



Elementary Aspects of the Political

*Histories
from the
Global South*

Prathama Banerjee

Elementary
Aspects of
the Political

BUY

Theory in Forms

A series edited by Nancy Rose Hunt and Achille Mbembe

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Histories from the Global South

Prathama Banerjee

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*To my little Chiku (2002–2014)
and his unforgettable courage and cool*

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INTRODUCTION

Politics is a paradoxical form of action.

—Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics”

This is a study of the years when what we know as modern politics took shape in India and the world. However, this is not a book of political history—rather, it is one of “histories of the political.” It asks the question that raises its head before we even set out to write political history—namely, What is the political?, or rather, What is it that in modern times comes to be commonly recognized as the political?

Growing up in India in the second half of the twentieth century, my friends and I saw politics as the default condition of being. It seemed as if no aspect of life (art, philosophy, love, spirituality) and no space of habitation (classroom, household, workplace, theater) was free of the overt play of politics. Politics was destiny, we believed, even though elders often warned us against the evils of overpoliticization! We lived in a ready state of agitation and mobilization. It is this condition—of being always already political—that I wish to investigate in this book, by asking the question that we never asked in our younger days: What or how is the political?

Commentators attribute this condition of intense politicization to the colonial experience. Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that since modernity in the colony was inextricably tied to the experience of political conquest, modernity emerged here as first and foremost “political modernity.”¹ Sovereignty, rights, representation, democracy, and so on emerged as the first questions in India, overshadowing other quintessentially modern questions, such as those of secularism, rationalism, individualism, and industrialism. As Sudipta Kaviraj notes, this made modernity in India very different in its sequentiality and configuration from the western European model.²

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Because anticolonial struggle needed to mobilize the force of the people at large, democracy was, right from the start, the constitutive question of modernity in India. Anticolonial movements, heterogeneous in both ideology and constituency (after all, not all anticolonial mobilizations can be subsumed under nationalism), shared one thing across the board. They called on everyone—men and women, rich and poor, peasants and workers, upper and lower castes, tribes and untouchables, students and professionals, theologians and traders, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs—to come through as unconditionally political. Even those who were neither educated nor propertied nor civil enough to be recognized as “responsible” actors were invited to act, in the first instance, as political beings. This was very different from the historical trajectory of western Europe, where education, modernization, and governmentalization of society preceded by centuries the recognition of universal political franchise. In the colony, being political was prior to all else; it was the precondition to achieving not just freedom, equality, and justice, but also community, sociability, intimacy, and indeed the ordinary fruits and pleasures of human life.

The subaltern studies school of history writing belabored this point in the 1980s. Against Marxist social history, which saw nonclass popular rebellions as premodern and prepolitical, it argued that even the most marginalized peoples in India, such as landless peasants and forest and hill tribes, must be recognized as deeply political beings, if anything.³ But even as subaltern studies fronted the moment of the political—against nationalist culturalism, Marxist economism, and upper-caste, middle-class statism—it never really interrogated the concept of the political. It never asked what it was about the subaltern that was recognizably political.

It was as if, irrespective of all philosophical or ideological disagreements, everyone recognized politics when they saw it. For what was modernity if not the triumph of politics over tradition, habit, custom, religion, culture? I feel that it is precisely this modern common sense—this faith in the self-evidence of the political that makes us see politics everywhere and invoke politics at every turn—that obstructs our understanding of politics today. For today it is politics that stands most unsettled across the world, often assuming unexpected if not counterintuitive forms. Our given ideological, sociological, and philosophico-normative parameters no longer guarantee political efficacy or insight. Clearly, we need to reinvent our political compass. And to do so, I argue in this book, we need to place diverse histories and counterhistories of the political right in the face of mainstream political theory and ask the question anew: What is the political?

I should clarify what I mean when I invoke histories and counterhistories of the political. I write from and about a location that is variously called Bengal, India, south Asia, “the subcontinent,” erstwhile “third world,” the global South, and so on—all of which are disciplinary regions with a certain geopolitical overtone. It is also often indexed as Indic, Islamic, or both—terms with problematic civilizational charge. Clearly, it is a struggle with language and lexicon when one seeks to step around binaries like national/international, provincial/universal, and local/global, while claiming a transhistorical salience for one’s own work. While I write from and about my particular location, my aim is not to demonstrate colonial or historical or cultural difference, nor is it to stake a claim to theory as such. It is simply to mobilize “other” histories, which are only contingently “Indian,” in order to open up new theoretical and conceptual possibilities for all to think about and debate. It also seems to me that this facility of thinking across histories and traditions, without being “comparativist,” calls for a certain lightness of being that cannot be achieved so long as one appears to be carrying the great burden of history, be it colonial or national, or so long as one assumes only the stance of “critique” at the cost of creative play.

Hence I go with the currently popular term *global South*, as signposted in the title of the book, to express solidarity with the intellectual mobilization happening around that term in academies of distant regions, including the decolonial institutional sites of Africa and Latin America. As I see it, this book belongs to that deterritorial intellectual domain where, despite geopolitical obstructions, scholars find each other struggling to move on from the moment of (postcolonial/decolonial) critique and undertake the positive and experimental task of reassembling diverse philosophies and experiences of struggle from across the world. So when I ask, What is the political?, I ask it from a crossroads that is no one’s country but only a modest meeting place, where we share our philosophies and histories with each other. The advantage with the global South is that it is indeed a nonplace. Hence, it might be interesting to rest here, at least for a while, with unexpected neighbors and wonderful strangers. What we might achieve is certainly not a universal political theory but perhaps unprecedented chords and productive “dischords,” by way of making music separately together.

The Philosophy Question

So when I ask, What is the political?, I am not by any means seeking a universal philosophical definition. In fact, I seek to move away from the western European tradition of thinking politics via political philosophy. For in India,

and most likely in other postcolonies, we remain caught up in a curious double bind. We believe that we are an intensely political people, and yet we lament the lack of political philosophy. We seem to “do” politics under the perpetual shadow of this lack and compensate by either borrowing concepts from western European political philosophy or showing up the latter’s Eurocentrism and consequent inapplicability to other-than-European contexts. But we do not ask questions of philosophy itself, nor do we interrogate philosophy’s claim to a privileged access to politics.

In universities and colleges in India, we teach politics through a narrative of great thinkers who make up the western European philosophical canon (Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Karl Marx) or through a similarly structured narrative of great Indian thinkers (Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Rabindranath Tagore, B. R. Ambedkar), who, often in spite of themselves, are made to perform the philosopher’s role for the sake of the political. Of course, these figures do not always fit the properly philosophical persona, resulting in their fundamental misrecognition as “not-quite” political. They appear as always already contaminated by an undigestible surplus of the “nonpolitical”—spiritual, cultural, sexual—that seems to obstruct in the global South the rise of the purely political idea.

When we do not think politics through a narrative of great philosophers, we tend to think it through a narrative of universal ideologies—liberalism, nationalism, Marxism, Fascism, and so on. Ideology here works as a proxy for philosophy, the implicit assumption being that ideology is the form in which philosophical thought acquires a practical life outside isolated and elite spaces of contemplation. For the longest time, a certain variety of Marxism held sway over political understanding in India. The categories of “economy” and “class” reigned supreme, irrespective of the actual dynamics of everyday politics. Caste continued to be misrecognized for decades, by academics as well as “progressive” political actors, as a distorted variety of class identity that would automatically right itself as modernization and development turned all Indians into rational economic beings.⁴ In the same vein, historians and economists searched for feudalism in India, tortuously trying to fit “Indian facts” into a global “transition narrative,” in the hope that feudalism in India’s past would ensure capitalism in India’s present and hopefully socialism in India’s future!⁵

Currently, Marxism has been replaced by liberalism as the universal frame within which to think politics across the globe. Chris Bayly reads much of Indian political thinking between the 1820s and 1940s as flowing into a worldwide “age of liberalism,” despite liberalism’s complicity in the imperial project and despite the fact of colonial difference.⁶ Even more tellingly, Andrew Sartori

shows not only western-educated elites but also poor Indian peasants to be liberals, even if they might not have known it themselves. He sees Bengal peasants fighting for land rights against rent-seeking landlords as bearers of a vernacular version of the original Lockean idea of the property-constituting power of labor, without considering the fact that the peasants' common sense might very well have been the original version of this idea.⁷ This is not the place to debate the validity of reading world history as a history of liberalism. Let me just register the real question at stake here: it is that of western European philosophy's presence at the heart of colonial (and postcolonial) politics, via a charting of philosophy's global career as ideology.

And if not ideology, we have normative ideals—citizenship, rights, secularity, civility, rationality, and indeed modernity itself—standing in for philosophy's claim over the political. Partha Chatterjee shows how European philosophy enforced normative principles across the world, through colonial pedagogy, on the one hand, and colonial governmentality, on the other, structuring the world in terms of a norm/deviation and norm/exception principle (such that those denied rights were first posited as deviations from the norm and then administered as exceptions to it, reinforcing the norms themselves in the process). That such ideals could assume the status of universals—even when blatantly flouted by their proponents and even when historical counterinstances flew in their face—was possible only because these norms, in Chatterjee's words, inhabited the “mythical space-time” of philosophical thought.⁸ From this mythic space-time—empirically seventeenth- and eighteenth-century western Europe but conceptually posited as the founding moment of political philosophy as such—norms continued to legislate on politics, unperturbed by the latter's empirical diversities.

The issue for me, however, is not that so-called modern political concepts—historically produced as they were in a certain western European location and then pitched as universal—are unhelpful to the study of non-European contexts. That issue has been tackled by the many acts of “provincializing Europe” undertaken by postcolonial theorists in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The issue at stake for me here is the relationship between philosophy and history and its implications for the understanding of politics as such.

Western European political philosophy as we know it today simultaneously mobilizes and erases traces of its own historicity—first by grounding itself in local historical events, such as the French Revolution or the Industrial Revolution, and second, by turning these empirical historical events into universal philosophical archetypes, the font of philosophical concepts such as liberty and equality, capitalism and communism. The result is a hierarchy not only be-

tween philosophy and history but also between history and history—between a history that claims to be philosophically and normatively salient, and other histories, such as histories from the global South, that cannot make such a claim. The latter remain confined to the register of the empirical. They offer counterfactuals to European history, and indeed “provincialize” it, but they do not dislodge philosophy itself from its hegemonic location.

It is this hierarchy between histories that I wish to interrupt—not by saying that histories from the global South can also function as a source of philosophical archetypes (which they indeed can if so written) but by denaturalizing the coupling of politics and philosophy. I wish to displace philosophy itself from being the natural ground of the political. This is not to say that I do not find philosophy relevant to thinking the political. Nor do I argue for some kind of political “realism” by scorning the power of ideas. In fact, I shall talk of ideas frequently in this book, in their diverse embodied and operationalized forms. I wish merely to say that philosophy must be seen as one, and only one, among the many protagonists that vie for supremacy around the question of the political. Hence, in this book, the question of philosophy will appear, as but one among many other questions. In chapter 2, for example, I show how it is in the tension between philosophy and theater that an image of the purely “political man” emerges in early twentieth-century Bengal and India. In chapters 5 and 6, I show how an idea becomes political by operating not as norm or ideology (not as philosophical proxies) but as a shared language that makes politics of various ideological hues mutually legible and translatable.

Politics and the Political

Therefore, when I ask the question—What is the political?—it is not a reference to the “politics” versus “the political” distinction made popular by contemporary French philosophy. Carl Schmitt familiarized us with the use of the political as a self-standing noun, when he defined decision/exception as the essence of sovereignty and friend/enemy as the essence of political community. He posited the political in opposition to what merely appeared as politics, namely, the routine and tame activities of law, representation, and government.⁹ However, it was Claude Lefort who made the distinction between *la politique* (politics) and *le politique* (the political) popular in the academy in the 1970s. Lefort defined the political as the prior moment of giving form to society (be it democracy, bureaucracy, or totalitarianism) and politics as the ex post facto play of antagonistic forces within that society. To Lefort, what we ordinarily perceive as politics—elections, party activities, unions, revolts, movements—was

a second-order set of activities predicated on the real political, which was the prior moment of the “institution” of a certain order of things.¹⁰

Needless to say, Schmitt and Lefort were very different philosophers. But they shared two assumptions that would come to be generalized in contemporary political thinking via this politics/political distinction. The first is the understanding that the political beyond politics can be accessed only through the work of philosophy. The second is an assumption of the unconditional priority of the political itself. When Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe set up the Centre de recherches philosophiques sur le politique in 1982, it was for the stated purpose of “the *philosophical* questioning of the political” and “the questioning of the philosophical *about* the political”—expressing at its most articulate the politics-philosophy coupling foundational to European political thinking.¹¹ Of concern to Nancy and others was the apparent emptying of politics from the political as such—as politics stood reduced in liberal democracy to the workings of law, on the one hand, and mass media, on the other.¹² To return the political to politics was thus to search for the ontologically political, a task for which philosophy had to be mobilized, no less, because the epistemologically oriented sciences of sociology, economics, history, political science, and so on and the ontically oriented empiricism of political activity itself were grossly insufficient.¹³ Of course, these thinkers defined the political very differently from each other. If Lefort defined the political as the institution of society, Nancy defined it as disposition toward community, Alain Badiou as radical event, and Jacques Rancière as redistribution of the sensible (i.e., change in the order of what or who is seen, heard, and felt).¹⁴ Despite these crucial differences, however, all of them defined the political in opposition to politics, policy, police—terms designating domains and activities that ordinary people recognize as political but the philosopher finds emptied of the political. And all argued for the priority of the political as the originary act of (re)ordering the world, wherein we lived life and played politics.

In this book not only do I wish to question philosophy’s privileged claim to accessing the political, but I also want to investigate its assumption of the priority of the political, which I believe is an eminently modern historical phenomenon. So when I use the term “the political,” I do not oppose it to “politics.” I do not believe that ordinary politics—involving elections, parties, mass media, movements—is devoid of the political in the least. To say so is to express a philosopher’s conceit and an inchoate fear of the routine, the everyday, the massified—a fear that has haunted western European philosophical thinking, right from the time of the French Revolution to the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century debates around universal adult franchise, to mid-twentieth-

century anxieties around the culture industry, to what Rancière aptly calls the late twentieth-century neoliberal “hatred of democracy,” to our most recent perplexity about populist, demagogic politics.¹⁵ But while I do not subordinate politics to the political, I do ask the following question of ordinary, everyday politics—namely, What is “political” about politics in the first place? In other words, I retain the adjectival connotation for the term “the political.” I believe that subjects, ideas, acts, images, and affects that might not appear to do with politics at any one time can and do *become* political at another, redefining in the process the very concept of the political itself.

Let me then refine my preliminary question. Instead of asking, What is the political?, I now ask, What is it that becomes political and in modern times assumes a kind of constitutive priority? This is obviously more a historical question than a philosophical one because it does not presume that there is any one thing—a force, an essence, an orientation, a subjectivity, a site—that is *a priori* or ontologically political. The political is not just a self-standing noun but an orientation, a qualifier, that is sometimes assumed or worn by subjects, forces, acts, and images, irrespective of their origin. What is political becomes so and does not remain so forever.

Two further points then become crucial. First, to chart the movement of becoming political historically is also to step aside of the modern-day common sense—that “everything is political.” This imagination of the political as pervasive and ubiquitous historically emerged (and was radicalized by feminist writers) in opposition to earlier imaginations of the political as confined to the state, the public sphere, and the realm of high politics. However, I feel that we have reached an impasse in this thinking of the political as everyday and everywhere because such a seamless generalization of politics renders the very category of the political toothless, shorn of both descriptive and analytical purchase. We are left with no history, no genealogy of the political—only with an unremarkable sense of our imbrication in everyday operations of power.

The motto “everything is political” rests, I believe, on a conceptual slippage between power and politics. Michel Foucault has taught us that power is everywhere—in schools, hospitals, prisons, and bedrooms. He has also taught us that power not only represses but also makes possible new subjectivities and positive practices. But talking regimes of power—coloniality, discipline, governmentality, biopolitics—and talking politics are different enterprises, and Foucault himself never conflated the two. Politics does presume power, but power does not necessarily presume politics. Perhaps the only definition, a minimalist one, that we can have of politics is that politics is one kind of orientation toward power, though not necessarily the only kind.

Second, to move away from the position that “everything is political” is also to move away from a universalist notion of the political. It seems to us today that the political can be conceived of only as a universal imperative. Some concede that in nonmodern times, politics might have been differently conceived and differently played out across peoples and places. But not so in modernity. With colonialism, the whole world came to share the same political grammar (a combination of liberal and Marxist concepts, such as rights, equality, autonomy, democracy, revolution), the same political forms (the nation-state, the representative assembly, the political party), and the same institutions and technologies of rule (discipline, governmentality, biopolitics). It is telling that even Partha Chatterjee, who critiques the hegemony of western European normative theory so sharply and differs with Benedict Anderson’s claim that all modern-day imaginations of political community partake of a universal homogeneous time, accepts that in the imagination of political form (as opposed to the “inner,” sovereign domains of culture, society, religion, domesticity) the whole world has thought in the same way since the nineteenth century.¹⁶

There is certainly some truth in this claim that, with colonialism, politics takes on a globalizing, if not universalizing, aspect, which I see as the obverse of the constitutive priority of the political in modernity. But if we take seriously the actual practice of politics, including its diverse enunciations across the world, very different stories come to the fore. My interest lies in exploring some of these differences. However, my project is not to demonstrate difference as such. Nor is it to relativize “political cultures” such that culture becomes the site of admissible difference, keeping the political undisturbed as a stable universal. By telling a different story of becoming political I seek to reopen theoretically what we, in our times, call politics.

Can the Nonpolitical Be Thought?

To study the movement of becoming political requires that we admit that there is something specific though not essential to politics. Rancière says that politics is a rare moment, when a given order of things is transformed by the enactment of equality by unequals. Otherwise, it is just the “police,” that is, an established regime of the perceptible and the sensible wherein unequals occupy, without surplus or spillage, the proper places assigned to them.¹⁷ While I agree with Rancière’s formulation of the rarity of politics, I am uneasy with his universal, once-and-for-all definition of the political as the enactment of equality. Such a definition conflates the rarity of the political with an assumed purity

of political essence. It refuses to recognize other kinds of claim making that do not speak in the name of equality.¹⁸ As I shall argue in chapters 5 and 6, it is important not just to invoke equality and recognize it when we see it—which, in Rancière’s telling, is in the “now” of politics rather than in some utopian future of a perfected society—but also to study how equality becomes a conceivable political idea in the first place, from being, for example, simply an everyday practical stance or a deeply spiritual idea. So while I agree with Rancière that politics is not a general condition of being, that things politicize or make a transition into politics, I also argue that the production of the political is not the production of an always already known orientation. In fact, I argue that the production of the political can be understood not by trying to predefine the ontologically political but by attending to the contingent and different ways in which the political gets differentiated from the putative nonpolitical. That is, becoming political is, at any one time, the unfolding of a certain political/nonpolitical relationship.

The nonpolitical, however, must not be confused with the prepolitical or the not yet political. The prepolitical (read premodern) has been a colonial epithet for so-called peoples without history—the colonized, the indigene, the poor, the effeminate—who have been struggling for at least a couple of centuries to prove that they, too, have history and politics. Much has been written about the tragic nature of this burden—of having to prove one’s political acumen until the end of time.¹⁹ But more important for my purpose is to recognize that the terms *prepolitical* and *not yet political* posit the political as the telos, the ultimate destiny, of all being—feeding into what I have called the constitutive priority and universality of the political in modern times. This blinds us to the crucial fact that in modernity the political actually gets instituted in opposition not only to the so-called prepolitical and prehistorical but also to changing imaginations of the nonpolitical. The nonpolitical has been variously imagined in modernity—as the spiritual, the intimate, the sexual, the social, the artistic, the scientific, and even the economic. Indeed, these various political/nonpolitical divisions have had institutional lives as modern disciplines. The history of each such discipline can be written as a history of how its relationship to the political played out over time—vouching for the fact that what is at stake here is indeed a political/nonpolitical dialectic. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century imagination of politics, as having to do with the state and state-oriented activities, proposed that political logic was autonomous of religious (Max Weber), social (Thomas Hobbes), economic (Adam Smith), aesthetic (Immanuel Kant), and other such supposedly nonpolitical logics. Subsequently, twentieth-century critics demonstrated that each of these so-called

nonpolitical logics was no less shot through with the political than politics itself. Feminists politicized the intimate, Marxists politicized the economic and the aesthetic, historians politicized the social, postcolonials politicized culture, and so on. In fact, all the influential debates of our times can be read in these terms. Thus, the never-ending secularism debate in political theory is about the division between politics and religion.²⁰ The event/everyday debate in anthropology and sociology is about the division between political action and life, glossed, respectively, as culture and social habitus by the two disciplines.²¹ The state/market debate in economics is about whether production and exchange are best regulated politically or allowed to operate by the autonomous logic of the market.²² And so on.

In other words, in modern times, we seem to be caught in a spiral. The political gets defined as being not-economic, not-religious, not-social, not-aesthetic, and so on, and then the economic, the religious, the social, and the aesthetic get shown up, inevitably, as also political. We may call this the persistent political/nonpolitical dynamic through which modern thought works, reproducing the political itself as the overdetermining concept of our times. To put it differently, it is only when framed by a universal and prior political that the social, the cultural, the psychological, the spiritual, and the aesthetic appear as particular to us. Interestingly, the economic works somewhat differently, even as it mobilizes its own status as a nonpolitical imperative. One of the lines of thought I pursue in this book is that the political assumes priority and universality in modern times not entirely by itself but by borrowing from the putative universality of the economic, which paradoxically gets posited as the ultimate instance of the nonpolitical, being about basic needs and bare life and hence, in the final instance, both before and beyond politics. (I consider this in chapter 6, where I discuss the animation and augmentation of the political idea of equality by the logic of economic reason.)

Running through all the chapters of the book, therefore, is an effort at understanding the modern political in terms of an ongoing process of differentiation—which consists of a simultaneous setting up and unraveling of antinomies between politics and society, politics and economics, politics and religion, politics and art, and so on. In other words, I argue that a history of the political is always already also a history of the social, the religious, the economic, and the aesthetic not only as categories of thought but also as organizing principles of life.

And yet, at the very heart of this political/nonpolitical dynamic, we also get glimpses of the extrapolitical! If the nonpolitical is that which gets posited as the other of the political, only to be in turn politicized, the extrapolitical

appears as the excess that actively resists politicization, even refuses it. So religion gets posited as the non- of the political, in modernity's self-presentation as a secular age, only to return as political question par excellence in the twenty-first century. But spiritual intensities—such as those involving questions of the self's finitude and solitude—even as they animate politics in times of mobilization and martyrdom, remain always already a little bit extra. This extra-political appears as the limit of the political, specifying politics and making it conceivable in the first place. Many political actors in this book, including famous ones such as Gandhi, Ambedkar, Muhammad Iqbal, and Tagore, cut sad and solitary figures exactly at moments when they insist on the salience of the extrapolitical—that is, on spiritual, intimate, poetic intensities, which accompany the political but refuse to be exhausted or explained by it. At the edge of the political, as it were, these adored yet misunderstood figures come through, unsurprisingly, as the most sharply critical voices with respect to modern politics.

Why Elementary Aspects?

It is not easy, in our times, to suspend belief in the self-evidence of the political. In trying to do so, my strategy is to disassemble the modern political into what appears as its constitutive elements. As must be obvious, I borrow this analytical pitch from Émile Durkheim's classic *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) and its subsequent reinvention in Ranajit Guha's masterpiece, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983). Elements here stand for those constituents that work as building blocks of a concept—be it religion or rebellion or, in my case, the political as such.²³ Concepts, because they are often denoted by single words, are sometimes confused with selfsame entities such as keywords and jargon. We must remember, however, that concepts are not just words or even special words. They are philosophical operations in the way that functions and equations are scientific operations. Concepts become concepts, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari remind us,²⁴ by articulating in themselves multiple propensities and potentialities, which is why concepts work more as expressive events than as signifying terms. That is, a concept is internally heterogeneous and, for that reason, highly amenable to disassembling into its constitutive elements.

I disassemble the political into its elementary aspects, so that one is able to think the political in terms of not merely, to use Guha's phrase, "specific encounters" (colonized/colonizer, Brahmin/Shudra, capital/labor, or landlord/peasant) but also "common forms and general ideas" that are shared across such

distinct historical encounters and combine differently at different moments in order to produce particular historical complexes of the political.²⁵ And yet I must also go against the grain of the foundational presupposition, shared by Durkheim and Guha, that elements are necessarily the most primitive, ordinary, or simple entities that are known to us; that elements become visible only when one analyzes early formations such as aboriginal religion (Durkheim) or pre-twentieth-century peasant insurgency, prior, that is, to the ideological overlay of nationalism and socialism (Guha). On the contrary, I argue that elements of the political, as we think of them today, are highly elaborate, complex, and coded formations and by no stretch of imagination natural, basic, or simple units “without [civilizational] embellishments” à la Durkheim.

I disassemble the modern political into four elementary aspects—subject, act, idea, and people—following the conceptual division posited by modern political philosophy. Needless to say, this imagination of the political as predicated on subject, act, idea, and people has passed into common sense today. When asked what is the political, we sometimes invoke a newly emergent subject—worker, poet, guerrilla, revolutionary, jihadi, black, Dalit, woman. At other times, we define the political as action—strike, fast, civil disobedience, war—which suspends or at least overdetermines ordinary activities of life. At yet other times, we define the political as “commitment” to an idea or ideology, such as freedom or equality, that helps us transcend particular locations and come together in solidarity. At other times still, we see the political as the rise of a new community under the sign of the people—nation, proletariat, race, *qaum*, multitude, and so on. Sometimes these elements appear in conjunction—with self, act, idea, and community seamlessly coming together to produce a particular formation of the political (as is the fantasy of nationalism). At other times, one element appears to replace another. Thus, when a self-identical political subject appears impossible, an idea appears to gather under its umbrella incommensurable peoples (as has been the fantasy of communism).

Having thus disassembled the elementary aspects of the modern political, I then set out to unpack the assumed elementary status of the elements themselves. So when I say *elements*, I use the term (originally defined in chemistry as the basic constituents of mixtures and compounds that cannot be further broken down by subtractive or operational means) somewhat differently than intended by Durkheim or Guha. In fact, I use *elements* somewhat ironically. Elements of the political for me are not an objective set of stable and simple entities. Instead, I see elements as codified entities that actively *resist* further decomposition—for, once decomposed or disassembled, they no longer appear as political or even productive of the political. Elementary aspects of the politi-

cal, in this sense, are aspects that simulate the ontology of “first principles”—by performing their role as entities that are both historical (because modern) and extrahistorical (because universal). A study of elementary aspects of the modern political for me, then, is also an interrogation of the presumed simplicity, stability, singularity, and universality of the elements themselves.

But my argument is not only a historical one. I am not just saying that the concepts of subject, act, idea, and people unravel when tested against historical or empirical reality. For example, I am not just making the point that the people—whether the nation or the proletariat—are always socially, culturally, and ethnically divided, which indeed they are. I am also making the additional point that the “people” does not cohere even as a pure concept. Nor do the concepts of subject, act, and idea with respect to the political. In fact, I believe that at the heart of each elementary aspect of the political lies a secret implausibility, which must remain coded for the element to appear as a stable element in the first place. Thus, I show that the political subject is split by the contrary pulls of self and selflessness, interest and sacrifice, renunciation and rule. Political action is thwarted by life, as action comes to be pitted against the everyday, the routine, and the quotidian. The idea founders on the irresolvable idealism/materialism dichotomy. The people appear always already strung between the distinct ontologies of population and crowd, mass and society—as that dangerous “part” that seeks to be “whole.” Moreover, one element sometimes appears to contradict another. Thus, the subject may undercut the conceptual valence of the people, when the latter is reduced to being an object of manipulation and mastery, as we see today in the context of hypermediatized and hypermanaged politics, in India as in the United States. Action may undercut the valence of idea and ideology. Again, subject and action may appear contrary. Thus, when an act such as the strike is defined as inherently political, irrespective of who the agent of that act might be, the subject question itself becomes redundant. And so on.

If elementary aspects of the political do not cohere conceptually or even sit together comfortably, how do they perform their elementary status in the first place? By being codified as such, I argue, through the mobilization of the persistent political/nonpolitical dialectic that marks modernity. Subject, act, idea, and people become elementary aspects of the political, each by positing a division between itself and something else, which appears for that moment as its definitive nonpolitical. But to effect this very differentiation yet another non- or extrapolitical imperative is mobilized, in which the political seeks its grounding. Thus, for example, the constitution of equality as a political idea in the twentieth century involved a simultaneous mobilization of the spiri-

tual and the economic. When defined as nonpolitical imperatives, the spiritual and the economic appeared as rival grounds of the political. But when defined as extrapolitical, as that which remained before and beyond politics, they worked together to index life as such, and in the name of creaturely life marked out the limits and the failures of the political. A quick description of the chapters might clarify this further.

Subject, Act, Idea, People

I write about each elementary aspect of the political in chapter pairs, the separation into the two chapters highlighting the internal tension, indeed the split, within the element itself.

Chapters 1 and 2 explore the rise, from the late nineteenth century on, of the image of the quintessential “political man” via the critical recasting of two distinct precolonial Indic traditions—renunciation (*sannyas*) and realpolitik (*artha/niti*). Embodied in two iconic figures—Vivekananda, the young renouncer who talked of a resurgent global Hinduism but also of socialism and Shudra revolution, and Chanakya/Kautilya, historical author of the ancient treatise of statecraft, the *Arthashastra*, and kingmaker and political strategist of legend—these two propensities, of renunciation and realpolitik, pulled in opposite directions and yet shared a common search, namely, for a purely political mode of being. Such a mode of being, I argue, was imagined as two distinct types of asocial, even antisocial, orientations—that of the renouncer who makes an irreversible exit from household life for the sake of public service and that of the realpolitiker who holds all social norms hostage to the cause of unconditional political efficacy. The social facts of caste and gender, unsurprisingly, played out in interesting and complex ways with respect to these figures, as they struggled to emerge as exemplars of the antisocial orientation.

Here the process of becoming political shows up as a process of differentiation from the social, which gets defined as the ultimate nonpolitical of the times. And yet this antisocial orientation comes to be grounded in two extrapolitical forces—the spiritual for the renouncer (such that Vivekananda would insist that what he did was not politics at all) and the philosophical for the realpolitiker (such that Chanakya would be recast in modern times as the original political philosopher of India). Spirituality in chapter 1 and philosophy in chapter 2 thus appear as the unmistakable extrapolitical supplements to the purely political mode of being of the political subject—returning us to the two defining issues of our times, namely, the relationship of politics to religion and the relationship of politics to philosophy.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore the modern sensibility of politics as action and nothing if not action (we call politics *activism* and political actors *activists*). Chapter 3 studies new uses of the familiar concept of *karma* as it came to be invoked from the late nineteenth century on, in response to the perplexed question of how to differentiate political action from the sea of unceasing activities that was the business of life itself. Note that this question was the opposite of what anthropology asks today—namely, Can everyday practices of life be seen as intrinsically political?, or, more recently, How do quotidian life activities engage and mediate spectacular political action and exceptional events?²⁶ Traditionally, *karma*—action, duty, imperative—denoted the very essence of the human condition, which was nothing other than an inescapable series of actions leading to more actions ad infinitum, such that not just this life but all future lives were always already determined in a chain of causality and consequence. Political action, it now came to be argued, was action that could break out of this cruel circularity—of cause leading to consequence and consequence becoming further cause. Hence, the imagination of political action as *nishkama karma*—a particular kind of nonteleological and unattached *karma* that achieved unconditional freedom by relinquishing stakes in consequences. The problem, however, was that in so defining political action, action no longer appeared political in its capacity as action per se but in terms of the renunciatory disposition of the agent of action. Action, in other words, failed to appear as political qua action and dissolved into the subject question.

Here was a paradox in the very constitution of the political. On the one hand, to define politics as action implied that any subject could be political, so long as s/he acted in recognizably political ways. On the other hand, to define politics as subjectivity implied that the subject was always already political, irrespective of her/his action (or indeed inaction). In response to this paradox, I show in chapter 4 how political action came to be reimagined in analogy to labor, since the 1920s. Labor simultaneously denoted a subject, a noun, and a modular form of activity, a verb. To be able to function in this double capacity, however, labor had to be first abstracted from the diversity of concrete work practices engaged in by people of different classes, castes, and genders. As Ambedkar never tired of saying, there was nothing called labor, only laborers—only a contingent hierarchy of intellectual, manual, and menial work, an intricate gradation of pure and polluted, masterful, and degraded bodies.

To model political action after labor thus required the abstraction of labor as an unmarked universal concept, irrespective of its imbrication in actual laboring bodies. Gandhi performed this abstraction by pitching labor—and

politics—as a moral disposition, communists and socialists as productive/creative purpose, Tagore as poetic/artisanal disposition. The shared sensibility was that anybody who labored was, presently or potentially, a political actor. But if labor was politics and politics labor, it was paradoxically so only insofar as labor could be indexed as ultimately an extrapolitical force. Labor henceforth came to be glossed as “struggle,” that is, a mode of bodily comportment. This was more easily done in images than in discourse. Images of labor now came to be copiously produced in India, often placed side by side with images of hunger, proneness, and passivity, and eventually subtly transcoded, in the name of the political, into a warlike comportment that was however never quite war. The very body from which labor had to be initially extricated and abstracted thus returned as that extrapolitical aspect that made the imagination of politics as action possible in the first place.

Chapters 5 and 6 are about the emergence of the political idea. Here I study how equality becomes thinkable in Bengal and India as the central political idea of our times. Chapter 5 explores early attempts at conceptualizing equality. It argues that equality initially gets posited as a spiritual idea—drawing sustenance from incommensurable philosophical and theological traditions such as nondualist Vedanta, popular Islam, and a recast Buddhism. Central to this moment was the struggle to imagine equality-in-difference, difference being the point of departure for the very thinking of equality in the colony. This challenges our common sense, drawn from the story of liberalism in western Europe, that historically equality gets thought first as formal equality and is only later inflected, in the writings of early feminists and race theorists, by the concept of difference.

In the early years of colonialism, freedom itself appeared predicated on a preliminary setting up of equality between unequals, colonized and colonizer, across the fact (which no one denied) of cultural and civilizational difference. If such an imagination of equality across the colonial interface was the bedrock of nationalism in India, nationalism itself, from the very beginning, was beset by the question of (in)equality between different constituents of the nation. Thus, what we had here was the play not only of difference as such but also of competing criteria of difference. One of the main arguments of chapter 5 is therefore that equality looked different when thought via the fact of gender difference than when thought via facts of caste, religious, or class difference. Hence, instead of working with a normative ideal of equality or with pregiven binaries, such as formal versus substantive, political versus economic, or liberal versus socialist equality, perhaps we should ask, What happens when we

have competing inequalities,²⁷ inflected by competing experiences of difference, which resist being gathered under a singular conceptual rubric such as Difference with a capital *D*?

Ajay Skaria, in his insightful reading of Gandhi's philosophy of equality, argues that equality-in-difference, being that which is without any basis in equivalence or commensuration, can perhaps be thought only in terms of a spiritual aspect. I try to show that spirituality indeed was central not only to early imaginations of equality as an idea but even, in certain cases, to later ones. B. R. Ambedkar, otherwise known as a great rationalist, felt compelled to return to spirituality after thinking with Karl Marx and John Dewey for quite some years. In most of chapter 6, however, I dwell on early socialist and communist thinking in Bengal—and study how economic reason came to be mobilized as a way of circumventing the question of difference, of setting up equivalences where none seemed plausible—as a way of measuring the immeasurable. And yet, I show that while the economic did inspire mass mobilization in the name of equality, what it made thinkable as an idea was not really equality as such but inequality. Equality, an impossible idea in its own terms, thus came to be pitched in the primary sense of a double negative—as that which was not inequality. In order to think equality as a positive idea, the economic itself had to be resignified—through the work of sociology, on the one hand, and literature, on the other. Chapters 5 and 6 thus are a study of the difficult “politicization” of an idea—in its circuitous travels through distinct spiritual, economic, literary, and social registers. The implicit query animating this study is about the very “normative” status of a universal political ideal and the necessary play of the political, the nonpolitical, and the extrapolitical in its constitution.

Chapters 7 and 8 study the “people.” Modern politics can be described as the repeated making and unmaking of the people, in whose name popular will and popular sovereignty are invoked. As we know, the people are never ever a preexisting entity. Different communities—race, nation, class, caste, religious community—claim the name of the people at different times, only to be dislodged from that privileged position by other emergent communities. In the last two chapters, therefore, I ask not so much, Who is/are the people?, but How do a people assume form and presence? That is, instead of working with normative concepts such as popular will or popular sovereignty, I attend to specific historical modes of “staging the people,” the term *stage* implying here both assembly and artifice in the constitution of political community. Therefore, I am not so much concerned with the different categories of the people posited by political philosophy—class, mass, people, folk, nation, crowd, multitude, and

so on. Instead, I dwell on the particular forms that in modern times claim to make the people both thinkable and palpable as an entity.

Chapter 7 is concerned with the rise of the modern political party, which seeks to give people a coherent body. I argue—through a study of the intimate yet fraught relationship between a nationalist party, the Indian National Congress (which claimed to encompass the people as a whole), and a vanguardist party, the Communist Party of India (which claimed to represent the working classes)—that the history of the people as political community is centrally animated in our times by a persistent part/whole dynamic, embodied in the party form. Even though classically a party is meant to represent “a part” of the people, in its modern democratic form it seeks to always already simulate a totality—be it nation, state, people, or the proletariat as a universal class. So while nationalists and communists appeared to stage the people differently—as, respectively, mass party and vanguard party, as the whole and “the part that has no part” (to quote Rancière again), they remained inextricably tied to each other—each feeding on the other’s constituencies, representational techniques, mobilizational forms, and rhetorical and pedagogical address. That is to say, both partook in a generalized part/whole dynamic constitutive to the form of the people as community. Equally, both shared the position that the party was the people in its purely political form. Hence the Congress’s need to distinguish itself from social and religious organizations, which represented the people in their social and cultural aspects, and the Communist Party’s need to distinguish itself from trade unions and peasant leagues, which represented the people in their economic aspect—returning us to the persistent political/non-political dialectic without which the people appeared unthinkable.

In chapter 8, I approach the same question, of the people and its form, from a very different angle. In opposition to the structure and solidity ascribed to the people by the party, I now posit the *fictionality* of the people, as it comes to be shaped in Bengal in the first half of the twentieth century. I use the term *fictionality* advisedly. I argue, through a reading of novels, short stories, poems, songs, and drama and a study of the newly emergent figures of the “literary ethnographer” and the “people’s poet,” that it is precisely the literary—and more specifically the dramatic (not in a generic sense but drama as an effect that cuts across genres)—which in modern times materializes the people as a credible fiction, with a charged yet evanescent presence.

Animating this final chapter is a crucial debate of the times—about the relationship between politics and aesthetics. Many aspects of the debate are familiar to us as having to do with globally salient disputes on aestheticism, naturalism, realism, socialist realism, Nazi art, and so on. But these do not pre-

occupy me so much as does the question of how culture and aesthetics operate as different, indeed rival, grounds of political community in modern times. Culture indexes what the people are by default—by habit, tradition, history. Culture thus is a claim of a preexisting people that politics must address and mobilize. Culture is about identity. Aesthetics, on the other, hand indexes what the people can become in the future. It is an imagination of the people's potential. It is thus literally about fiction. Hence, the question at stake is not about representation (can a people that is “yet to come” be represented?) but about which modes of staging make the people appear more viable and credible at a certain point in time. In other words, I argue that it is not so much the nature of a people but the mode of its staging that determines the political—a fact that must, however, be hidden, or at least disguised, if the people (the demos) are to function as the founding moment, the stable ground of modern politics.

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NOTES

Introduction

- 1 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 9.
- 2 Kaviraj, "An Outline of a Revisionist Theory of Modernity," 497–526.
- 3 Chakrabarty, "A Small History of *Subaltern Studies*," 3–19.
- 4 Bandopadhyay, "Another History."
- 5 Mukhia, *The Feudalism Debate*.
- 6 Bayly, *Recovering Liberties*.
- 7 Sartori, *Liberalism in Empire*.
- 8 Chatterjee, *Lineages of Political Society*, 1–28.
- 9 Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*.
- 10 Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society*.
- 11 Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, *Retreating the Political*, 108.
- 12 Badiou, *Being Singular Plural*, 47–48.
- 13 Marchart, *Post-foundational Political Thought*, 8–9.
- 14 Badiou, *Being and Event*; Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*.
- 15 Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*; Mazzarella, *The Mana of Mass Society*.
- 16 Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 25–26.
- 17 Inston, "Inscribing the Egalitarian Event," 15–26.
- 18 Ajay Skaria mentions, in a private conversation, that equality is best thought of as an "intimation," perhaps even an originary intimation. This intimation can become an idea, as during the French Revolution. But equality's nature as an intimation rather than an idea or an ideal continues, as evinced by the indubitable restlessness of this quasi concept.
- 19 In the Indian context, the definitive statement was made by Ranajit Guha in his lecture on *An Indian Historiography for India*.
- 20 Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*.
- 21 Ries, "Anthropology and the Everyday," 725–42.
- 22 Dodescu, "State versus Market," 17–32.
- 23 I use the term *aspects* here—and not *forms* (of religion à la Durkheim) or *structures* (of kinship à la Claude Lévi-Strauss)—for the following reason. The term *aspect*—with its connotations of direction, perspective, facade, surface—better

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captures my argument that what we are dealing with here is the political at “face value,” which is exactly what I am trying to deconstruct. Structure, on the other hand, is a claim of a deep, stable truth below the surface, which is not my claim at all. And I reserve the term *form* for the more active aesthetic impulse of “giving form”—e.g., the political party as an effort to give political form to the people. My *form* does not preexist historically changing modes of being political, as it does for Durkheim in his account of religion.

- 24 Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*.
- 25 Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, 2.
- 26 Das, *Life and Words*.
- 27 Galanter, *Competing Inequalities*.

Chapter 1. Renunciation and Antisocial Being

- 1 Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*; Chowdhury, *Frail Hero and Virile History*; Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*.
- 2 Banerjee, “The Abiding Binary.”
- 3 I do not fully subscribe to the argument made by south Asian “early modernists” that the whole world was becoming “modern” before colonialism came and spoiled it. Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories.”
- 4 In precolonial times, *samaj* did not mean society. It meant the ability “to move together,” the sociality of caste groups, heterodox religious communities, or even urbane cultured classes. A region had and an individual belonged to multiple *samajs* at the same time. *Samaj* was neither national society nor the conceptual other of the state.
- 5 Tagore, “Bharatbarsher Itihas” (1902), in *Rabindra Rachanavali*, 4:382–84.
- 6 Mehta, “Gandhi on Politics, Democracy and Everyday Life.”
- 7 For the relationship between law and violence, see Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India*.
- 8 Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*; Dirks, *Castes of Mind*.
- 9 Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar, *Women and Social Reform in Modern India*.
- 10 Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), in *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, 1:23–97.
- 11 Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, in *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, 9:78–84.
- 12 Ambedkar, “Philosophy of Hinduism,” in *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, 3:84.
- 13 Nikhilananda, *Vivekananda: A Biography*; Chattopadhyay, *Swami Vivekananda in India*.
- 14 Vivekananda, “The Social Conference Address,” in *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 4:303–7.
- 15 This was the time of the “rediscovery” of Buddhism. Edwin Arnold published *The Light of Asia* in 1870; Rajendralal Mitra published *The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal* in 1882; Aghornath Gupta published *Sakyamuni Charit o Nirvanatattva* in 1882; and Girish Ghosh’s play *Buddhacharit* was commercially staged in Calcutta in 1885.

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