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THE MATERIALITY OF POLITICS

SUBJECT POSITIONS IN POLITICS

VOLUME 2

RANABIR SAMADDAR



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To Etienne Balibar

'I have implicitly suggested that recognition of the other scene is theoretically associated with the rejection, not of class antagonisms and the structure of capitalism, but of an absolute "last instance", and with the adoption of a *broad* (hence heterogeneous) concept of materiality. But I have also run the risk of purely and simply identifying the political other scene with the scene of imaginary collective processes and their unconscious determinants. This is not exactly what I want to suggest here. The other scene that emerges with the conjunction of several forms of extreme violence, such as absolute mass impoverishment and suicidal and extremist policies, is no more an *ideological-imaginary* than an *economical-social* scene: it precisely involves an interference of their respective logics and their "normal" institutional articulation, producing an effect of strangeness and a disruption of subjectivities.'

— Etienne Balibar,
Politics and the Other Scene (2002)

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Preface and Acknowledgements

The last few years have seen the gloss over various liberal and quasi-liberal theories and doctrines wearing thin. Neither does Cultural Studies as a field appear to offer a critical route to political knowledge at present. Exhaustion over studies of (modes of) representation is all too apparent today; it is time once again to study *actions*. Cultural explanations of politics provide only a partial and inadequate understanding, while the new liberal theories professing primary liberties and goods, or multiculturalism, or tolerance, or good governance, or the index of democracy are too synthetic to be acceptable. In such a context, there arises the need to emphasize the physicality of politics. My emphasis on the physicality of politics begins by noting the essential relation between law, violence and terror (pointed out by Walter Benjamin), the limits of constitution making and the specific nature of colonial constitutionalism, which is being replicated today on a global scale. Collective actions and politics, the emergence of law from contentious politics and its acquisition of a mythic status were not understood by post-colonial studies of the kind deeply influenced by cultural representations. The colonial state could have never grown without arousing fear and using terror; thus the colonized needed to reflect on a new theory of the political subject.

The book opens with an essay on the ideas I dispute and the method I follow. For instance, I dispute the notion that anti-colonial nationalism began in the domain of culture and in the dichotomy of 'your materiality'/'our spirituality'. This may have been true of only one variety of nationalism—i.e. nationalism as *ideology*, but the argument cannot be a general one. In this context, I also caution that the notion of capillary existence of power must not be extended *ad absurdum*, where we forget the brute and the fundamental forms in which it has been exercised on the conquered and colonized. Yet power is unintelligible without studying resistance. We need to study how institutional and discursive practices produce the violent or the dialogic political subject. Once again, the stress is on 'materialities' of politics,

which of course include the issue of physicality, but go far beyond present debates and frameworks, demanding new frontiers in political thinking.

Politics in both volumes is *activity*. In Volume 1, this theme leads to an exploration of technologies of rule. In Volume 2, it leads to an exploration of the subject positions in politics. The political subject in this book is the collective political actor poised against governmental rules for stabilizing order. This political subject of Volume 2 is a product of certain definite contentious circumstances. The hermeneutics of the political subject as explained in this book is (at least close to) the real story, while the hermeneutics of the subject that reaches us through philosophy is a fictionalized version. The latter traces a subject that attains selfhood without contention, politics, attrition, and which achieves subject position without taking sides. Conflict in the real world is between ideas or actions, but in philosophy it is between subject positions only. While this work addresses the theme of physicality, readers will find here a different reading of blood, violence, bodies, controls, laws and conflicts—a different reading of the materiality of politics. In this reading, the universality available to bodies is underscored by the universality of conflict, and therefore an abstract universality of subject positions is replaced by an acute need for a rigorous study of control systems and rebellions, governmentalities and autonomies, laws and illegalities, nightmares and visions—in other words, *concrete universalities*. History needs to be studied in a new way.

The introductory chapter suggests a provisional method by raising the question: what is criticality in politics, and why is criticality important in studying forms in politics? The answer helps us to grasp the materiality of politics—the central theme of the book. Volume 1 tries to demonstrate in different ways how we can read the foundations of our political life as physical accounts of politics. The chapters delve into problems of rule by law in a situation characterized by the salience of the violence of reorganization, the fundamental insecurities of nationalized life and the way the power to rule is built through practices of care and protection. Volume 2 discusses some of the crucial questions concerning the emergence of subject positions in politics and the directions that our political life may take when spurred by contentious actions. It also discusses the urge for autonomy that manifests itself in contentious times.

I have used a series of historical illustrations and current material, and pursued several themes for micro-study. Several friends and co-researchers have helped shape the thoughts and ideas that readers will find here and several others have been a source of encouragement. I

extend my heartfelt thanks to Benedict Anderson, Etienne Balibar, Paula Banerjee, Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury, Pradip Kumar Bose, Subhas Chakraborty, Sanjay Chaturvedi, Bartolome Clavero, Rada Ivekovic, Bishnu Mahapatra, Sandro Mezzadra, Jean Luc Racine, Ben Rogaly, Hari Sharma, Gilles Tarabout and Charles Tilly.

The chapter on terror and law in Volume 1 was first written at the behest of the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, Colombo, particularly Sridhar Khatri and Imtiaz Ahmed, and delivered as a public lecture in Guwahati at the invitation of Sanjib Barua, then at the Centre for North-east and South-east Asian Studies, OKD Institute. The international conference at MSH, Paris on 'Conflict, Law and Constitutionalism' allowed me to consolidate several arguments on law, legality and constitutionalism. The conference on 'Difference' in Kairouan, Tunisia allowed me to reflect on methods in political thinking and writing. The lecture at the Sussex University Migration Studies Centre on 'Racism, Immigration and Politics in the North-east' helped me summarize my arguments in the last chapter of Volume 1, first presented coherently as an essay due to the encouragement of WISCOMP, and Meenakshi Gopinath in particular, who insisted that I should revisit my earlier work on migration in the light of a variety of security anxieties of the political class, state establishments, communities and immigrants. The arguments on partition as a violent reorganization of political space and on self-determination and autonomy continue from my previous book, *The Politics of Dialogue* (Ashgate, 2004) and the co-authored study, *Partitions: Reshaping States and Minds* (Frank Cass, 2005). The Network of Autonomy Studies at the University of Uppsala, under the stewardship of Kjell-Ake Nordquist, encouraged me to think further about the theme of autonomy. Barry Sautman of the Technical University in Hong Kong, and the Calcutta Research Group's collective programme on Autonomy provided further interesting insights. These coupled with my earlier work on the political subject forms the core of the second volume. I am indebted to the participants and organizers of these conferences and the publishers of the volumes.

Finally, I am enormously happy to use this occasion to acknowledge the tremendous value I attach to the friendship that Etienne Balibar has given me over the years.

Ranabir Samaddar
Kolkata
February 2007

Chapter 1

DREAMS OF THE COLONIZED

I

In the first volume we discussed the phenomenon of 'colonial constitutionalism'. However, through the colonial period when constitutional designs were being planned and thrust upon the people of the colony and new legal arrangements were being put in place to control their irrational desires, what was happening to the 'other' of the constitution—the ultimate legal rationality and the laws—namely, the dreams, desires, revolts and physical acts of politics of the colonized? Those familiar with the history of modern India know that the 1940s were extraordinary in that the most feverish activity to give a constitutional face to India characterized the entire decade, beginning with Cripps's Mission and ending with the declaration of a constitutional republic. The decade was marked by turbulent events, alternative thought and actions by Indians subjugated by the British Empire. In this opening chapter of the second volume of the work I aim to describe how these dreams and desires burst forth and manifested themselves in the last decade of the colonial rule, the 1940s, and in the next chapter I will show how throughout the colonial period terror acted as the other of law, the other implying the other within, the supplement. I have discussed the intimate relation between law and terror at the end of this chapter. There we will investigate the political dreams and desires of the colonized as the other of colonial constitutionalism. This chapter describes three dreams of the colonized—dreams of freedom, independence and democracy. Against the background of transition and the transfer of power I also indicate in the process of my description what happens when these dreams of *freedom*, *independence* and *democracy* merge to take the fateful form expressed by that well-known word in politics—sovereignty.

But as we begin to examine the dreams, we must be careful lest we think that a description of dreams is not about strategic matters of

politics. Inasmuch as they tell us of the efforts to break shackles in their time, they also reveal matters of the context, strategies or even rhetoric. They also say a great deal about how collective thoughts and actions speed up suddenly and sometimes remarkably, postponing indefinitely their duty to keep their priorities in order, and claiming instead the right to criticize circumstances totally and uncompromisingly, in other words claiming the right to engage in politics. It is in those times of total criticism that we have a situation of infinitely different (and thereby indifferent to) outcome(s)—a situation beyond the state and nation, universality and homogeneity, beyond considerations of the costs of war and internal dissension, a merger between dreams and reality.

As we describe the dreams, certain questions arise repeatedly. What were the characteristics of these political dreams or visions? Who dreams of freedom, independence and democracy? Did these words signify the same vision in the minds of the colonial people? Did the colonized start thinking of these separately, and when did these dreams merge? These separate ideas—freedom, independence and democracy—merged and then took a sudden unfamiliar turn, arriving at a point which could be sustained only by submitting itself to a constant procedure of re-examination, grievance, judgements and the testimonial agencies of facts. These facts then gave place to law and the law yielded place to justice. Of course, dreams did not begin that way; they began as ideas of the colonized. They then gathered momentum and leaped into the abyss without the slightest hesitation, without any assurance of the outcome, and that was the moment—one can say with the benefit of hindsight—when circumstances had become ripe for the appearance of constitutionalism, the imposition of new rules of law, passive revolution, the formation of a new state and sovereignty. The politics of the colonized is not a matter of doctrine, but of dreams. It does not originate from theory, but from longings, which of course take shape through contentions in politics. Dreams materialize in a political form that must undergo permanent trial, because all forms of politics based on dreams are inherently hazardous—dreams can only stare towards an abyss that sooner or later occasions the emergence of a sovereign authority—a void waiting to be filled up by a sovereign power.

There is one more thing to remember in relation to what I will describe in this chapter. All efforts to talk about sovereignty, notwithstanding the theories of sovereignty that have come to us for

several centuries, are a way of talking about the pasts of sovereignty—freedom, independence and democracy. These are as I have said the *pasts* of sovereignty, when freedom had merged in the aspirations of the colonized for independence and democracy, and the situation was ripe for the appearance of a sovereign power. Therefore the language of sovereignty with which politics in India resounds today only forces us to look at its past differently. We might even admit that the symbols of sovereign India are not its parliament or the republican constitution—the embodiments of the two principles of representation and consent—but dreams of the colonized, the past dreams of its people, dreams that refuse to vanish even after they have merged to give birth to an awesome power—a sovereign nation. The whole situation reflects a conspicuous asymmetry. While dreams of freedom, independence and democracy are matters of the past, and our cognitive sense revolves around the problems of the politics of our time summed up in the problematic of that one word, sovereignty, our intuitive self, guiding and emerging from our practices refuses to admit the closure of a political world that is mainly driven by dreams, and it insists on straddling both worlds. This chapter is about that half-real world of dreams in politics, consequently of asymmetries that mark the notion of sovereignty in the politics of the colonized.

I now recall three events in the life of our nation that occurred in the 1940s—first, the authoring of an essay by a person who was a colonized Indian, a tract that has remained largely ignored, at best acknowledged as the last testament of a romantic dreamer; yet a tract that is remarkable for its continual pursuit of an undefined idea of freedom; second, the elections held almost exactly halfway through that decade, elections that were supposed to augur independence and were marked by battle cries for political power, and led to bloodbaths and constitution-making; and third, the battles that began almost unheeding of the arrival of independence, as if time remained strangely suspended for the soldiers who refused to lay down their arms although the phenomenon of independence now reduced their actions to nothingness.

To a chronicler who wishes to recapture the time when dreams were interplay between aspirations and events, the idea of a *maze* as opposed to the classical procedure of chronology appears as the most important and innovative. In a maze, there is no beginning, no end and no closed circle. In the labyrinth, the historical person dreaming and at the same time acting in real life cannot but (mis)take one for the other, and

cannot help but mould the world s/he inhabits to himself/herself. S/he builds his/her world exactly in the same way as a subterranean animal survives, with its double existence (over and under ground) and by continuously moving his/her provisions and building an intricate network of passages to confuse the outsider—for exactly as in the case of the subterranean animal, s/he can survive by hiding many of his/her possessions (mostly his/her dreams) from the gaze of the outsider, mixing them with other less valuable things in order to confuse and mislead the outsider. The historical person I am referring to here keeps a certain number of passages open in this way, not only to survive the dual world of politics and dreams but also to keep intact his/her dreams. In order to appreciate that world of the maze, the work of the chronicler of dreams must conform to it. S/he must re-orient his/her work to the structure of the time s/he is trying to retrieve and delve into. This s/he can do by keeping similarly a number of passageways open through appropriate dispositions in which events appear as points, and can be therefore switched at some appropriate moment. What I describe as a 'point' here is of course not chance, but indeterminate choice—not total indeterminacy that would discount the possibility of any organization and style, but one that marks the topographical representation of a maze. It seems to me that the historical armature of the 1940s is concealed and yet residing as if in a maze, for whenever we look back at that decade that ended 65 years ago, we find dreams intervening and interrupting whenever events take on a rational image, form or order of happening. To the chronicler, the confrontation between the two is creative to say the least.

II

On 14 April 1941, three months before his death, on the completion of his eightieth year, Tagore composed his last essay, '*Sabhyatar Sankat*' (also published in English as 'The Crisis in Civilization'). He was ill; physical agony combined with his anguish at the spectacle of the mass murders and barbarism of the war that was unfolding; and he was fearful of the crisis of civilization brought about by greed, selfishness and the insolent power of the West. He wrote that his one-time faith in Western civilization had painfully shattered, though he said that he would declare to the end his hope in the ultimate triumph of human

spirit, 'perhaps . . . from the East . . . ' after the night of 'arrogant stupidity', 'cataclysm', and 'unrighteousness'.¹

Even before the initial attempt to understand how hope, loss, despair and dreams interweave in that short essay, one can ask a question about the intriguing word in the title of his essay—crisis *in* civilization, or *of* civilization? Did Tagore think that the Second World War signalled crisis of Western civilization in particular? Or was it a crisis of civilization in general? There are grounds for either reading. Tagore writes of the disaster brought upon the West by greed, arrogance and violence, and says that on the verge of his death he is looking forward to the dawn from 'the east'. The 'clean' history will 'perhaps begin' with the 'dawn from the east', with the 'message of civilization' arriving thence. But while the poet makes a distinction between the West and the East in configuring the future and judging the present as history, he links the two destinies in the career of doom—in the decline of the West in which he had placed so much faith in his childhood when he had 'gone to England' and 'listened to lectures of John Bright in Parliament and outside', and at the 'beginning of youth' when he had immersed himself in 'the stately declamations of Burke', 'Macaulay's linguistic effusiveness', 'in discussions centred upon Shakespeare's drama and Byron's poetry, and above all upon the declaration of humanism in the politics of those time';² and in the decline of India marked by 'abject dependence', the 'dearth of the most elementary means of livelihood', 'callous neglect of the minimum necessities of life of the people, like food, clothing, educational and medical facilities', the 'unseemly conflict over religious difference' and the country's present 'smothered by the deadweight of colonial administration'. The clearest indication of the links between the two destinies in the career of doom comes with this sentence that appears after the poet has briefly described the reasons for the decline of the West:

Such is the tragic tale of the gradual loss of my faith in the claims of the European nations to civilization.³

Besides, in some other parts of the essay Tagore speaks of civilization as including the east and the west, how the decline of one sets into motion the decline of another, and in this inter-linked destiny civilization is one, yet in the context of the colonized these are two destinies, two civilizations linked in a career of doom. The link is

colonialism and subordination, and in a sudden turn of phrase, the poet writes, 'the rule of English civilization' has ruined 'the civilization here', has brought disaster for India. Hopes of early youth, the earlier hopes nurtured in childhood, the pleasure of literature, civility, progress and the reappearance of greatness after the disaster—all these constitute the dreams of the colonized and appear in the essay, but not in a series, in progression; the themes appear as if to mark the uncertain world of the colonized reminding the readers that cataclysm has struck the world.

Yet, we do not gain much in harping on this indeterminacy about whether the colonized mind thought of civilization in singular or plural terms, and therefore spoke of crisis *in* civilisation or crisis *of* civilisation. We are aware of commentaries that say that nationalism developed because it was situated in a framework of duality—their civilization of machines/ours of the mind, or, their civilization of materiality / ours of spirituality. But even if we hold for a moment that that was true, and leave aside the criticism that the framework was more complicated and rather indeterminate, at least by the time the political claims of anti-colonialism began to take a more definitive shape during the first three decades of the 1900s the critique of the West became deeper leaving the safe anchors of a shallow duality, as the dreams and the aspirations of the colonized assumed their form amidst the contentious 1920s and 1930s, indicated for instance by this testament. However, more significant for our purpose is how in this testament the colonized mind confesses the dreams, or even when confessing hides the dreams at least partially from the glare of the 'corrupt' and 'cynical' world, and in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary refuses to admit that the dream of the return of great humanism has little chance of being realized. Politics and dreams were never so confused or transposed on to each other before that—for, possibly, times had been less demanding for the dreamer.⁴

Therefore, let us again see the way in which the confession of dreams occurs in that essay. We have to recall in this context that Tagore, who was one of the early signatories of the anti-fascist declaration, refused to believe in the ideological slogans of the war-crazed powers. Increasing communal differences characterized the political situation in Bengal, as did differences and acute bickering within the Bengal Provincial Congress when the war broke out in Europe. Tagore was critical of the route Bengal nationalist politics was taking, its listlessness, and he was not ready to accept the complaint of the Bengal nationalists.

Today this Bengal of ours has become the symbol of Indian ignominy. Yet, one hears all the time the complaint of the Bengali: out of jealousy and envy other provinces are trying to silence Bengal, nobody can stand the good of Bengal. Nothing can be a more false complaint . . . Actually this is our fate (to eternally whine and complain). Otherwise, how many nations (*'jati'* in the original, thus here it can also mean 'peoples') get such opportunity in politics that Bengal got? Even if we assume that she got no such opportunity, have we learnt any lesson from that time? Childishness now occupies the place of glory in Bengal's chariot, and Bengalees by now should have had the capacity to know the nature of this childishness. Unfortunately that has not happened. Modern politics in Bengal is a testimony of that failure and fruitlessness.⁵

If this was the state of Bengal politics, what was that of the world outside? Tagore wrote as the war broke out:

A few centuries ago European civilization began giving birth to mercantile animals. Some of these animals then started wandering in our Afro-Asian localities in search of food. Some of these edibles were fat, tempting, thick and soft—and in varying shapes. The alluring smell reached the nostrils of Europe. Particularly those who were not getting enough of these but had their mouth watering had hungry bellies. Then began quarrels and squabbles between the hungry and the fed animals. Once it was a tussle between the hunter and the hunted, now started the bloodshed between the hunter and the hunted. This has been heart-rending for the mother-Europe. She is crying out in agony, she needs peace. But peace does not come from the outside; its source is within . . . Those who eat others by the habit of greed, those carnivorous animals cannot stop killing others. Today we can notice, how unnaturally their teeth have been growing, in some case the front teeth, in some cases the teeth in the back row.⁶

Bengal politics thus bore no hope, and the war in the West indicated the 'return of the laws of the jungle'. These were the interlinked destinies of doom appearing before the colonized, and dreams formed in such milieus. '*Sabhyatar Sanka'* refers to the dreams and doom in an alternating sequence; the links are the clues to