolonial theory, and modern South Asian history and historiography in order to demonstrate that a more philosophically robust, but still historically informed, conception of universality is needed for more sensitivity to how Europe was already provincialized by “reason and history, rather than by any vague appeal to popular authenticity” as the “colonized already participated in universality and agency, even if on unequal terms”. After doing this, we draw on Massimiliano Tomba’s concept of “insurgent universality” as a theoretical lens for an analysis that outlines how universality functions in Ambedkar’s critique of the Indian Political-Social distinction, Gandhi, and Gandhism on caste. Ultimately, I contend that comparative political theorists must be careful in centering difference as they risk missing the histories of the colonized which demonstrate that resistance came not only from a position of particularity that rejected hegemonic forms of modernity in total, but also manifested itself in the very universalist categories that elites framed their own politics in. As an alternative, I argue that an emphasis on insurgent universality rather than ‘fragmentary resistances’ or difference is helpful as a conceptual anchor in bringing out how the colonized participated in universality, even if unequally.

**Keywords:** colonialism, decolonization, postcolonial, universality, modernity, difference, Ambedkar, India, caste

## **Acknowledgements**

This thesis was worked on over the last year and is the result of my research and writing after the coursework I completed for CUNY's Political Science MA program from 2020-2022, much of which was a trying period for everyone. In that regard, I want to first thank my advisor Uday Mehta whose flexibility, understanding, and thoughtful conversations played no small role in enabling me to do work I can be proud of.

I would also like to thank Michael O. Sharpe and Susan Buck-Morss for the excellent classes I took with them and support in thinking about political themes that matter to me in constructing this thesis.

I would like to thank Earl Fleary, Alyson Cole, Charles Tien, and Jack Jacobs for their assistance as administrative staff, which provided a welcoming and supportive department during my time at CUNY.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank my family and good friends for their love and care considering that much of the requirements for my MA were completed during the first two years of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In 2005, Sanjiv Mehta, a Mumbai-born entrepreneur, purchased the East India Company, which gave him the rights to its name and coat of arms as a trademark. Shortly thereafter, he relaunched it in London as a shop for luxury products. The store itself features commodities inspired by the company's history such as tea, jam, gold coins, and books (Doshi 2017). Commenting on his feelings after acquiring it, Mehta pleads, "Put yourself in my shoes for a moment: on a rational plane, when I bought the company, I saw gold at the end of the rainbow." He goes on to assert, "But, on an emotional level as an Indian, when you think with your heart as I do, I had this huge feeling of redemption—this indescribable feeling of owning a company that once owned us" (De Sarkar 2010).

The above instance of anti-colonial affect undergirded by the cultural norms of contemporary capitalism can be described as what political theorist Saroj Giri refers to as "professionalized universalism," a play on Said's original term, "professionalized particularism"<sup>1</sup>. Giri's coinage here corresponds to how the so-called "non-West", whether in the form of the immigrant professional or many countries of the former third world that have seen tremendous economic growth in recent decades (such as China and India), is not simply marginal anymore given its role in the capitalist world order. Thus, anti-colonial discourse in the present has become an "ideological contrivance" that serves to cover up this new "post-West Universal". Specifically, those who adhere to a framework of seeing all forms of exploitation and oppression

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<sup>1</sup> In "Orientalism Reconsidered", Edward Said utilized the phrase "professionalized particularism" as part of his critique of essentialist western universalism and historicism. From a now classic anti-orientalist perspective, his objective was to "to dissipate and re-dispose the material of historicism into radically different objects and pursuits of knowledge" (1985, 103). Giri's formulation of "professionalized universalism" is his way of pointing out that the old forms of historicism and universalism associated with earlier western imperialisms have declined as Capitalism has become more globalized and its ideological form arguably less 'eurocentric' (2017).



as akin to a persistence of ‘colonialism’ without sufficient historicization end up treating this universal as particular despite evidence to the contrary. The effect of this postcolonial framing is that contemporary anti-racist and anti-colonial politics unwittingly renders those still affected by histories of systemic discrimination, such as African Americans and indigenous peoples, invisible as immigrant professionals and the former Third World parasitize on the struggles of the most oppressed in the service of capital accumulation. For Giri, one consequence of this state of affairs is that the only substantial opposition to contemporary racisms and reactionary tendencies in America seems to be coming from the various gigantic corporations (instead of any significant Left) like Apple, Nike, and even Ford. For example, some CEOs personally joined the protests against Donald Trump’s “Muslim ban” (Giri 2017, 80-83). Further commenting on this, Giri states, “It’s as though the abstraction of the network society and digital economy, not to speak of the universalism of capital, or the liberal anonymity of the profit motive, is the only bulwark against particularistic fascism and racism” (2017, 80).

If we take Dipesh Chakrabarty’s distinction between History 1 and History 2 as our point of departure<sup>2</sup>, we can consider figures such as Sanjiv Mehta and the middle class immigrant professionals, even with all their presumed anti-racisms and anti-colonialisms, as contemporary figures of Universal History as the History of Capital, which by definition always tries to subordinate particular History 2’s that may or may not live in opposition to it, insofar as these people are cultural manifestations of our contemporary liberal capitalist world order. In such a framework, “the universal turns out to be an empty place holder whose unstable outlines become barely visible only when a proxy, a particular, usurps its position in a gesture of pretension and domination” (Chakrabarty 2000, 70). But what happens to the oppressed, whether they be the

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<sup>2</sup> We will discuss how Chakrabarty (2000) formulates this distinction in detail below.

colonized, racial minorities, LGBTQIA+, or workers, in this conception of universality where Elites seem to have a monopoly on it while the true oppressed are seemingly condemned to utter particularity and, thus, remain at the margins of history and politics?

In this thesis, we seek to take steps towards problematizing postcolonial theory and its frequent anti-universalism. Towards this end, my initial focus will be some of the productive and problematic aspects of what Getachew and Mantena term the “decolonization of political theory” (2021, 359). Here, we highlight how some comparative political theory scholars have methodologically overemphasized ‘difference’ in their studies of non-western political thought as an overcorrection to Eurocentrism. In supporting this claim, we review literature in comparative political theory, postcolonial theory, and modern South Asian history and historiography in order to demonstrate that a more philosophically robust, but still historically informed, conception of universality is needed for more sensitivity to how Europe was already provincialized by “reason and history, rather than by any vague appeal to popular authenticity” (Bayly 2007, 163-9) as the “colonized already participated in universality and agency, even if on unequal terms” (Skaria 2014, 346). After doing this, we draw on Massimiliano Tomba’s concept of “insurgent universality” as a theoretical lens for an analysis that outlines how universality functions in Ambedkar’s critique of the Indian Political-Social distinction, Gandhi, and Gandhism on caste. Ultimately, I contend that comparative political theorists must be careful in centering difference as they risk missing the histories of the colonized which demonstrate that resistance came not only from a position of particularity that rejected hegemonic forms of modernity in total, but also manifested itself in the very universalist categories that elites framed their own politics in. As an alternative, I argue that an emphasis on insurgent universality rather

than 'fragmentary resistances' or difference is helpful as a conceptual anchor in bringing out how the colonized participated in universality, even if unequally.

## CHAPTER II: POSTCOLONIAL DIFFERENCE IN COMPARATIVE POLITICAL THEORY

### Issues in Decolonizing Political Theory

In “Anticolonialism and the Decolonization of Political Theory,” Adom Getachew and Karuna Mantena discuss how the very term *Decolonization* has become a “critical watchword across the humanities and social sciences” (2021, 359). Specifically, it denotes how disciplines have been challenged to interrogate how they have been involved in “histories of imperial domination and racial hierarchy” and uncover how the ideology of this past may still inform contemporary scholarship. Political theory has become part and parcel of this trend of decolonizing academic knowledge in various ways, much of which includes expanding the traditional canon of political thought as well as rethinking it. Political theory conventionally is constituted as a field by a set of texts of political thought deemed important for the Western tradition. The process of revising the Western canon has occurred along two axes. First, there is a general consensus that the canon must include non-western and anti-colonial thinkers, especially those who historically were counterhegemonic voices. This aspect of decolonizing political theory has been quite successful as demonstrated by how many university courses on political thought regularly include Franz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, W.E.B. Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk*, and M.K. Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj*.

The second axis of revision has been motivated by exploring the conceptual and historical connections between imperialism and political theory. Scholarship in recent decades have focused on the conceptual and historical connections between political theory and imperialism (Getachew and Mantena, 359-360). For instance, Empire has been demonstrated to have been “a formative context for conceptual development...in generating modern theories of

sovereignty and property” (Ibid, 360). Furthermore, such work has also amply shown how many different political ideologies – as well as their categories and concepts – facilitated and defended European domination. Conversations centered on the relations between liberalism and empire, and the legacies of imperialist liberalism have been particularly productive for criticizing the specific sociological and anthropological premises that undergird so called universal ideals. Many different political theorists, from the perspective of a wide variety of traditions like global justice and critical theory, have taken to task the exclusions and epistemic prejudices of modern political thought in order to grapple with the “political and philosophical legacies of colonialism” (Ibid.). In this vein, contemporary political theory has integrated insights through its dialogue with anticolonial thought and postcolonial studies.

As an example of the second axis of revision above, Getachew and Mantena briefly discuss Amy Allen’s *The End of Progress* (Ibid, 369-370). In this work, Allen argues that the contemporary representatives of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory – Juergen Habermas, Axel Honneth, and Rainer Forst – have persisted in silence regarding imperialism and how it has historically shaped assertions of political and moral universals. She demonstrates this silence by showing how these thinkers philosophically presuppose a developmentalism connected to how they are committed to a method of immanent critique that does not regress into relativism (Allen 2016, 3). While both Habermas and Honneth present a “deflationary, contingent, and reversible account of progress,” Allen asserts that these thinkers’ account of sociocultural learning and plea for “the necessity and unavoidability of the universal norms central to the legacy of the Enlightenment” replicates a hierarchy with European modernity at its apex (Allen 2016, 68). While Forst does not ground his work in the same Neo-Hegelian commitments, his alternative of founding normativity in a universalist moral-political criterion of “the right to justification,”

which relies on an account of practical reason, does no better in terms of avoiding Eurocentrism. Despite avoiding developmentalism, Forst implicitly universalizes the particular as his account of practical reason is shown to be “a thick, particular, and Eurocentric notion in disguise” (Ibid, 15-16).

Getachew and Mantena praise how Allen contributes to decolonizing political theory by employing the Frankfurt School’s method of Immanent Critique against itself. However, they take issue with how Allen’s corrective strategy assumes an “idealist account of empire in which imperialism issues from an epistemic standpoint that views European modernity as universal” (Getachew and Mantena 2021, 369). For instance, Allen states the following: “Imperialism as a political project cannot sustain itself without the idea of empire, and the idea of empire, in turn, is nourished by a philosophical and cultural imaginary that justified the political subjugation of distant territories and their native populations through claims that such peoples are less advanced, cognitively inferior, and therefore naturally subordinate” (Allen 2016, 1). For Getachew and Mantena, it is not clear that the “unidirectional relationship between imperial ideas and imperialism” in Allen’s account sufficiently captures the issue with empire. The issue with Allen’s idealist approach is how she relies on an abstract problematic in decolonizing political theory, focusing on identifying and transforming “imperial philosophical assumptions” (Getachew and Mantena 2021, 370). In contrast to this idealist line of thinking, Getachew and Mantena assert that anticolonial thinkers created critiques of false universalism in their projects of decolonization that were premised on “a historical and material account of the experience of Empire”. They did not think that they had to outline the “theoretical sources of these false universals”, but rather take note of their practical consequences and transform them.

Another aspect of decolonial corrective strategies Getachew and Mantena take issue with is how Allen and others have posited that political theorists' ability to engage postcolonial realities presuppose an overcoming of the Western tradition's "internal and implicit commitments to Eurocentrism" (Getachew and Mantena 2021, 370). For instance, Allen pleads with critical theorists to adopt "a stance of modesty or humility, not one of superiority, toward our own moral certainties" (Allen 2016, 33). Such humility, she contends, is an essential precondition for any process of intercultural learning and exchange (Allen 2016, 76). Unfortunately, such an assertion is all too self-referential as they are founded on skeptical theories of history taken from Adorno and Foucault and "not distinctive to, nor the product of any dialogue with, anticolonial or postcolonial thinking" (Getachew and Mantena 2021, 370). Against this tendency, Getachew and Mantena posit that having a sensitivity to the "historically specific trajectories of the postcolonial world" reveals a particular lacuna in the current critiques of Eurocentrism – a theorizing very clearly rooted in the experience of politics outside the West. In other words, in prioritizing epistemological decolonization, contemporary theorists have failed to recognize that the problem is not so much that traditional concepts of political theory are always-already imperial, but rather that they lack any correspondence to how politics is practiced in most of the world. When used for historical experiences that do not correspond to the trajectories of modernity seen in the history of the West, canonical concepts of political theory come up against their own historical and sociological constraints (Getachew and Mantena 2021, 372).

While I would not disagree with Getachew and Mantena's position – that a lack of historical sensitivity to how politics has been practiced and thought in the global south marks many of the contemporary critiques of Eurocentrism – we believe that Joshua Simon comes

closer to identifying the problems with postcolonial frameworks as they pertain to political theory due to his recognition of their theoretical assumption of ‘difference’. In “Institutions, Ideologies, and Comparative Political Theory”, Simon discusses how comparative political theorists have asserted that engaging with Asian, Islamic, and African political thought will illuminate “the contingency and provincialism of the putatively universal principles...taken for granted in the European and North American tradition” (2020, 433). By the terms ‘contingency’ and the ‘provincialism’ of the West’s ‘universal principles,’ He is referring to a now common theme within fields influenced by postcolonial theory of using the difference or otherness of either a non-western tradition or minority histories to critique the fundamental assumptions of a field that has its institutional and ideological origins in the modern West. For example, in *Provincializing Europe* (henceforth *PE* in this thesis), Dipesh Chakrabarty discusses how minority histories of subaltern groups such as working classes, African Americans, and women are created with a view of contributing towards the “struggle for inclusion and representation characteristic of liberal...democracies” rather than being used to question fundamental assumptions of history as a discipline (2012, 97).

In a similar vein to Chakrabarty, Leigh K. Jenco elsewhere critiques how comparative political theorists have often sought to merely expand the canon of political thought by studying non-western traditions without a view of letting the addition of these formerly alien bodies of thought lead to a critical reevaluation of Western political theory’s themes and questions (2014, 673). In “Towards a Cosmopolitan Political Thought,” Godrej makes a similar argument to Jenco by discussing the importance of acknowledging the ‘otherness’ of non-western traditions to the point of having an openness to being transformed by them. Specifically, she asserts that a truly cosmopolitan field of political theory would permit challenges by “other texts and ideas”



while also having a consciousness of “how these encounters may disturb or dislocate our familiar understandings of politics” (2009, 138).

In line with our objective of delineating a postcolonial thematic of difference, we would like to note two distinct features of the arguments presented by Jenco and Godrej. First, both assume a fundamental difference between Western political thought and non-Western political thought. Second, they both advocate for allowing this difference of non-Western thought to lead us to interrogate the various traditional themes and problems of Western political theory. Responding to such theoretical moves that seek to provincialize Western political theory, Simon concedes that this is indeed a radical project. However, the issue with this commitment is that, without clarification, it imposes limits on which traditions and political intellectuals one can productively study and, by extension, the kinds of political critiques comparative political theory can make with their research. For Simon, this leads comparative political theory to ignore, at its own peril, “the critical insights to be gleaned from political thinkers who occupied intellectual contexts similar to the leading lights of the Western canon, but whose unfamiliar institutional context causes them to make unfamiliar arguments with familiar concepts and languages” (2020, 433).<sup>1</sup> While I agree with Simon that the postcolonial theme of difference tends to exclude non-western figures who drew substantially from Western traditions for their interventions in the politics of their own contexts, he does not go far enough in ascertaining the theoretical details of postcolonial difference that would reveal how or why it often has this selection bias. In this

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<sup>1</sup> In this regard, Simon cites scholars who have worked on Latin American political thought as an excellent area of study for this problem. For example, Katherine Gordy has taken note of how Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui, despite working with a Marxist-Leninist framework, “fundamentally undermined some of Marxism’s most basic temporal and spatial assumptions by suggesting that the vestiges of Incan communism in Peru should be used in the struggle for socialism rather than dismissed as relics of the past” (2013, 358). In this thesis we focus on Ambedkar in a similar spirit to Simon and Gordy in an attempt to track how he deployed (originally) western notions of democracy, liberty, and egalitarianism in the context of colonial India.

thesis, we seek to argue that the problem is that those seeking to decolonize political thought overemphasize a philosophical assumption of difference that in its very conception has a tendency to exclude those who speak in the Enlightenment categories against the ruling classes they oppose since postcolonial difference accords the place of universality primarily to Capital and modern imperialism, even though it denounces this universalism as false. To delineate the details of this specific theoretical assumption of difference, in the next section, we briefly state how Anievas and Nisancioglu (2017) outline this postcolonial thematic and then do a close reading of Chakrabarty's *PE*.<sup>2</sup>

### **Difference as a Central Postcolonial Thematic**

In "Limits of the Universal," A. Anievas and K. Nisancioglu, reevaluate the contributions and issues of Subaltern Studies using Vivek Chibber's *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* and the debate centered around the latter. Through a critical assessment of Chibber's work, the authors seek to pinpoint more precisely what is right and wrong with Subaltern Studies in particular and postcolonial theory more generally. After doing this, Anievas and Nişancıoğlu argue that "an understanding of the origins of capitalist modernity remains a relatively unexplored omission" that calls into question the broader goal of 'provincializing Europe' (2017, 40).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The focus on Chakrabarty's *PE* here is purposeful as this work is considered by many to be one of the defining works of postcolonial theory despite its internal diversity as a subfield. Thus, we are simply taking Chakrabarty's book as an example of how one may begin to precisely define a postcolonial thematic of difference, though certainly not the last word on it. Furthermore, we have only highlighted aspects of Chakrabarty's wider argument as a more comprehensive review of this book in particular and postcolonial theory more generally is beyond the scope of this thesis. For broader debates on the various themes of postcolonial theory, see Chibber 2013 and Anievas and Nisancioglu 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Though, for the purposes of this thesis, we will not delve too deeply into this lacuna centered on political economy as our concerns are limited to theorizing the relationship between the Universal and the Particular.

In their engagement with Chibber's critique of Subaltern Studies, Anievas and Nisancioglu outline what postcolonialism is and is not by delineating its primary arguments and objects of analysis. For them, postcolonialism prioritizes problems of "historical difference and theoretical homogeneity" as its scholars seek to correct the "Eurocentric bias of social theory". In this vein, there are two crucial aspects of what may broadly be considered postcolonialism. First, postcolonial scholars want to 'provincialize' Europe by "decentering" the Eurocentrism of the assertion that "Western social forms and accompanying discourses are homogeneously universal" (2017, 42). Postcolonial approaches focus on how "European modernity and identity" have always been founded on the subjugation of the "non-Western Other". Through these themes, these scholars emphasize the importance of colonial practices to the structure of European power and identity (Inayatullah and Blaney 2004; Bhambra 2007). As a result, postcolonialism centers "the particularity of alternative visions of society" that come from non-Western contexts in its research program. In its attempts to 'give a voice to the Other', postcolonialism demonstrates how "subaltern experiences" have interrupted "Eurocentric visions of history, thereby reasserting the significance of non-Western agency in world history" (Anievas and Nisancioglu 2017, 43).

The second aspect relates to the first as it seeks to assert "the heterogeneity of all social development and its irreducibility to exclusively European forms". In the view of postcolonialism, history is not constituted by universality or homogeneity but rather "difference, hybridity, and ambivalence", in summary, multiplicity. Therefore, postcolonialism also looks to displace linear historical time and deny any "stadial conceptions of development" (Bhambra 2007, 34-55). Anievas and Nişancıoğlu argue that these two features of postcolonialism – a commitment to histories that are both non-Eurocentric and multilinear – to be the principal benefits of the postcolonial viewpoint, especially in regards to how it applies to the study and

critique of capitalism. In delving into detail on these two aspects of postcolonialism, they review Dipesh Chakrabarty's *PE* and Ranajit Guha's *Dominance without Hegemony*, which form the primary targets of Chibber's critique in his own book. In critically discussing these classics of postcolonial studies and Chibber's positions on them, Anievas and Nişancıoğlu seek to avoid some of the problems in trying to do a broad overview of an internally diverse subfield. Still, they consider the work of Chakrabarty and Guha as especially integral to the "postcolonial phase of Subaltern Studies", thus making them garner special attention in the authors' article. For the purposes of this thesis, we focus mainly on Chakrabarty's *PE* by highlighting parts of his argument in order to hone in on a definition of difference that one could consider as a theme of postcolonial scholarship more broadly. Towards this end, we first review Chakrabarty's formulation of the problem of translation. Then we go on to discuss his account of historicism and his distinction between "History 1" and "History 2", which includes a brief review of the figure of the Peasant as it has been framed in Subaltern Studies in order to clarify what Chakrabarty sees as the stakes of the problem of translation and History 1 and 2. After this, we posit what we take to be the three aspects of difference which form the basis of the theoretical framework of *PE*.

At the beginning of *PE*, Chakrabarty argues that the issue of capitalist modernity cannot be seen only as a "sociological problem of historical transition [to Capitalism]". It also must be viewed as one of translation. In defining this problem of translation, Chakrabarty recalls how, before scholarship was globalized, there was an era where translating "diverse forms, practices, and understandings of life into universalist political-theoretical categories of deeply European origin" was unproblematic for most social scientists. It was assumed that an analytical category like Capital had enough of a purchase beyond the "fragment of European history in which it may

have originated”. Scholars thought a ‘rough translation’ was adequate for the purposes of academic analysis. For example, many old area studies books would feature a “glossary” at the end that would feature “a series of ‘rough translations’ of native [terms], often provided by the colonialists themselves”. Chakrabarty discusses this “politics of translation” according to what other scholars have discussed as how what translation “produces out of seeming ‘incommensurabilities’ is neither an absence of relationship between dominant and dominating forms of knowledge nor equivalents that successfully mediate between differences, but precisely the partly opaque relationship we call ‘difference’” (Chakrabarty 2000, 17). In this regard, Chakrabarty’s goal is to represent this “translucence—and not transparency” as it pertains to European categories and non-Western histories in the work that constitutes *PE*.

In bringing to light this translucence of modern European categories as it pertains to non-Western histories, Chakrabarty’s account of History 1 and History 2 is crucial. In Chapter 2, Chakrabarty considers traditions of writing history – such as liberalism and Marxism -- that seek to explain all historical phenomena using a universalizing theme of capitalist modernity as ‘historicist’ since they take their “object of investigation”, in this case Capital, “to be internally unified, and sees it as something developing over time” (2000, 23). Sometimes, historicist accounts of capitalism either assert that capital inevitably overcomes the differences among its histories in the long run, or, in line with the thesis of uneven development, such differences become “negotiated and contained” – though not always transcended – “within the structure of capital”. A third alternative to the previous two theories is that capitalism actually ‘produces and proliferates differences’ (instead of always transcending them). Historicism is constitutive of all these claims because “they share a tendency to think of capital in the image of a unity that arises

in one part of the world at a particular period and then develops globally over historical time, encountering and negotiating historical differences in the process”.

Even when ‘capital’ is considered to have a global rather than European origin, it is still viewed as a “totalizing unity – howsoever internally differentiated – that undergoes a process of development in historical time” (Ibid., 47). Therefore, the only history that counts from the perspective of those writing about the history of capital, a “universal and necessary history”, is the history that can be seen as (Ibid., 63) an antecedent of Capital “posited by itself” (Marx 1978, 491), which constitutes the foundation for the common narratives about transitions to the capitalist mode of production. This “past posited by capital itself as its precondition” is what Chakrabarty refers to, drawing on Marx, as History 1. The ‘other’ of this History 1 is what Chakrabarty calls History 2. History 2 or, rather, History 2s, are “antecedents” of capital (Chakrabarty 2012, 63) because capital “encounters them as antecedents” but “not as antecedents established by [it], not as forms of [capital’s] own life-process” (Marx 1978, 468). In stating that something does not belong to capital’s life-process, Marx is asserting that it does not lend itself to the reproduction of capital. Chakrabarty interprets this to mean that antecedents to capital are not only those that constitute History 1 but also other relationships which do not necessarily contribute to the reproduction of the logic of capital. Therefore, “Marx accepts...that the total universe of pasts that capital encounters is larger than the sum of those elements in which are worked out the logical presuppositions of capital” (Chakrabarty 2000, 64).

According to Chakrabarty, this division between History 1 and History 2 enables Marx to “write into the intimate space of capital” a degree of substantial uncertainty since capital – in the “reproduction of its own life process” – must confront relationships with two possibilities. These relationships are either central to the reproduction of capital, or they are oriented towards

“structures” that have nothing to do with this reproduction. Thus, while History 2’s are not separate from Capital, they still “interrupt and punctuate the run of capital’s own logic”. Marx states that History 1 must destroy or subjugate the many possibilities that are connected to History 2. However, there is nothing to necessitate that this process of subordinating History 2’s to History 1 could ever be complete (Ibid.,64-5). For Chakrabarty, this means that difference is not something “external to capital”, but neither is it “subsumed into capital”. Difference is connected to capital in plural and intimate ways “ranging from opposition to neutrality”. Such is the possibility, in Chakrabarty’s view, that is suggested by Marx’s “underdeveloped ideas about History 2”. History 2 is not about an “alternative program to writing histories that are alternatives to narratives of capital”. To assume this is to presuppose that History 2’s are a “dialectical Other of the...logic of capital,” which they are not since they are not necessarily subsumed under History 1. Rather, History 2 is a category that functions to constantly interrupt the “totalizing thrusts of History 1” (Ibid. 65-66).

The upshot of what Chakrabarty is getting at in asserting that History 2 interrupts the totalizing thrusts of History 1 is that there is no possible “historical form of capital”, no matter how global its reach, that could ever become truly universal. There is neither a global nor a local form of capital that could “represent the universal logic of capital” since all historically existing forms of capital are provisional compromises constituted by “History 1 modified by somebody’s History 2’s”. Thus, the “universal...can only exist as a place holder, its place always usurped by a historical particular seeking to present itself as a universal”. However, according to Chakrabarty, this does not mean we can simply give up “the universals enshrined in post-Enlightenment rationalism or humanism”. After all, Marx’s “immanent critique of capital” is structured by the “universal characteristics he read into the category of ‘capital’ itself”.

Chakrabarty is not seeking to get rid of the need to engage the universal, regardless of how it manifests itself, whether in the history of the Enlightenment, the history and logic of capital, and more. What he wants to do with his reading of Marx is to try to create a lens through which one can see the category of 'capital' turning into a "site where both the universal history of capital and the politics of human belonging are allowed to interrupt each other's narrative".

Because Capital is a "philosophical-historical category...historical difference is not external to it but is rather constitutive of it" and the histories of capital that consist of History 1 at its base, which are "unevenly modified by more and less powerful History 2's". Due to the role of History 2's, histories of capital are unable to jettison "the politics of the diverse ways of being human". While capital installs into every history some universal themes of the Enlightenment, if we look more closely, we can see that "the universal turns out to be an empty placeholder whose unstable outlines become barely visible only when a proxy, a particular, usurps its position in a gesture of pretension and domination". In this reading of Marx, Chakrabarty goes on to discuss what he terms the "politics of translation" in the writing of history:

To think of Indian history in terms of Marxian categories is to translate into such categories the existing archives of thought and practices about human relations in the subcontinent; but it is also to modify these thoughts and practices with the help of these categories. The politics of translation involved in this process work in both ways. Translation makes possible the emergence of the universal language of the social sciences. But it must also, by the same token, enable a project of approaching social-science categories from both sides of the process of translation, in order to make room for two kinds of histories. One consists of analytical histories that, through the abstracting categories of capital, eventually tend to make all places exchangeable with one another. History 1 is just that, analytical history. But the idea of History 2 beckons us to more affective narratives of human belonging where life forms, although porous to one another, do not seem exchangeable through a third term of equivalence such as abstract labor. (Ibid., 71)

One classic case study to clarify the stakes of the politics of translation as stated above is the connection between modernity and the very figure of the peasant. Despite its connection to



precolonial practices and its tendency to live according to “non-bourgeois, non-secular” forms of life, the peasant was still political in a modern sense and was, thus, crucial to the making of modernity (Anievas and Nisancioglu 2017, 45). In fact, as David Washbrook demonstrates, one cannot imagine a division between, on the one hand, a modern stratum of society versus a putatively “traditional” or “backward” section, the peasantry, without the arrival of colonialism in South Asia (1990). In Chatterjee’s view, the attempt to classify the peasant as “pre-modern, ‘pre-capitalist’ or ‘pre-capital’” corresponds to a violent imposition of a “rationalist grid of elite consciousness” that would make the Subaltern comprehensible to bourgeois nationalists and colonial rulers (2010). Similarly, in *PE*, Chakrabarty asserts, “Much of the institutional activity of governing in India is premised on a day-to-day practice of historicism; there is a strong sense in which the peasant is still being educated and developed into the citizen” (2000, 10). Despite this elite tendency to try and mold the peasant into a ‘better’ modern citizen, ultimately, History 1 gets disrupted by History 2 in the following manner when it comes to the figure of the peasant:

The history and nature of political modernity in an excolonial country such as India thus generates a tension between the two aspects of the subaltern or peasant as citizen. One is the peasant who has to be educated into the citizen and who therefore belongs to the time of historicism; the other is the peasant who, despite his or her lack of formal education, is already a citizen. (Chakrabarty 2000, 10)

Here, we can see that the point of Chakrabarty’s formulation of the politics of translation and his distinction between History 1 and 2 is to provide lens through which one can ascertain the very categories at work in history between modern elites and subalterns. For example, as recounted above, while elites seek to impose on peasants ideological and material practices that would fit with a particular project of modernity, the peasant resists such historicism in their “emphasis on kinship, gods, and the so-called supernatural”. However, one must not make the anachronistic mistake of considering this peasant subject as ‘non-modern’ or ‘anti-modern’ since that would

mean ignoring the histories where the peasant has demonstrated itself as integral to modern politics insofar it has participated through “rebellions, protest marches, sporting events, and in universal adult franchise” despite its seemingly traditionalist way of being (Ibid.).

We believe that Chakrabarty’s descriptions of difference and the Universal within his framing of the problem of translation and History 1-History 2 provides a clue as to how one could go about defining a postcolonial notion of difference. In this regard, it is worth recalling how Chakrabarty describes the Universal’s function as a “place holder”:

No historical form of capital, however global its reach, can ever be a universal. No global (or even local, for that matter) capital can ever represent the universal logic of capital, for any historically available form of capital is a provisional compromise made up of History 1 modified by somebody’s History 2s. The universal, in that case, can only exist as a place holder, its place always usurped by a historical particular seeking to present itself as the universal. (Ibid., 70)

Despite the connotation of relativizing the universal here, Chakrabarty goes on to caution that this does not mean that one should or can, more importantly, give up on “the universals enshrined in post-Enlightenment rationalism or humanism”. As an example of the epistemological effect Enlightenment universals have had on modernity, Chakrabarty reminds the reader that “Marx’s immanent critique of capital was enabled precisely by the universal characteristics he read into the category of ‘capital’ itself” (Ibid.). For Chakrabarty, the political implications of such conditions means that ‘Provincializing Europe’ “cannot be a project of cultural relativism”. That is, it cannot hinge on assuming that “the reason/ science/ universals that help define Europe as the modern” are just culturally relative ultimately and, thus, only a particular form that originate in European culture.

Even after providing this caution against cultural relativism though, Chakrabarty reasserts and elaborates on the Universal’s emptiness:

Capital brings into every history some of the universal themes of the European

Enlightenment, but on inspection the universal turns out to be an empty place holder whose unstable outlines become barely visible only when a proxy, a particular, usurps its position in a gesture of pretension and domination. And that, it seems to me, is the restless and inescapable politics of historical difference to which global capital consigns us. At the same time, the struggle to put in the ever-empty place of History 1 other histories with which we attempt to modify and domesticate that empty, universal history posited by the logic of capital in turn brings intimations of that universal history into our diverse life practices (70-1).

In the above passage, the Universal is posited as a *particular* force of domination, a false universal that only has a *pretense* of representing universality. However, Chakrabarty goes on to highlight that such a false universal does not simply dominate but is always contested by other forces, presumably various History 2's, in the broader struggle for power. In trying to displace History 1's position of domination, History 2's inevitably get their "diverse life practices" translated into the frame of History 1's universal history.

My problem with Chakrabarty's formulation of the Universal as a false universal of domination is that it frames contestation from the margins as just particular rather than potentially representing true universality. As will be shown in our discussion of Tomba's concept of insurgent universality below, this is problematic if one wants to recover histories of struggles for liberation. For now, it must be asked: why does Chakrabarty frame the Universal and the Particular in this manner? To answer this question, it is worth reviewing how difference has been framed in the passages we focused on from *PE*. In outlining the problem of translation, Chakrabarty refers to what others have referred to as translation's tendency to produce 'difference', which constitutes neither a lack of a relationship of domination or "dominating forms of knowledge nor equivalents that successfully mediate between differences" (2000, 17). Rather, difference refers to a "translucence—and not transparency" in the disjuncture between modern Western concepts and their translation when applied to non-Western histories. In formulating his distinction between History 1 and 2, Chakrabarty asserts that difference is neither

something that is outside capital nor something completely subordinated to it. Difference is related to capital along many different axes that range from neutrality to opposition. To some degree, History 2 corresponds to difference insofar as History 2 works to frequently disrupt the “totalizing thrusts of History 1” (Ibid. 65-66).

If one attempts to find a univocal definition of difference in the ways it is employed in Chakrabarty’s discussions above, one will not only fail to do so or risk stating something banal, but also miss the point. This is so because difference, according to Chakrabarty, functions in and through “necessarily fragmentary histories of human belonging that never constitute a one or a whole” (Ibid., 255). This assumption is key because Chakrabarty wants to take issue with the “abstract figure of the universal human” by providing Heideggerian insights on “human belonging and historical difference” (Ibid., 18). Thus, how difference manifests will depend on the case and what angle one looks at it from since Chakrabarty has framed it to resist having a unifying definition. At the very least though, we can say from the foregoing discussion that difference refers to History 2’s that manifest as particulars that punctuate the totality of History 1. History 2’s through the opposition of History 2’s subjects to the empty universality of History 1.

### **Provincializing Europe in Comparative Political Theory**

Now that we have gleaned the function of difference in *PE*, we move on to discuss how some scholars in comparative political theory mirror this classic of postcolonial theory. Despite Chakrabarty’s caution to the contrary, I contend that much of postcolonial political theory mirrors Chakrabarty’s theoretical move of opposing the universal from the position of the particular, often through asserting the importance of studying non-Western thinkers and traditions in order to decenter traditional western political theory, without his sensitivity to how

the post-Enlightenment European tradition has structured our globalized world. For example, in her article on the thesis for “Chinese Origins of Western Knowledge,” Jenco asks how we can distinguish between cultural otherness and the historical otherness “already found in our existing canons of thought?” In exploring this problem, she discusses how Chinese reformers in 1860 sought to change the Confucian civil service curriculum by introducing more education for young elites on mathematics, engineering, and natural science. Specifically, she discusses this historical episode to highlight how “these Chinese reformers pose Chinese origins for Western knowledge not because they assume that historically situated difference is more easily or naturally negotiated than culturally situated difference” (Jenco 2014, 658-659). That is, they comprehend how locating difference within a “received genealogy” leads to this foreign knowledge to become “disciplinary (i.e., capable of facilitating meaningful innovation)” instead of simply assimilating the given foreign knowledge on the terms of one’s tradition. While Jenco recognizes that this claim by Chinese reformers does not have historical validity in the actual history of late Imperial China, she seeks to recognize how this “China-origins thesis” is still valuable as an object of political analysis insofar as it demonstrates how there were attempts to “endow foreign knowledge with recognized ‘membership’” within a Confucian framework.

At the same time, however, Jenco discusses how such a recognition of western knowledge had the unintended effect of “displacing the repositories” of previous Confucian knowledge and intellectual practices, thus contributing to “the evolving criteria of a very different kind of knowledge” (Ibid.). Elaborating on this unintended effect of Chinese reformers’ efforts to integrate modern Western knowledge into Confucian education, Jenco advocates that we seek to take a similar path insofar as we be open to non-western traditions and knowledges even if they will “supplant the very resources that [underwrite] such a [cross-cultural] move in

the first place” within political theory and beyond. Put simply, Jenco is arguing for questioning the very criteria we use to determine what “non-western voices” to include in “new world-historical philosophical canons”. Thus, she is seeking to problematize the very idea of simply expanding canons to include non-western traditions in accordance with either the demands and present realities of our current world or existing categories of traditional political theory. For Jenco, the stakes of being critical of how we go about this endeavor involves displacing our “possibly ethnocentric” criteria, criteria on what counts as “relevant” or interesting to political theorists, that remain hegemonic in many respects. To do this requires that political theorists be open to traditional categories and problems of Western political theory being transformed by non-western political thought even as they seek to understand these traditions through a cross-cultural conversation (676-677). Thus, if “the encounter is to be truly disciplinary rather than merely assimilative, the very criteria of relevance and similarity must be interrogated” (677).

Similar to Jenco’s argument that political theorists be open to revising their “criteria of relevance and similarity” in their encounters with non-western political thought, Godrej argues that “the requirement of adherence” necessitates that scholars studying non-western political thought “are existentially as well as epistemically forced outside their own Eurocentric categories of knowledge”. This requirement that they struggle to bring such experiences into the discourse of political theory entails not just seeking ways to fit descriptions of non-western political thought into the “categories of Western knowledge”. Instead, they need to search for methods of introducing “non-western categories and ways of knowing” into academic political theory. For instance, instead of translating ahimsa as merely nonviolence, the scholar could utilize their existential insights inject the concept of ahimsa into Western discourse, to challenge

and reformulate Western understandings of nonviolence as simply abstention from injury in political action, broadening it to encompass a whole way of life” (Godrej 2009, 164).

What is common to both Jenco and Godrej’s arguments above is that they defend a conception of totally revising the very categories of political theory by attending to non-western political thought which, in their estimation, has been neglected due to the hegemony of the West. In this regard, they share with Chakrabarty a position of opposing the false universalism of the West with supposedly particular knowledges from non-Western political thought. The problem with these positions of seeking to revise the western political canon and its attendant anti-universalism is that they risk missing how modern “social critiques of caste, oppressions of women, the lack of rights for laboring and subaltern classes...and [especially] the very critique of colonialism itself – are unthinkable except as a legacy, partially, of how Enlightenment Europe was appropriated in the subcontinent” (Chakrabarty 2000, 4). Such a blind spot is easy to have if one implicitly or explicitly presupposes a History 1-History 2 distinction where the only force that remotely approaches the place of the Universal is the false Universality of History 1 (as Capital’s history) while all resistance, as forms of History 2, are consigned to the position of the particular. In this vein, translation of resistance that has functioned along universalist categories that often fall under the terms of History 1 (in the form of Enlightenment concepts like freedom and equality for example) become hard to approach without reconsidering what defines the Universal and the Particular in history.

### CHAPTER III: RETURNING TO UNIVERSALITY

While Chakrabarty displays an awareness of this problem of the global nature that ‘European’ enlightenment categories have come to acquire in modernity, some have come to question his and other Subaltern Studies scholars’ emphasis on methodologically fragmentary histories that eschew any sort of universalism that are akin to the structure of History 1. For example, Mytheli Sreenivas has argued, contrary to its characterization as another form of subaltern resistance by some, that the Self-Respect Marriage rebelled against Indian nationalism in ways that would actually be hard to classify as subaltern as it proposed “alternative and modern nationalist forms” (Sreenivas 2008, 92) even as it sought to challenge the “hegemonic project of national modernity” (Chatterjee 1993, 13). In making these claims, Sreenivas differentiates herself from Subaltern Studies insofar as their work analyzed Indian nationalism’s aspirations to hegemony while they recognized alternatives mostly within “the interstices or fragmentary ruptures of nationalist thought”. Aside from these fragmentary resistances, Sreenivas asserts that Indian nationalist discourse was also confronted on its own terms from the beginning by organized movements outside its political orbit like the Self-Respect movement. In other words, the “language of nationalism, as well as [other categories such as] modernity, progress, and universalism,” were not left alone for Indian nationalist discourse to shape according to its own ideology. Rather, movements like the Self Respect movement proposed “an alternative imagination of national culture itself...[and] alternative [national] trajectories” that we cannot simply consider as “inevitably marginal to Indian modernity” (Sreenivas 2008, 92-93).



In a similar vein to Sreenivas, in *The Caste Question*, Rao takes Subaltern Studies to task for not adequately foregrounding “the political culture of caste and the intellectual history of radical anti-caste thought” -- such as those embodied by thinkers like Ambedkar -- in their attempts to analyze “the Indian subaltern, usually viewed as a precapitalist subject rooted in forms of social life that became sources of oppositional consciousness”. In this regard, the Subaltern Studies Collective consistently argued for “tracking the specificity of anticolonial nationalism and nation-state formation, even as it underscored the political complicities between colonial and nationalist elites”. This enabled the Collective, on the one hand, to demonstrate how anticolonial nationalists depended upon colonial institutionalists and, on the other, critique anticolonial nationalism’s reliance on “culturally coded” or traditionalist “forms of authoritarian power” (Rao 2010, 10-11). If the distinctive feature of anticolonial nationalism was designating a crucial role for tradition and culture in political struggle as Chatterjee has asserted elsewhere (1990), then the sustained argument of the Collective was that a “hegemonic, mainstream (Hindu) culture” was made equivalent by nationalist elites with the “distinctive lifeworlds and aspirations of the subaltern”, which enabled this ruling class to engage in antidemocratic politics and epistemic violence. Despite acknowledging the value of analyses such as Ranajit Guha’s work of “insurgent peasants as revolutionary political actors”, Rao argues that “community unhistoricized is simply the locus of a traditional moral order while the subaltern appears negatively”, which is “what is left over outside the axial political equation of colonial state and elite nationalists” (Rao 2010, 11). In other words, the Subaltern Studies Collective failed to approach the Subaltern in any substantive positive sense partly due to their focus on the apparent hegemony of anticolonial nationalism in which the subaltern only had a negative presence as anticolonial nationalism’s other.

Rao's criticism of subaltern studies for not sufficiently taking into account the history of anti-caste thought and politics can be considered part and parcel of a wider effort to interrogate the limits of what can be termed the historical critique of Orientalism in scholarly discussions of South Asian history since the 1980's. A prominent example of the latter is Ronald Inden's *Imagining India*, though we can also discern the outlines of it in the early Subaltern Studies and aspects of the writings of Bernard Cohn. According to this historical critique of Orientalism, European traditions almost entirely constitute the basis of colonial knowledge, which "breaks radically with pre-colonial forms of knowledge". The issue with colonial knowledge is its tendency to operate through essentialism as it comprehended "caste, village India, Hinduism, and other South Asian practices as ahistorical and timeless" (Skaria 2014, 344). Inden understood his job as a historian as one of critiquing such essentialism in order to "restore the agency that those histories have stripped" away (Inden 1990, 1). With respect to how this colonial knowledge structured the discourse of South Asian intellectuals, many scholars have demonstrated that a reverse Orientalism was at work in the interventions of native intellectuals as they often just took over colonial stereotypes and simply inverted their valences.

According to Ajay Skaria, if we comprehend Orientalism as a problem of essentialism, then we can see it as primarily as an "error -- a failed and poor kind of history, even the antithesis of history" (2014, 344). The violence of Orientalism corresponds to its weak claim to universality and its denial of universality to those it essentializes (the subjects of orientalism, the colonized, can never transcend their essence). Thus, the solution to Orientalism is a history that would recuperate the "universality and agency [of] the essentialized object". Skaria admits that this view has been extremely beneficial insofar as it has assisted us in identifying the operations of Orientalism in the most unexpected of places. Concretely, the academy at least has become a

place where old racial stereotypes are considered less legitimate and, thus, less common overall (2014, 344).

However, as highlighted above with the work of Rao and Sreenivas, some have come to probe the limits of this historical critique of orientalism. Another perspective in this regard is provided in C.A. Bayly's *Empire and Information* where he repeatedly emphasizes one theme: "The British understanding of Indian society – as opposed to its trades – may have been extraordinarily defective, but this was more because of a lack of reliable informants than the consequence of orientalist stereotypes." In conversation with Inden directly, Bayly asserts:

...these ideas [that Inden had analysed] were abstractions from a body of competing and fractious ideas, principles and rule-of-thumb which were generated by the routine collisions and alliances of colonial politics. British assessments of crime, religion and native lethargy were more often reflections of the weakness and ignorance of the colonizers than a gauge of hegemony. Orientalism, in Edward Said's sense, was only one of a variety of localized engagements between power and knowledge. (1996, 143)

In a similar vein, he states later:

British knowledge in India was . . . contradictory, insecure, and driven as much by universalizing ideas as by the search for an oriental 'other'. At the same time, the British response was informed by particular local circumstances, not by received ideas derived from metropolitan texts. The growth of professional bodies in India, the competition of Indian practitioners, and the often unacknowledged influence of Indian ideas meant that no coherent body of oriental or colonial knowledge ever emerged. Racism, economic exploitation and orientalism are all valid concepts with which to understand early colonial India, but they were much more tenuously related to each other than recent studies have assumed. By contrast, Indians reacted speedily and pragmatically to the new ideas presented to them. These ideas were as often enlisted to maintain or extend indigenous authorities and statuses as they were to undermine them. (1996, 282)

While Bayly is critical of Orientalism like Inden, he is skeptical of its purported hegemony. His work and other scholarship in a similar vein dismisses Orientalism rather than attacking it.

One could characterize the wider argument of this scholarly literature that questions the limits of the historical critique of orientalism as akin to asserting that Orientalism was “provincialized by history itself” in the colonies. In this regard, Bayly seeks to complicate how Chakrabarty earlier admits that “the region of the world we call ‘Europe’...has already been provincialized by history itself” by modifying this claim in the following manner:

Here, despite the appearance of ‘dialogue’ between East and West, Western modernity was simply ‘provincialized’, to use the words of Dipesh Chakrabarty. But it was provincialized by reason and history, rather than by any appeal to a vague popular authenticity. Thus analogy, incorporation, translation, circumvention and rejection were all modes of appropriation used by Indian public men at different times in the overall attempt to understand the alarming new world in which they lived. (Bayly 2007, 163-9)

In the view of Skaria, this modification proposes that the task of the historian with respect to Orientalism is not to combat colonial stereotypes with historical accounts, but instead “trace the ‘history itself’ that had already in the colonies marginalized Orientalism. Here, the colonized already participated in universality and agency, even if on unequal terms” (2014, 346).

While it is a promising sign that some postcolonial historians have come to question the anti-universalism undergirding much previous postcolonial scholarship, what I find unsatisfactory is the lack of a more robust theoretical reflection on what constitutes universality as it instantiates itself in the history and politics of the colonized. It is for this reason that I draw on Massimiliano Tomba’s notion of “Insurgent Universality” in order to consider how it may assist us in tracking the translation of post-Enlightenment European categories in colonial contexts. Towards this end, I analyze Ambedkar’s critique of the Indian Political-Social distinction, Gandhi on caste, and Gandhism as an ideology.

In *Insurgent Universality*, Tomba argues that the Haitian Revolution in the form of the slave uprisings of Santo Domingo of 1791 and 1793, permits us to reconceptualize the question of universal history and universalism (2019, 18). Elsewhere, Susan Buck-Morss has asserted the

following in regards to the universal significance of the Haitian Revolution: "...rather than giving multiple, distinct cultures equal due, whereby people are recognized as part of humanity indirectly through the mediation of collective cultural identities, [the Haitian Revolution demonstrated that] human universality emerges in the historical event at the point of rupture. It is in the discontinuities of history [like the Haitian Revolution] that people whose culture has been strained to the breaking point give expression to a humanity that goes beyond cultural limits" (2009, 133). In a similar spirit to Buck-Morss, Tomba asks, "What happens if instead of the event chosen by Kant, the revolution in Paris, we take as a starting point the revolution in Haiti?" (2019, 18). Here, Tomba seeks to argue that the French Revolution's universality was realized through the occurrence of the Haitian Revolution as the latter demanded that African slaves receive total emancipation and citizenship (Ibid.): "The French Republic wants all *men* without distinction of color to be free and equal" (Sothonax 2014, 107). In this quote, "the term 'man' becomes the vector of a new universality, the universality that found its inception in the French Revolution but is only really constituted through the Haitian Revolution" (Tomba 2019, 18). Specifically, it was the rebellion of the slaves in Haiti, not the ideals of the Enlightenment, which generated the demand for abolishing slavery and colonialism as part a wider political program and historical movement towards universal emancipation. Taking the Haitian Revolution as his point of departure, Tomba goes on to define insurgent universality thusly:

The universality that I call insurgent has to do with the democratic excess that dis-orders an existing order and gives rise not to chaos, like the theories of the social contract prescribe, but to a new institutional fabric. The democratic excess is such that it goes beyond the constitutional armor of the representative state and calls into play a plurality of powers to which citizens have access, not through the funnel of national citizenship but in daily political practice. This abandons the grounds of the politics of recognition; it does not ask for inclusion but, rather, practices a universal political citizenship that exceeds the limits of legal citizenship and calls into question the forms of dominion, not only in the political sphere but also in the social order. It is here that the deviation between 1789 and 1793 can be seen. (2019, 21)

In this thesis, we seek to highlight how Ambedkar's anti-caste thought embodied insurgent universality as defined above. Towards this end, we begin by briefly discussing why Ambedkar and anti-Caste thought is a suitable case study for insurgent universality. Then we go on to outline Aishwary Kumar's analysis of the Indian Political-Social distinction, an anti-colonial nationalist separation of the project of political independence from social issues like caste discrimination and women's rights. After this, we corroborate Kumar's formulation by looking at how Ambedkar himself was aware of this distinction in his own time as demonstrated by his speech "Ranade, Gandhi, and Jinnah" (Ambedkar 2002, 121-131). Here, we begin demonstrating how insurgent universality undergirds Ambedkar's thought and politics through his refusal of separating social issues from political ones as Indian Nationalists were wont to do, which we take as his demand for a true practice of a politically universalist citizenship that goes beyond the limits of formal law and the state. Subsequently, we examine moments of Ambedkar's critique of Gandhi's views on caste and 'Gandhism' as an ideology in order to trace how Ambedkar's critique of caste manifests itself as an insurgent universality that critiques forms of domination in both political and social spheres, in this case the caste system of colonial India.

## CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS -- AMBEDKAR'S INSURGENT UNIVERSALITY

To begin our analysis, we start with justifying our selection of modern Indian anti-caste thought as a tradition of insurgent universality. In “Dalit-Bahujan Discourse in Modern India,” Valerian Rodrigues considers the substantial differences between the discourses of Indian nationalists and anti-caste thought respectively as it pertains to their positions on colonial modernity. As Chatterjee (1995) and Kaviraj (1997) discuss in their own work, Indian nationalist discourse had an “ambivalent attitude” towards colonial modernity as it sought to both learn from Western models of material modernization while trying to “salvage a non-negotiable [cultural] domain” in which the nation’s identity could come into its own. Thus, Indian nationalism opposed not modernity in total, but a particular version of it (Rodrigues 2006, 54-55).<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, modern Indian anti-caste thought sees modernity, colonial or otherwise, as a “significant advance over the premodern past”. For thinkers like Phule, Ambedkar, and Periyar, the cultural identity that mainstream Indian nationalism sought to construct was “deeply oppressive”. Thus, anti-caste thought positions itself as open to a “more substantial version of modernity spilling into the ‘inner’ cultural domain”. For them, modernity was not considered exclusively British or Western, even if its hegemonic versions were to some degree. Anti-caste thought believed that “the principles of modernity are superior to the principles in [the] existing social institutions [of modern Indian caste society]”, thus leading them to think that the principles of modernity could “be used to interrogate both colonial modernity” and the

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<sup>1</sup> This point will receive some elaboration in our discussion of the Indian Political-Social distinction below in the details of why Indian nationalists sought a different arrangement of the political and social.

Brahminical modernity of Indian nationalists (Rodrigues 2006, 55). It is due to this alternative notion of modernity that sought to be more emphatically modern than Indian nationalism that we believe that a thinker like Ambedkar and modern Indian anti-caste thought more widely is in line with Tomba's notion of insurgent universality since anti-caste thought sought to challenge Indian nationalism's prioritization of political independence over social questions, especially those pertaining to caste and women's rights.

Now that we have justified our selection of Ambedkar as a case study for insurgent universality, we now move on to Aishwary Kumar's discussion of the Indian political-social distinction. In *Radical Equality*, Kumar calls attention to a peculiar taming of the more "recalcitrant dimensions of [Ambedkar's] thought" by having his authorship of the Indian constitution overdetermine his body of work. The effect of this framing is that it curtails "the insurrectionary possibilities – and duties – of citizenship" that Ambedkar's work "sought to open up". In this domestication of Ambedkar, where he is folded back into the history of India's Constituent Assembly, the "contradictions of the anticolonial movement for sovereignty" are reconciled through consecrating the nation as embodied in the state via a sanctification of its "constitutional success, of which Ambedkar could be positioned a liberal democratic champion" (Kumar 2015, 17). While Ambedkar is rightly considered an exemplary thinker of the connection between "philosophy and government", according to the above perspective, he comes to stand "outside the classical debates on the relationship between action, obedience, and truth, his conceptual scruples and struggles circumscribed within the framework of what Hannah Arendt, distinguishing it sharply from the realm of the political, calls 'the social question'" (Kumar 2015, 18).



The result of this reduction of Ambedkar to a “theorist of social amelioration” has had deleterious effects on the history of radical democracy. One such issue is how the history of the politics of the colonized in the late nineteenth century has come to be centered on individuals like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Bal Gangadhar Tilak. It was in the nationalist thought of these figures that the origin of politics’ spiritualization is found insofar as politics for the Indian national movement became connected to consolidating “religious identity and emotion into a moral psychology of resistance”. Once the 1890’s had rolled around, the question of *swaraj*, or home rule, had acquired a vocabulary of both “existential risk and spiritual survival”. During this period, the struggle to gain freedom from empire, which had since the 1860s been centered on the activities of community petitioners, reform groups, liberal political associations, and landholder lobbies, had started to become rendered with “rhetorics of civilizational transcendence and spiritual restitution”.

For Kumar, such discursive features of anti-colonial nationalism reveal that “India’s political modernity” was “theologico-political at its source”. In other words, the earliest architects of Indian modernity could not easily separate their “enchantment with the idea of the state” from “their prescriptions on religious conduct and spiritual affirmation”. This had the effect of sidelining equality, that “founding concept of the social question within traditions of modern thought and ethics,” insofar as the new political and religious theory of sovereignty came to acquire mass appeal in the struggle against the British Empire. Such a lack of commitment to equality by Indian nationalists became apparent as communal riots along religious lines occurred periodically during the transition to anticolonial mass politics. As Kumar notes, Gandhi was sensitive to this reemergence of communal conflict between Muslims and Hindus as his intervention in *Hind Swaraj* illustrates. Going against the grain of his time, he argues that “the

only force proper to India's struggle for swaraj" is the cultivation of "respect for other people's faiths" while remaining steadfast in one's own. However, Kumar notes that Gandhi is completely silent on caste inequality and that there is a "peculiar absence of the 'untouchable' in the rich economy of metaphors" that undergirds the rhetoric of *Hind Swaraj*.

Such silences are partly symptomatic of the "ambiguity in Indian imaginaries of the nation form – the juridical and religious exclusions inseparable from the triumphant proclamations of anti-colonial nationalism". Ambedkar had such exclusions in mind when he coined the term "the Indian Political" in *Pakistan, or the Partition of India* (1945). However, he was not the first to criticize Indian nationalism along these lines, even if he ended up being the most systematic. The beginnings of modern anti-caste thought, the "other tradition of critique", can be dated back to at least the late 19th century with the publication of *Gulgamgiri* (Slavery, 1873), which was inspired by the American Civil war, by the radical social reformer Jotirao Phule. Despite such a long running lineage, figures such as Phule, Ambedkar, and Periyar have never quite fit in "the anticolonial order of things" from the perspective of historians who have worked on the Indian political because thinkers like Ambedkar "concerned themselves with the institution of society, with the problem of coexistence among Indian society's diverse, unequal, and mutually untouchable constituents." Thus, the way anti-caste intellectuals thought about freedom was more sensitive to "those everyday prohibitions – indignity, segregation, untouchability – that seemed too mundane," at least in relation to an Indian nationalism whose focus was of a grander scale insofar as it centered itself on "spiritual well-being". In the view of Indian nationalists, the social theory of anti-caste intellectuals seemed to reduce freedom and justice to "questions of spatial mobility, occupational dignity, physical noninterference, and social security" (Ibid., 19-20).

Put another way, this “other vision of freedom...was not concerned with the ethics of civilizational mastery and national spirit”. Moreover, the universalism of anti-caste thought did not prioritize “the humanist desire for liberation from imperial domination” (Ibid., 20).

Elaborating on these points, Kumar asserts:

In fact, this struggle seems to have never belonged to the governing rules and shared expectations of the political at all. Instead, its ‘small’ insurrections have been consigned to the realm of the social, a domain concerned with the spatial and material dimensions of everyday stigma, suffering, poverty, and labor relations. Its demands for restitution were, after all, articulated in terms of constitutional safeguards and juridical regulations against caste cruelty and religious oppression alone. With an incurably anthropological and statist understanding of ideals such as citizenship, advocates of this struggle aligned themselves with the abstract reason of the ‘rights of man,’ looking toward the egalitarian zeal of democracy in America while disavowing the spiritual rigor and love of tradition that would need to be embraced for a political restoration of the Indian self. (Ibid.)

Kumar’s point in the above exposition is that a distinction between “the political and the social, the spiritual and material – and in Gandhi’s Platonic world, the intelligible and sensible” informs many different judgments of this “insurrectionary (but always patient and attentive) vision of politics” that Ambedkar operated within. This especially Indian version of Arendt’s separation of the political from the social has lived a long life within anticolonial historiography (Ibid., 20-21).

In *On Revolution*, Arendt cautions, “The whole record of past revolutions demonstrates that every attempt to solve the social question by political means leads into terror” (1963, 150).

While there are many implications one can draw from Arendt’s distinction between the political and the social, Kumar wants to draw attention to its relevance for anticolonial nationalism. In this regard, he argues that this distinction actualized itself in the practice of anticolonial liberation struggles much before Arendt articulated it with philosophical weight in light of twentieth century totalitarianisms. In India, distinguishing between the political and social came to manifest itself in a set of “categorical hierarchies” that, since the late nineteenth century,

framed the anticolonial call for national independence in the following manner: “freedom before equality, unity before justice, territorial safety before social security, and as Ambedkar would often wryly remark—most powerfully in *Annihilation of Caste* (henceforth abbreviated *AoC*) itself, as he took on the Brahmin liberal S. Radhakrishnan (subsequently the second president of free India)—claims to civilizational certitude before a commitment to civic virtue” (Kumar 2015, 21). In such oppositions, the political becomes cordoned off from those, such as anti-caste intellectuals, who contemplated “its truth, value, and mentality, its relationship to ethics” in less hierarchical and exclusionary terms, which were more decentralized and dispersed than the “vision of anticolonial politics” could permit. Such a separation has meant that thinkers like Phule are either excluded from the genealogy of the Indian political or, as in Ambedkar’s case, are reduced to “enigmatic, if not troubling” figures. It is almost as if the conditions of the exclusions of Indian nationalism preordained that Ambedkar, as he recognized himself, would persist as a “part apart” due to how “his Atlantic inspiration [is] often considered embarrassing for those who position twentieth century anticolonialism as a doctrine of spiritual freedom mounted against Eurocentric paradigms of political thought and practice” (Kumar 2015, 21).

In line with Kumar’s account of the Political-Social distinction in anticolonial nationalism, we now move on to trace how Ambedkar was sensitive to this Political-Social distinction of Indian nationalism in his own time. In this vein, we analyze his speech “Ranade, Gandhi, and Jinnah”. In this work, Ambedkar gives an account of the Indian political-social distinction as it pertained to Ranade’s fundamental disagreement with “the political school of the [Indian] intelligentsia”. The latter ‘political’ intellectuals held to the thesis that “political reform was to have precedence over social reform”. This meant blocking social reform, such as those applying to marriage or the rights of women to own property and be educated, until it was

deemed that sufficient political independence has been acquired by the Indian people. In this piece, Ambedkar argues against prioritizing political over social reform. Towards this end, he summarizes the main assertions of these political reformers in three points. First, Indian political reformers would state that they want political reform first because they want to “protect the rights of the people”. Ambedkar replies that such an argument problematically assumes that there are already rights vested in the people to protect. It is based on a very minimalist theory of Government like what Thomas Jefferson subscribed to. Jefferson believed “politics was only an affair of policing by the State so that the rights of the people were maintained without disturbance”. To critique this notion as found amongst Jefferson and 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian political reformers, Ambedkar first assumes the above statement is a valid one. If politics is merely a matter of a state having enough police powers to ensure that the rights of the people are respected, then said rights must exist in a substantial form before we can even talk about policing (real or possible) violations of them. Ambedkar rejects such a theory in the case of India since, at the time he gave this speech, he did not believe that ‘the rights of the people’ existed in a substantial sense. Thus, he opposes prioritizing political over social reform as that would ultimately mean protecting the few ruling castes and classes in Indian society who have rights while “penalizing those that have none”. In this first thesis alone of the Indian political reformers described by Ambedkar, we already see how Indian nationalists were seeking to separate the implementation of formal political rights from their manifestation, or lack thereof, in society, in line with a more general distinction between the political and social.

The second thesis of these political radicals according to Ambedkar is that “they wanted political power because they wanted to confer on each individual certain fundamental rights by law” and that this would not happen until political power was first acquired. Ambedkar accepts

that it is indeed a noble aspiration to confer rights on every individual. However, the question is how to make these rights effective even after they have been codified into law. It is problematic to assume that such a codification of rights alone is enough for them to have any meaningful effect on society (Ambedkar 2002, 121-122). On this point, Ambedkar asserts:

As experience proves, rights are protected not by law but by the social and moral Conscience of society. If social conscience is such that it is prepared to recognize the rights which law choose to enact, rights will be safe and secure. But if the fundamental rights are opposed by the community, no Law, no Parliament, no Judiciary can guarantee them in the real sense of the word. What is the fundamental use of rights to the Negroes of America, to the Jews in Germany, and to the Untouchables in India? (Ambedkar 2002, 122)

Elaborating on this claim, Ambedkar invokes Burke to say that Law can only punish individuals who have violated it. It cannot do the same with respect to collectives that are determined to defy it. What we have in the above discussion of the second thesis is the political reformers' desire to seize state power and Ambedkar's corresponding retort that mere implementation of law does not make them *socially* effective. In regards to the latter, we get an elaboration of Ambedkar's more substantial notion of a really existing social domain that may or may not reflect the rights or laws that have been codified.

The third thesis of these political radicals that Ambedkar presents is that they desire "self-government". In this vein, they often decree "Self-Government is better than good government". Ambedkar rejects this argument since self-government does not always imply a good government. However, he is not saying that these political radicals do not wish to have self-government and good government. In fact, they sought to establish a "democratic form of government". But he questions whether such an aspiration is possible to implement in Indian society as it existed in his time since "a democratic form of government presupposes a democratic form of society". Democracy as a "formal framework" for politics has no value if it

is not accompanied by social democracy. These political reformers could not see this because they only conceived of democracy as connected to the political domain, particularly as it pertains to the state, rather than the social domain. In this third thesis, we can see a certain repetition of the Indian nationalist “enchantment with the idea of the state” (Kumar 2015, 21), which is nothing new compared to the previous two theses. However, what is new is Ambedkar’s response to it insofar as asserts democracy as not only a political form but also a social form.

Just from the above three theses of the Indian political reformers and Ambedkar’s responses to them, we can see that he was attentive to the Indian political-social distinction. In this regard, Ambedkar takes the political reformers to task for confining their thought to the political (as defined by the state and who runs it) and not paying attention to the social (insofar as its content concerns the existing conditions of a given society beyond formal government or law). This is a running thread in the next two theses as Ambedkar reemphasizes the social in response to the arguments of Indian political reformers. What is it about this move from the political to the social that indicates that Ambedkar’s criticisms here are undergirded by insurgent universality? To answer this, one need only look to how he defines democracy as both a political form and social form, which needs from its citizens “first...an attitude of mind, an attitude of respect and equality toward their fellows. The second is a social organization free from rigid social barriers. Democracy is incompatible and inconsistent with isolation and exclusiveness, resulting in the distinction between the privileged and the underprivileged” (Ambedkar 2002, 123). In this definition of democracy, we can see that Ambedkar, as an insurgent universalist, is calling for a more universal practice of citizenship that would not only be reflected in a formal codification of rights by the state but also a better social order as he criticizes the forms of domination in both political and social spheres.

So far, we analyzed an example of Indian nationalists' preoccupation with the political apart from the social and one of Ambedkar's efforts to critique this ideological division. While we have demonstrated that Ambedkar's sensitivity to the social is partly inspired by a capacious notion of democracy that would qualify him as a figure of insurgent universality, we believe more elaboration is needed on some of the ideological issues he was responding to in his own time. Doing this allows us to further comprehend the depth of Ambedkar's insurgent universality insofar as it was constituted by a finely tuned critical attention to domination and exploitation in both the political and social spheres of colonial India. Towards this end, we focus on moments from *AoC* and *What Congress and Gandhi have Done to the Untouchables* (henceforth shortened to *Congress and Gandhi*) as they pertain to aspects of Ambedkar's critique of Gandhi and the ideology of Gandhism on caste in order to outline what Ambedkar saw as Gandhi's sanctification of the Indian status quo, an assertion in line with Kumar's discussion of the general tendency of how Indian nationalism's "ethics of civilizational mastery and national spirit" tended to blind them to social issues.

In *AoC*, there is a section called "Reply to the Mahatma" that was appended to the original version of text after Gandhi presented some criticisms in one of his newspapers. One can say that this section constitutes an excellent starting point to broach the political and social differences between Ambedkar and Gandhi with respect to caste. Furthermore, it has the virtue of providing a summary of the main points Ambedkar made in the main body of his famous undelivered 1936 speech as the following:

1. That Caste has ruined the Hindus; 2. That the reorganization of the Hindu Society on the basis of Chaturvarnya is impossible because the Varnavyavastha is like a leaky pot or like a man running at the nose. It is incapable of sustaining itself by its own virtue, and has an inherent tendency to degenerate into a Caste System unless there is a legal sanction behind it which can be enforced against everyone transgressing his Varna;



3. That the reorganization of the Hindu Society on the basis of Chaturvarnya would be harmful, because the effect of the Varnavyavastha would be to degrade the masses by denying them opportunity to acquire knowledge, and to emasculate them by denying them the right to be armed; 4. That the Hindu Society must be reorganized on a religious basis which would recognise the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity; 5. That in order to achieve this object the sense of religious sanctity behind Caste and Varna must be destroyed; 6. That the sanctity of Caste and Varna can be destroyed only by discarding the divine authority of the Shastras. (Ambedkar [1936] 2004)

In the above summary of Ambedkar's argument, his critique of caste, which he considers as integral to Hinduism insofar as it can be called religion, assumes a position of insurgent universality by how he outlines the social effects the caste system has had on Indian society and his aspiration to replace it with democracy. For Ambedkar, the way Hinduism has functioned for thousands of years makes it incapable of being retained as a tradition worthy of emulation in the modern era without significant modifications that might make one question if it would still be 'Hinduism'.

After recapitulating the main arguments of *AoC*, Ambedkar goes on to respond to Gandhi's criticisms point by point. Since it is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss this exchange in its entirety, we highlight parts of Ambedkar's response where he takes to task Gandhi's spiritualization of politics as he finds this dimension of Gandhi's discourse to be inimical to a truly democratic society. At one point, Ambedkar criticizes Gandhi's idea that Hindu society can reform itself "without any fundamental change in its structure if all the high caste Hindus can be persuaded to follow a higher standard of morality in their dealings with the low caste Hindus". Ambedkar rejects this argument insofar he denies that just a change in one's "personal character" can make a person "loaded with the consciousness of caste" not treat his fellow human beings as "superior or inferior" in line with the graded inequality of the caste system. In other words, a Hindu "can never be expected to deal with his fellows as his kinsman and equals". But the problem with the Hindu is not their personal character. Rather, the problem

is “the entire basis of his relationship to his fellows,” how the caste system shapes the Hindu’s consciousness whether they want it to or not since the given society is founded on caste or varna divisions (Ambedkar [1936] 2004).

In explaining why Gandhi holds on to a society based on Varna, Ambedkar recalls how earlier Gandhi defended the caste system on the grounds that it is the best form of society for social stability than a class system. Ambedkar admits that everyone wants a stable life, but not at the cost of mobility and adjustment to circumstances without any possibility of social justice. For Ambedkar, the implicit reason that Gandhi is holding onto a view supporting the caste system by calling it Varna is due to how the politician side of Gandhi stands in the way of his saintly persona. On this point, Ambedkar posits two ideological roles of Gandhi. First, Gandhi seeks to “spiritualize politics”. In particular, this spiritualization has allowed Gandhi’s image as a saint to be commercialized. This feeds into Gandhi’s second role as a politician, which mainly refers to the basic function of the politician as one who adjusts his discourse based on a minimal pragmatism (or opportunism) to maintain their significant position in society once they have attained it. On the matter of why Gandhi seems to continue to support caste by calling it Varna, Ambedkar states that Gandhi “is afraid that if he opposed them he will lose his place in politics.”

While Ambedkar is clearly arguing that Gandhi’s politics is opportunistic to some degree above, it should be noted Ambedkar is not asserting that Gandhi is a purely cynical political figure with no ideology. On the contrary, Ambedkar describes Gandhi as a conservative par excellence seeking to defend the old Brahminical order:

The Mahatma appears not to believe in thinking. He prefers to follow the saints. Like a conservative with his reverence for consecrated notions, he is afraid that if he once starts thinking, many ideals and institutions to which he clings will be doomed. One must sympathize with him. For every act of independent thinking puts some portion of an apparently stable world in peril. But it is equally true that dependence on saints cannot lead us to know the truth. The saints are after all only human Beings...Insofar as

[Gandhi] does think, to me he really appears to be prostituting his intelligence to find reasons for supporting this archaic social structure of the Hindus. (Ambedkar [1936] 2004)

In highlighting the above passages from *AoC*, we have sought to sketch out aspects of Ambedkar's critique of Gandhi as it pertains to the latter's views on caste. So far, we can note two initial targets of Ambedkar's critique: 1. Gandhi's tendency to reduce social problems to an issue of personal morality rather than oppressive social structures 2. Gandhi's preference for a caste-based society over one based on class as the former, in his view, generates greater social stability. Eventually, Ambedkar's riposte of these two positions leads him to describe Gandhi as an opportunistic politician with the garb of an orthodox Hindu.

While *AoC*, as one of Ambedkar's most famous texts, provides some contours of Ambedkar's critique of Gandhi, it is in *Congress and Gandhi* that Ambedkar enumerates a more full-throated critical assessment of Gandhi's politics. In fact, one of the chapter's titles is named "Gandhism," which sets out to describe this ideology's underlying social and economic philosophy and then criticize it. In this vein, after discussing Gandhi's opposition to labor strikes and machinery, Ambedkar asserts, "Gandhism may well be suited to a society which does not accept democracy as its ideal" (2002, 159). Supporting this argument, Ambedkar reiterates that a democratic society requires a certain level of economic development and "civilization" so that each citizen can have, to some degree, a "life of leisure and culture". But Gandhi would have "the common man...toiling ceaselessly for a pittance and remain a brute" (Ambedkar 2002, 159). What undergirds this sanctification of proletarian labor is how "Gandhism is not satisfied with only *notional* class distinctions. Gandhism insists upon class structure. It regards the class structure of society and also the income structure as sacrosanct with consequent distinctions of rich and poor, high and low, owners and workers as permanent parts of social organization"

(Ibid., 160). Ambedkar's condemnation of this Gandhian making-sacred of class divisions can be summed up by the following statement: "The isolation and exclusiveness following upon the class structure creates in the privileged classes the anti-social spirit of a gang" (Ibid.).

While Ambedkar would agree that there should be a minimal analytic distinction between how class and caste functions, it is clear that he believes that Gandhi's sanctification of class divisions extends also to caste ones if one examines the underlying political theology of Ambedkar's statement that "the social ideal of Gandhism is either caste or varna".<sup>2</sup> The sanctification that founds this Gandhian ideal of caste or varna is located by Ambedkar in how "Gandhism is a paradox. It stands for freedom from foreign domination which means destruction of the existing political structure of the country. At the same time, it seeks to maintain intact a social structure which permits the domination of one class by another on a hereditary basis which means a perpetual domination of one class by another" (Ibid., 165). The key term in this passage that hints that Ambedkar is talking about both class and caste in the same breadth is "hereditary basis," arguably the key component of what distinguishes caste from class since, by contrast, modern class society at least presupposes one can have an occupation different from the parents

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term 'political theology' here in the Schmittian sense to refer to "[the Sovereign] who decides on the exception" (Schmitt 2005, 5) and its theological correlate in the concept of good and evil, where evil denotes the exception to the good, which is decided with respect to what is considered to be the good of God (Hirst 1999, 99). Thus, according to Schmitt, the concepts of the modern theory of the state are 'secularized theological concepts' as Christian theology has influenced the historical development of this state (36). In *Periyar: A Study in Political Atheism*, Manoharan (2022) reviews Schmitt's concept of political theology in order to develop a thematic for analyzing Periyar's thought called "political atheism," which he initially defines as a "challenge to political theology [insofar as the former] acknowledges the unity or affinity of religion and the state, and opposes both" (42). In the context of India, Periyar opposed what he saw as the Hindu political theology of Brahminism, which he believed operated in and through "the Indian state and its apparatuses like the law, education, police, press, and others..." (Manoharan 2022, 63). In general, anti-Brahminism is a common trope within modern Indian anti-caste thought. It is for this reason that one might say that Ambedkar opposed the political theology undergirding Gandhi's social and political thought as hinted above. However, we must keep in mind that this did not necessarily entail a political atheism and opposition to the state as in the case of Periyar since different anti-caste thinkers proposed different alternatives to Brahminical Hinduism. For example, it is well known that Ambedkar was a proponent of the constitutional liberal state and, at the end of his life, considered Buddhism as the best religious and ethical route for Untouchables and other lower castes to break away from oppression imposed upon them by Hinduism.

one was born to. While one could argue that Ambedkar is primarily talking about caste even though he is using the term class in the above passage, it is clear from the wider context of the chapter that he is loosely referring to how, in his view, Gandhism wants to sanctify both caste and class divisions in modern Indian society. Again, the latter is evident by how Gandhi opposed both labor strikes and machinery as a means for economic development.

Ambedkar elaborates on this point of Gandhism's sanctification of India's social structure in the form of caste by arguing that, ultimately, Gandhism is just Orthodox Hinduism with a 'more human face' as both believe in caste, the "law of hereditary profession," and "karma, predestination of man's condition in this world". This equivocation is especially driven home when Ambedkar goes on to famously assert what Hinduism means for Untouchables:

To the Untouchables, Hinduism is a veritable chamber of horrors. The sanctity and infallibility of the Vedas, Smritis, and Shastras, the iron law of caste, the heartless law of karma and the senseless law of status by birth are to the Untouchables veritable instruments of torture which Hinduism has forged against the Untouchables. These very instruments which have mutilated, blasted, and blighted the life of Untouchables are to be found intact in the bosom of Gandhism. (Ibid., 171)

In highlighting the above moments from *AoC* and *Congress and Gandhi*, we have sought to sketch out how Ambedkar's critique of Gandhi as it pertains to caste is partly constituted by a critical eye to Gandhi's deleterious spiritualization of politics. This aspect of Ambedkar's critique is crucial insofar as it corresponds to Kumar's assertion that Indian nationalists in general, whether they be Gandhi or others, often had a constitutive blindness to social issues due to their ideological commitment to their restoration of a specific 'Indian self,' which Ambedkar and other anti-caste thinkers would refer to as a Brahminical Hindu self. We believe this aspect of Ambedkar's thought in particular and modern Indian anti-caste thought more generally is important insofar it highlights the insurgent universality of this tradition as it sought to respond

to Indian nationalism's lack of sensitivity to social questions due to the latter's politics of prioritizing civilizational mastery.

Now that we have established Ambedkar's insurgent universality by highlighting his commitment to a practice of a more universal form of citizenship and his sensitivity to both the social and political spheres, we would like to briefly discuss some critical comments Tomba has made on Chakrabarty's *PE* in order to further problematize postcolonial anti-universality. Towards this end, we first take note of a passage from *AoC* that Chakrabarty uses in *PE* to illustrate the historicism that underlies even the most benign efforts at social justice. After this, we critically respond to Chakrabarty's reading by drawing out the consequences of how insurgent universality forces us to distinguish between a historicism of the oppressed and the historicism of the oppressor. Subsequently, we examine Tomba's reformulation of History 1 and 2 and provide an alternative reading of Ambedkar's historicist critique of Hinduism in light of Tomba's reframing of universality.

In the conclusion of *PE*, Chakrabarty focuses on a passage from *AoC* where Ambedkar criticizes the Hindus for their traditionalist orientation towards the past. Here, Ambedkar demands the Hindus be more critical of what part of their heritage they seek to preserve rather than thinking that all their heritage, regardless of its horrors, is sacred. On this point, he invokes the following words from John Dewey: "Every society gets encumbered with what is trivial, with dead wood from the past, and with what is positively perverse....As a society becomes more enlightened, it realizes that it is responsible not to conserve and transmit the whole of its existing achievements, but only such as make for a better future society." Ambedkar goes on to demand that Hindus "consider whether they must not cease to worship the past as supplying their ideals". On this he, again, defers to John Dewey with the following: "An individual can live only in the

present. The present is not just something which comes after the past; much less something produced by it.” Shortly thereafter, Ambedkar asserts, “...the Hindus must consider whether the time has not come for them to recognize that there is nothing fixed, nothing eternal, nothing *sanatan* [eternal, timeless]; that everything is changing, that change is the law of life for individuals as well as for society. In a changing society, there must be a constant revolution of old values; and the Hindus must realize that if there must be standards to measure the acts of men, there must also be a readiness to revise those standards” ([1936] 2004).

After presenting the above passages from Ambedkar, Chakrabarty argues that the reasoning undergirding Ambedkar’s assertions are historicist because they assume that “to get a grip on things we need to know their histories, the process of development they have undergone in order to become what they are”. The issue here is not necessarily seeking to explain historical conditions, but how historicism tends to promise “to the human subject a certain degree of autonomy with respect to history”. In other words, historicism gives us the illusion that we could gain a “certain mastery” over the “causal structures operating in history” once we have discerned them (Chakrabarty 2012, 247). For Chakrabarty, what undergirds this “modernist dream of the ‘true present’ that always looks to, and in turn is determined by, the blue print of a desirable future” (2012, 248) is a “practice of anachronism” that permits us to “reify the past into an object of study” (Ibid., 244).

While we do not deny that there is a certain historicism that underlies Ambedkar’s call to Hindus to critically reevaluate their religion and heritage, we would caution that one ought to distinguish between a historicism of the oppressed and the historicism of the oppressor. Such a distinction follows from the view that the West was provincialized by “reason and history” rather than a “vague popular authenticity” as the colonized participated in universality due to how their

struggles for liberation went beyond the formalism of Enlightenment categories like freedom, reason, and progress. In other words, they were motivated by an insurgent universality in which their “democratic excess” sought to replace an oppressive status quo with a different order that would allow a truly plural practice of universal citizenship that goes beyond the legal confines of formal rights and also permits a calling into question of both political and social injustices.

Such a conception of universality as insurgent, as opposed to being an “empty place holder” for a particular force of domination, forces us reconsider the place of the universal and the particular in Chakrabarty’s definition of History 1 and 2. In his work, Tomba criticizes Chakrabarty’s distinction between History 1 and 2 by calling to attention how an occasionally “monolithic concept of Europe” emerges from Chakrabarty’s account of it. In response to this, Tomba seeks to pluralize ‘Europe’ through his concept of insurgent universality and the case studies he musters by demonstrating that “European modernity” is “crisscrossed by multiple conflicting temporalities”<sup>3</sup> that permit him to “to raise the question of multiple possible bridges between European and non-European trajectories” (Tomba 2019, 10-11). With this in mind, Tomba goes on to reframe “Universal” in the following manner:

In this way, the universal is not only placed on the abstract level of what Chakrabarty calls [History 1], limiting [History 2] in its particularity, but is also expressed in conflicts between different temporalities and, as in the cases we are examining, it builds unexpected bridges between alternative trajectories of modernity. For me, it is not a question of choosing between the dominant temporality of socially necessary labor or the nation-state and local temporalities anchored in traditional relationships. Rather, it is about considering the tension between those different temporalities as a field of possibility open to different political outcomes. It is in this tension that politics exposes itself to the risk of change and becomes truly political. (2019, 11)

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<sup>3</sup> In discussing the other temporalities that conflict with the conventional formulations of modernity and universality, Tomba analyzes not only the Haitian Revolution but also the 1871 Paris Commune, popular mobilizations during the Russian Revolution in 1918, and the politics of the Zapatistas in 1994 (2019).



Following Tomba on tracing “alternative trajectories of modernity”, we have taken steps to analyze how insurgent universality manifests in Ambedkar’s work by examining his critique of the Indian Political-Social distinction, Gandhi, and Gandhism on caste. In line with this, we now go on to reinterpret the passage from Ambedkar that Chakrabarty criticizes as historicist in light of Tomba’s reformulation of the place of the Universal in History 1 and 2.

As stated above, even though we admit that Ambedkar’s demand that Hindus be more critical of their heritage is founded on historicism, we believe that making this assertion without a distinction that separates the historicism of the oppressed from the historicism of the oppressor runs the risk of allowing such an argument to be weaponized by political forces who oppose most struggles for social justice (such as the Hindu nationalist right, for example). Rather than classify Ambedkar’s critique of Hinduism as a historicist one that still functions within the logic of History 1, which according to Charkabarty is still capitalist universality, it would be more productive to consider Ambedkar’s discourse as a historicism of insurgent universality insofar his historicist reasoning serves a universal project of emancipation that represents an alternative pathway of modernity that could have and still can serve as the foundation for a truly political practice of politics outside what have been the dominant themes of History 1 such as the nation-state or capitalism. As demonstrated by our discussion of the particulars of their oppositional stance to Indian Nationalism’s separation of the political from the social, it is clear that to some degree Ambedkar and modern Indian anti-caste thought embodies such an emancipatory drive despite the limits of their discourse (considering that their horizon was emphatically modernist).

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

In the humanities and social sciences, the very term decolonization has become integral to addressing historical injustices by seeking to deconstruct a Eurocentric canon and centering non-western thinkers and histories. In the realm of political theory, this has meant consistently criticizing work, traditional and contemporary, that is premised upon a blindness to Western imperialism and chauvinism. While acknowledging the importance of these trends, Getachew and Mantena take postcolonial scholars to task for how their critiques of Eurocentrism are often idealist and ahistorical as they fail to engage with the concrete and material problems of colonialism like Fanon and Gandhi did, for example. To highlight another issue with the call to provincialize Europe, Simon cautions against an intellectual decolonization of political theory that would leave out non-western figures who were deeply inspired by classics of modern (western) political thought.

While I take the above criticisms of postcolonial political theory to be well founded, I argue that part of the problem with postcolonial political theory is its investment in a certain notion of difference that structures the criteria of what counts as postcolonial thought. In demonstrating this, I conducted a close reading of Chakrabarty's *PE* to hone in on what this thematic of difference could refer to (if we take Chakrabarty as our point of departure). In this regard, we found that difference is defined by History 2's that manifest as particulars that disrupt History 1's drive totalization as History 2's resistance opposes the false universality of History 1. I came to question Chakrabarty's formulation of difference as it leaves no room for the oppressed to be in a position of universality if they work within a historicist frame.

After discussing Chakrabarty's conceptualization of difference, we went on to highlight how this thematic of difference manifests itself in Comparative Political Theory. Similar to Chakrabarty, scholars such as Jenco and Godrej oppose the hegemony of a false Western universalism with previously unacknowledged knowledges from non-Western traditions. While we do not reject the importance of this process of canon revision and questioning traditional categories of political theory, it is clear that an overemphasis on 'non-western' traditions that do not utilize any 'western categories' runs the risk of paying due attention to how modern Enlightenment categories have informed struggles for social justice in the colonies. In arguing for the importance of a more robust conception of universality, we reviewed how some historians of modern South Asia have come to question the postcolonial emphasis on the subaltern as a subject that manifests itself as a fragmentary resistance (to either colonialism or anti-colonial nationalism) as a political agent that avoids hegemonic categories of modernity such as nation, freedom, and universality. In this regard, we take C.A. Bayly's formulation that Europe was "provincialized by reason and history, rather than by any appeal to a vague popular authenticity" as "analogy, incorporation, translation, circumvention and rejection were all modes of appropriation" that the colonized used to challenge their marginalization (2006, 163-9) as an excellent starting point of how one might conceive of universality in a postcolonial vein that avoids the pitfalls of anti-universalism.

However, the question becomes how to define this universality, even if preliminarily, in a way that would allow us to trace its history? In this thesis, we proposed Tomba's conception of "insurgent universality" as a candidate for such a task. In demonstrating this, we focused on notable Indian anti-caste intellectual and movement leader B.R. Ambedkar. Specifically, we examined his critique of the Indian Political-Social distinction, Gandhi, and Gandhian ideology

on caste in order to show that his thought was founded on an insurgent universality in which his commitment to democratic insurgence sought to contest what he saw as a conservative Indian nationalist imaginary in order to replace it with a more pluralist practice of universal citizenship that goes beyond formal law and also permits substantial challenges to both political and social justice. After outlining how insurgent universality manifests in Ambedkar's social and political thought, we went on to briefly discuss Tomba's own critique of Chakrabarty's formulation of History 1 and History 2 in order to highlight how the former's reconception of universality allows us to distinguish between a historicism of the oppressed versus the historicism of the oppressor. This distinction is important insofar as it allows us to not dismiss those of the oppressed who work within a historicist frame while still recognizing how their struggle represents a more authentic universality than the one of History 1.

To conclude, we would like to note that, while we highlighted Ambedkar's critique of Gandhi on caste and Gandhism in order to illustrate how Ambedkar's discourse is undergirded by insurgent universality, our focus was purposely one sided for reasons of scope. If one wanted to do a more extensive analysis of Indian political thought that would go beyond perspectives of the texts we analyzed, one could make the argument that Gandhi too was a figure of insurgent universality, despite his differences with Ambedkar, as the history of Indian democracy is unthinkable without either of them. In this regard, one could turn to the work of Uday Mehta's "Gandhi on Democracy, Politics, and the Ethics of Everyday Life" (2010). Here, Mehta admits that Gandhi had a complicated view of democracy insofar as he was unimpressed with existing institutional forms and formalism of the language of rights. However, Mehta argues that Gandhi is ultimately still one of the most important democratic thinkers of modern India due to how Gandhi's "ideas of self-rule, transparency, accountability and inclusiveness, which are associated

with the basic ethos of democracy, are fundamental to his thought, life and practice” (2010, 355-

6). Elaborating on this, Mehta states:

[Gandhi] did more than any single individual in the twentieth century—more than even Lenin or Mao— to bring the common man and woman into the fold of public life, on terms that were marked by a singular absence of hierarchy, prescriptive authority and the condescension of political parties and traditional elites...His deep commitment to openness and truth; his view that individual self-rule was a function of character and self-discipline and not predicated on traditional markers of education, gender or property ownership; his view that power, including that of the state, had no presumptive normative priority—are all consonant with a spirit of democratic governance. (Ibid., 356-7)

From the above passage, one could argue that Gandhi also embodied insurgent universality on his own terms through his refusal of hierarchy, authority and the state. The last point on Gandhi’s rejection of the state is peculiar considering that, by contrast, Ambedkar was a firm believer in using the power of the liberal state to change society. While I do not believe such a position necessarily disqualifies Ambedkar as a figure of insurgent universality even though Tomba has defined this concept as against “the constitutional armor of the representative state” (2019, 21), a more comprehensive study of the insurgent universality of both Ambedkar and Gandhi would certainly have to contend with their differences on questions of the state and how this has shaped the history of democracy in India. In contributing towards such an effort, we will come closer to comprehending the many ways Enlightenment categories have been translated into contexts different from their origin (in Europe) in the struggles of the oppressed, a crucial endeavor to avoid making the mistake of attributing universality only to History 1 as the Universal History of Capital.

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