




BOOK FORUM

The Stakes of Internationalism

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The centrality of internationalism is among the most rewarding points of emphasis in Auritro Majumder's *Insurgent Imaginations*. There is even a kind of intellectual daring in his proposing internationalism as a defining concept for reckoning with peripheral literature, given that categories such as cosmopolitanism or globalization are far more apt to catch the attention of contemporary readers. Nonetheless, it is to the internationalist orientation of writers and artists from outside the “West” that Majumder returns, not out of a hoary commitment to preserve the old or the outmoded but to keep faith with the actual histories of cultural and political struggle spurring the vast output of artistic creativity in the global south. Majumder focuses specifically on the literary and cultural forms that articulate this peripheral worldview, unified by a singular ambition: to “push the boundaries of humanist emancipation.”¹

The first thing that strikes me as salutary in locating internationalism as a universal aspiration which finds expression in locations such as Cuba, India, Mexico, or Brazil (among other places) is the author's decision to avoid what Theodor Adorno's translator, the philosopher Robert Hullot-Kentor, calls the “gratuitous plural.”² That is, Majumder is guided by the understanding that locating a desired plurality simply by designating it (e.g., “internationalisms” instead of “internationalism,” “racisms” instead of “racism,” “modernities” instead of “modernity”) cannot in fact render it real. Even though this move is evident everywhere in criticism today, it involves a category mistake—geared less toward demonstrating the equality between ideas or isms than in virtue signaling. At the end of the day, such nominalizations only succeed in shunting

¹ Auritro Majumder, *Insurgent Imaginations: World Literature and the Periphery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), x.

² Robert Hullot-Kentor, “Robert Hullot-Kentor in Conversation with Fabio Akcelrud Durão,” *The Brooklyn Rail: Critical Perspectives on Art, Politics, and Culture*, July–August, 2008 (<https://brooklynrail.org/2008/07/art/robert-hullot-kentor-in-conversation-with-fabio-ackelrud-durao>).

the antagonism of the one and the many to the side, to be replaced by their placid and liberal pluralization. By contrast, internationalism is a fighting word, uttered on behalf of an ineluctably singular and universal equality among peoples of the globe. At the most general level, it speaks in the name of the collective and, more particularly, under the banner of visionaries, rebels, and revolutionaries from the periphery of the capitalist world system; those, that is, who serve as the basis of Majumder's wide-ranging explorations. Forms and practices that have emerged under the auspices of internationalism, Majumder argues, deliberately swerve away from elite understandings and bourgeois conceptions of subjectivity, desire, or reconciliation, centering instead on nuanced depictions of a world opposed to the one that dominates metropolitan consciousness.

Fiction, film, and drama are, as Majumder documents, the primary vehicles for pursuing this vision. They embody forms of consciousness that in rejecting their bourgeois counterparts—whether that of homegrown elites in the periphery or those in the center—uniquely represent the “cultural front” of broader struggles for social, economic, and political sovereignty. The *perspective* of internationalism, then, is a historical desideratum to which the book gives proper due, albeit one that has faded in vast swathes of contemporary criticism that otherwise purport to advance the project of world literature, especially along minoritarian lines.

My remarks here are intended as elaborations of Majumder's undertaking, especially because the project of internationalism—what it entails as well as what it marks its distance from—has been more than a little muffled within the mainstream critical consensus. Pheng Cheah for instance, has distinguished internationalism from cosmopolitanism either by conflating the former as in some way complicit with nationalism or by rendering it equivalent to transnationalism, whose primary thrust he rightly diagnoses as accommodating the needs of capital.³ That said, his speculations are often difficult to pin down because of their abstruseness—exemplified in the work cited here by an allegiance to Derridean notions of “spectrality.” This is an idea and even an ideal for deconstructionist critics like Cheah, whose critical enterprise is both to reveal and revel in ambiguity, the result of which is that his propositions regarding the “spectral nation” tend in the direction of making the nation-state a servant of international finance (bad) as well as the ghost that haunts it (good). In the interests of space, only one instance of Cheah's mode of thinking will have to suffice to convey this ambiguity: “Derrida notes that Marxist internationalism is ‘in principle non-religious; in the sense of a positive religion; it is not mythological; it is therefore not national—for beyond even the alliance with a chosen people, *there is no nationality or nationalism that is not religious or mythological—let us say ‘mystical’ in the broad sense.*”⁴

Whatever the merits of conceiving of nationalism and the nation-state by the light of specters, internationalism itself disappears from view in such a reading, relegated less to spectrality than irrelevance. It should go without saying that Marxist internationalism is not national simply because it takes the *global* division of labor to be its core concern. This much is axiomatic, hardly needing

³ Pheng Cheah, “Spectral Nationality: The Living-on [sur-vie] of the Postcolonial Nation in Neocolonial Globalization,” *Boundary 2* 26.3 (Autumn 1999): 225–52.

⁴ Cheah, “Spectral Nationality,” 249; emphasis in the original.

Derrida to state or Cheah to repeat as complex proof of the matter (viz., “it is therefore not national”). At the same time, Marxism’s generative internationalism is not without its ideology, albeit not a nationalistic one, which we might take as the commitment to socialism in one form or another.

To be sure, this commitment involves the inheritances of the nation form, an insistence on the sovereignty of domestic policy making (rather than the imperatives of global capital), and the integrity of borders—the violations of which have led, as we certainly know, to political catastrophes in Iraq or Libya and, now, Afghanistan as well (to name only some recent episodes in political history). The task the internationalists set themselves was to *transform* regnant understandings of nationally defined bourgeois property into a socialist cosmopolis; this is the horizon of possibility glimpsed in the internationalism of socialists from Lenin to Lumumba and toward which their vision was firmly trained. For the likes of Cheah, however, such a commitment appears beset by being too concrete, for not trucking in the vaunted in-betweenness so characteristic of arguments like his that take their lead from aporetic forms of thinking. Needless to say, it is not that aporias of thinking escape ideology but rather that those who luxuriate in the abyss are unable, or at least unwilling, to recognize the impress of the ideological in their preference for the ineffable. In this optic, internationalism can only come across as the waste product of a post-Kantian fascination with ontological rather than political issues, often sidelined by dogmatic attempts to defend the former in terms of the latter.

By contrast, what I find compelling about Majumder’s dialectical account of the capacity of literary practices and practitioners to inhabit and advance the utopian (though material) goals of internationalism is that he shows these efforts to be organic—simultaneously located within specific social and regional contexts and linked to wider political and even existential aspirations. His discussion of Aravind Adiga’s novel, *The White Tiger*, in chapter 5, for example, unpacks the mutually constituted dimensions of local structures of kinship, patriarchy, caste, and class in India, along with offering a larger meditation on wage slavery and the penetration of capital into peripheral spaces. Peripheral internationalism, then, neither “haunts” the local nor fantasizes the global, generated as it is by the dialectic of inner and outer life, particular and universal desires. But it should be added that Majumder is less content to rest his case on abstract appeals to dialectics than on precise formulations of the terms and conditions by which a dialectical standpoint concretely illuminates the peripheral present.

Accordingly, for example, in the very first chapter of *Insurgent Imaginations*, he refers to the acclaimed Bengali activist, actor, dramaturge, and cultural critic (a Renaissance personality whose presence on the Indian cultural scene cannot be overestimated), Utpal Dutt, who famously replied to a question about revolutionary theater by saying, “Our ‘program’ is to bring the stories of the gallant revolutionary struggles of another people to our own people so that they too will be inspired to fight.”⁵ Aside from the deliberate emphasis on solidarity with struggles in other places and of other peoples, this anecdote (chapter 4 offers a

⁵ Majumder, *Insurgent Imaginations*, 19.

longer treatment of Dutt's contributions to peripheral internationalism) highlights Majumder's stress on situating a thinker, writer, or critic's orientation away from the now-standard preoccupation with writing back/against/to empire. To this end, the book valuably charts the ways that peripheral writers focalize connections not only among those in Asia, Latin America, or Africa, but also with like thinkers in Europe and North America, all joined in various endeavors to articulate the historical experience of uneven development, on the one hand, and advocate for an alternative telos of social and political possibility.

Of note here, Majumder avers, is the resonance of a different conversation—one that self-consciously marks its distance from metropolitan academic and critical fashions—in which, for instance, the recrudescence of nativism or moralistic calls for “canceling” European ideas have become the mode du jour. It is not an exaggeration to say that the dispiriting and at times dangerous myth making of the nationalist, in the terms Cheah lays out, has become oddly visible in just this kind of censorious gesture from those who elsewhere consider it imperative to dispense with nationalism.

The last point is one worth grappling with, if only because it reveals the extent to which glibly allergic reactions to Eurocentrism have not and cannot be seen as coincident with the emphases that peripheral thinkers themselves evince. They were all avowedly left leaning and at times card carrying, so the chestnut that Marxism is Eurocentric, for example, seems valid only if one ignores or is unaware of the Marxist credentials of any number of notable figures from outside Europe—all the way from revolutionary thinkers such as M.N. Roy and Aimé Césaire to more contemporary interlocutors and adherents such as the aforementioned Dutt, the better-known activist-writer, Mahasweta Devi, as well as influential left filmmakers such as Glauber Rocha or Mrinal Sen. One always suspects that there is some other agenda at work in denigrating the traditions of the left, but because it is unwise to speculate about motivations that circulate in academic settings, a more productive move is to pause, as Majumder does, to take the measure of peripheral writers who can be termed insurgent. They are the organic intellectuals of the *lumpen* classes across the globe and, as already noted, their goals are totally discontinuous with the metropolitan critical fetishes that often, and ironically, proceed in the name of disavowing Eurocentric privilege.

Majumder's choice of insurgent intellectuals assumes a different function in the nexus of politics and art: to give voice to the prismatic relationships between form and history that have, over the course of the uneven experience of capitalism, led certain modes of thought and expression to take shape in the center, while others have emerged from elsewhere in the crucible of struggle against that which Adorno eloquently called “wrong life.”⁶ That there is no contradiction or taint attached to granting, for example, that Dutt's theatrical experiments took their cue from Brechtian theater; that Tagore was as much a universalist as Lenin; or that Mao's dialectics were formulated by the light of a

⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott ([1951]; London: New Left Books, 1974), 39.

textured understanding of peasant consciousness in his contemporary China and historical France; these are some of the most consequential topics that Majumder tackles, and in his hands, the energy, nuances, and details of the traffic in ideas along geopolitical axes of North/South or East/West are enlivened as real engagements rather than limp binaries.

It seems to me that the insertion of peripheral internationalism as a “reading method”⁷ greatly enhances the interpretive quest that motivates those of us not interested in purely belles-lettristic criticism. By proposing a dynamic that immanently connects politics, economics, society, and culture, this method lends substantive weight to conceptions like “world literature” or “global culture,” guided as it is by the imperative to pay attention to the sutures between aesthetic experience and social reality. *Internationalism*, as a term borrowed from the vocabulary of left traditions, can thus be seen as the lever of an outlook that takes seriously the aim of referring expressive forms to their conditions of possibility. And especially in the context of discussing peripheral literary or cultural artifacts, this outlook makes it possible to move beyond the stalemate produced by thinking of cultural objects as circulating from centers of global influence to the periphery (and back) without regard for either the specificity of their mode of utterance or the local and institutional pressures that in practice always underlie negotiations between aesthetic imperatives and economic ones.

Apart from positing the issue of peripheral internationalism as a methodological key for undertaking close reading, Majumder also takes a significant and conceptually driven step to tease out what Fredric Jameson has put forward as the “historicity of forms.”⁸ How do forms transmit history? This question is deftly and most successfully tackled, in my view, in Majumder’s discussion of the Bengali activist-writer Mahasweta Devi’s fiction (in chapter 4). Although Devi’s work is now familiar to many readers of postcolonial and world literature, in part due to the stewardship of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, she has come to represent something of a talisman for vernacular writing. As a result, she is now taken up by many constituencies in metropolitan settings as a champion *par excellence* of subaltern cultural politics—by feminist critics, perhaps above all, but also by ecologically minded scholars, along with those invested in the representation of Dalit (“downtrodden”) movements and consciousness in South Asia. But, as Majumder astutely observes, the entry of Devi into the Anglophone academy has blocked our recognition of the fact that she has a much bigger and more politically grounded audience *outside* the West.

This is a small detail but betokens a larger imperial history. For, as Majumder observes, the form of English as the dominant mode by means of which Devi’s works are now read has had a corollary effect: the diminution of her scope and reputation as one of the most translated contemporary authors within India itself—with her Bengali fiction translated into other Indian languages, including as Assamese, Gujarati, Hindi, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Telegu, and Ho, a tribal language.⁹ In other words, there is a mutation that occurs when a writer

⁷ Majumder, *Insurgent Imaginations*, 21.

⁸ Fredric Jameson, *The Ancients and the Postmoderns: On the Historicity of Forms* (London: Verso, 2015).

⁹ Majumder, *Insurgent Imaginations*, 126.

thoroughly immersed in organic— not simply academic—debates over culture and politics in the periphery is catapulted into the Western imagination as a solitary exemplar of approved literary or cultural values. The larger point Majumder makes is not that there is an authentic, vernacular world that metropolitan readers cannot access; rather, it is that the reception of Devi into metropolitan circuits of readership and influence—made possible by her translation into the *lingua franca* of English—has had the contrary effect of stifling the implications of her embeddedness as a writer whose interest in the critique of problems such as bonded labor and exploitation lay squarely behind her own political vision.

What one can take away from this illustration is the perverse effect of rendering peripheral writing into the mirror image of metropolitan thinking, particularly to the degree that it assumes the form of equating the critique of capitalism's universalizing impulse with an endorsement of subaltern difference. Against this current, Majumder demonstrates that the incomplete and dialectical interactions between a writer's objective to grasp the totality of the world and the world itself proffer not only a different vision of the links between politics and art, but also between peripheral and metropolitan ideals.

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