

The Work of Theory

Thinking across Traditions

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Tackling the question of how to recalibrate the relationship between history and theory in our favour without falling into the trap of either an unqualified universalism or a naïve historicism, this article proposes that we move from the position of being a critic of Western theory to that of being a composer and assembler of a new theory from different sources and different histories.

This article is based on the experience of teaching a course on social and political theory as part of “Researching the Contemporary,” an annual teaching programme at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. We have experimented with the shape and structure of this course and explored the possibility of a somewhat different canon of theoretical readings. Much of what we write has been thought together through the last five years of teaching. We have also benefited from conversations with colleagues and friends in other universities who have also been struggling to think theory in/from the global south in ways that go beyond the standard Western canon. We thank in particular, Sudipta Kaviraj, Arindam Chakrabarti, Nivedita Menon, Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, Chandan Gowda, Sukanya Sarbadhikary, Upal Chakrabarti, and colleagues at the CSDS.

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The term “theory” brings to mind names such as Plato, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Georg Hegel, or Karl Marx. Thus theory appears as a ready-made body of philosophical thought, produced in the West, which either fascinates us (as something “they” do) or makes us turn away (because we think our concerns are social scientific rather than philosophical). The more theory-inclined among us simply pick the latest theory off-the-shelf and “apply” it to our context, notwithstanding its provincial European origin, for we believe that “theory” is by definition universal. In other words, our relationship to theory is dependent, derivative, and often deeply alienated.

Take the mode of production debate of the 1970s and 1980s, when economists and historians tried to “apply” Marxism to Indian agriculture, looking for wage labour, market orientation, surplus accumulation, and so on to determine whether the Indian economy was capitalist or not. Eventually, it all came down to wondering about it—if not capitalism, then perhaps India had semi-feudalism (so capitalism-in-potential) or “retarded” capitalism or even “capitalist subsumption” of the non-capital (Patnaik 1990; Thorner 1982). Even when some conceded that features such as wage labour and market orientation had longer precolonial histories, the theoretical reference point remained the European “transition debate.” It is only now that some scholars have begun asking whether the Anglocentric transition model works at all for societies such as ours, with no colonies to fuel primitive accumulation (Sanyal 2007).

Or take the 1990s debate on secularism in India. Faced with mass mobilisation for the demolition of the Babri Masjid, scholars experienced the limits of the secularism idea. Some tried to fashion something called Indian secularism, acknowledging their inability to work without the implicitly Christian concept of the secular despite its obvious inapplicability to India.¹ So in our experience, theory has often fallen short in its encounter with history—often resulting in the production of non-Western histories as deviant histories of “lack”.

Postcolonial thinkers have critiqued the global hegemony of Western theory by invoking “difference”—not just between the West and the rest, but also as constitutive of modernity itself. Yet, the terms of the theoretical game have not quite changed. Clearly, a mere demonstration of difference through amassing historical counter-evidence is not enough for a theoretical breakthrough. It can expose the Eurocentrism of dominant traditions, but it cannot produce autonomous theory. Even when not entirely derivative, our thought remains imprisoned

in the old comparativist framework, where we mark our similarities and differences with the West in terms of criteria already prefigured in Western theoretical frameworks (Chatterjee 2011).

We, in the postcolonial world, respond to this predicament in one of three ways. One, we espouse critiques as our mode of being, relentlessly showing up the limits of universal categories of thought. This is the mode of postcolonial theory. Two, we look towards practice as that which inflects Western theoretical concepts in our favour. That is, we believe that while we cannot do without Western concepts because they are the only modern concepts available, in practice, we deploy them in ways that effectively give them new content and new contours. This approach is exemplified by Partha Chatterjee's narrative of democracy as practice and his concept of "political society" (2004). Finally, we sometimes invoke an authentic/indigenous mode. In its crude form, this becomes a kind of cultural nationalism. In more sophisticated versions, as in Ashis Nandy's writings (1995), this becomes a demonstration of the pathology of modern/universal categories such as "secularism," "nationalism" and "history," and of the positive powers of myth, spirituality, and poetry.²

We feel, however, that none of these really engages with any theoretical tradition other than the Western, which remains its reference point even in critique and disavowal. Towards the end of the essay, therefore, we will gesture towards a fourth way of relating to Western theory. Our proposal is that we move from the position of a critic of Western theory to that of one which composes and assembles new theory from different sources and different histories.

Our basic question here is how can we become free theoretical subjects. We believe this entails reopening the basic question: "what is theory?" In the following sections, we spell out four methodological imperatives that we believe are critical to this reopening. But, before that, a few words on the question of abstraction in thought.

The Question of Abstraction

Theory is often understood as thought in abstraction. Abstraction may appear as normative—concerned with what ought to be rather than what is—and therefore untouched by the nitty-gritty of the practical world. Such is the case with universals such as democracy, equality and secularism in liberal political philosophy. Abstraction may also be formal or logical, as is the case with Anglo-American analytical philosophy that concerns itself purely with the clarity and consistency of concepts and propositions. Or abstraction may be imagined as purely ontological, as in some schools of continental philosophy that raise first-order questions like Being, Truth, Event, and Life in the name of an apparently transhistorical human condition. In all these cases, "abstraction" stands in for the universality of thought.

It is this notion of abstraction that has defined the West's understanding of the non-West. Hegel was not alone in believing that while other people of the world thought in purely empirical, or at most symbolic, terms, Europe alone thought in

abstraction (1975). So did Georg Simmel (explaining why "primitives" could not think abstract time and symbolic money) (1978) and phenomenologist Edmund Husserl (1970).³ So did as recent and radical a thinker as Gilles Deleuze, who said that while Greeks had abstract thinking, "oriental sages" thought figuratively (Deleuze and Guattari 1994). We know that Enlightenment notions of subject-centred reason posited abstraction as, by definition, the most advanced mode of thinking that connected classical Greece to modern Europe.

Much before Hegel, however, Europe had become familiar with Indian, Chinese, and other traditions of thought through colonial encounters. So it began asking if these non-European traditions were also philosophy. Expectedly, the answer was no. Henceforth, classical Greek *philosophia*—love of knowledge—would be defined as knowledge solely for its own sake (that is, unconnected to political motive, social interest, or personal desire) and distinguished from other thought traditions, purportedly contaminated by practical and soteriological interests. So Europe had philosophy, embodying *theoria*, or a purely contemplative mode; others had religion and myth (Park 2013).

A lot can be said about the deeply problematic nature of this imagination of philosophy that was established in modernity. For instance, one could say that seeing the world as purely an object of contemplation (rather than as something we inhabit) led to the centrality of the subject/object binary in modern Western thought—the subject being that which unilaterally contemplated the object-world which apparently lay exposed for contemplation before the theoretical eye. Needless to say, the modern narrative of mastery of the world by reason was predicated on this subject/object binary. Theory as thought-in-abstraction was therefore necessarily accompanied by a deeply practical, technological, and colonising attitude towards the world, as Martin Heidegger noted in the early 20th century (1977) and "new materialists" do today (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 3, 95).

From the late 19th century onwards, colonial intellectuals in India sought to recast their own intellectual traditions in this hegemonic image of philosophy. Anxious of being labelled either too spiritual or mythological or practical, they tried hard to find terms within the Sanskrit lexicon that could translate as philosophy. Many difficulties arose as a result. For example, in trying to render the term *darsana* as philosophy, modern Indian intellectuals forgot that even though it was also a visual metaphor like "theoria," it did not mean contemplation at all. It simply meant view or perspective, interchangeable with terms like *mata* (opinion or position) and *vada* (reasoning or argument). So *darsana* was necessarily plural and contentious (Halbfass 1988; Sjödin 2011).

There were also attempts at rendering *anviksiki* as philosophy, even though *anviksiki* was not a distinct domain of thought at all. It simply meant "critical or investigative reasoning," a mode of thinking that was pertinent to all fields, including politics.⁴ It is telling that to the Jaina thinkers who collated and systematised diverse *darsanas* of their time, this multiplicity of perspectives became the ground of *anekantavada*.

Anekantavada proposed that because entities are infinite in their qualities and modes of being, they cannot be grasped in all their aspects by finite human perception (Koller 2000: 400–07). In other words, it was implicitly recognised that like philosophy there is perhaps no single meta-concept that could work as a mode of absolute knowledge orientation, encompassing all forms of situated and perspectival knowledges by virtue of its abstraction. All thought was recognised as conditioned and partial.

This of course is not to say that there was no abstract thinking in India or in other parts of the world. The analytical school of Nyaya for instance—with its theory of *pramanas* or conditions of knowledge—functioned in a highly abstract mode. Abstraction, however, was not seen as necessarily the highest mode of thinking, nor was it the default image of thought. Abstract thinking—like thinking through narratives, through analogies and metaphors, through binaries, and through examples—was seen as merely one among many distinct modes of thinking, each having its use in its appropriate context.

Theory as Practice: Concepts in the World

In defining theory as abstract thought and by denying others the very capacity to abstract, modern Europe not only monopolised “theory” but also created a fundamental conundrum about thinking itself by producing the irresolvable theory/practice binary that globally plagues thought today. Francois Jullien, historian of classical Chinese thought, traces the theory/practice binary back to the time of Plato (2004: 1–3, 52, 54–55). As we know, Plato believed that the cosmos was made up of ideal celestial forms and that the real world was simply a lesser copy of this celestial perfection. The purpose of human life—whether it be the poet’s, the geometrician’s or the philosopher king’s—was to try and approximate this ideal order. Classical Greece, especially democratic Athens, came to be emulated in modernity as a model for both thought and politics. As a consequence, this archaic ideal/real binary became an enduring characteristic of European thought, through subsequent reinventions as mind versus matter, subject versus object, and idealism versus materialism.

In modernity, when a divine perfection could no longer be imagined as the model of the world, the platonic ideal/real binary came to be based on the notion of a reified “Subject” (with capital s), who embodied reason as the new perfection. This subject, emancipated from the flesh and the world, wielded rational thought, which, when applied to the world, transformed it for the better. This rational thought (often opposed to psychosomatic drives, passions, and madness) could take many forms—political ideology, economic modelling, blueprints for social engineering, or even urban planning. In this paradigm, the subject appears external to the world rather than embedded in it, and the world appears laid out before the subject to apprehend in thought and, subsequently, to act upon. It is this epistemological externality that assumes the particular form of abstraction that is today called “theory” as opposed to socially-imblicated, ordinary thought. This mimesis-based model of knowledge still plagues us, such that our practice remains

oriented to realising the ideal and our thought to representing the real, always falling short in both cases.

Jullien, however, tells us that the theory/practice binary is not the mode through which all cultures think. The ancient Chinese, for example, approached war, the epitome of action if any, not in terms of a plan versus strategy or theory versus practice opposition, but in terms of a continuum across plan (that is, the conceptualisation of war); strategy (the empirically grounded modality of action); and tactic (contingent field engagement). Or, across the distinct moments of thought, speech, action, and indeed, inaction, waiting, and resolution. So instead of reducing war to the ultimate moment of victory or defeat—after the model of Action with a capital A, which can be dichotomised with thought—the ancient Chinese understood war as a temporally stretched-out condition, from the moment of considering the possibility of war to its long aftermath. Jullien also points out that the Chinese language does not work with a distinction between the active and passive voice like European languages, implying that the theory/practice and subject/object binaries do not therefore really work in classical Chinese intellectual traditions.

Crucial in these Chinese traditions, therefore, is neither thought nor action but a more complex notion of “efficacy” which encompasses what we are used to seeing as the separate domains of thought, life, and action. Efficacy is neither seen to lie in the inherent truth of an ideal nor reduced to the genius of action. Rather it is seen to lie in the ability of an agent or a thought to enter the interstices of an existing order so as to creatively mobilise, redirect, and transform the “propensity of things”—the processes already at work in the world. Clearly, the world is seen here as an active and ongoing process, a flux rather than a domain of inanimate objects to be contemplated, or a state of pre-political passivity to be acted upon—an insight that resonates with the classical Buddhist tradition in India. Efficacy is thus seen as conditioned upon the ability to enter, inhabit, and engage that process, not upon an abstraction from or momentary suspension of it so as to make time or space for thought.

If we redefine theory in this image of efficacy, we can see it as a particular mode of working with the world rather than of abstracting from it. The image for us is then not of a theory being put into action, after the fact of its thinking as it were. Rather it is the image of theory itself as an activity—that of coursing through “reality,” processing the world so to speak. That is, theory not as “shedding” light on the world from above, but as emanating and illuminating it from within, thus transforming the world’s visible and apprehensible contours. The transformative potential of a theory then lies not in its successful application to a separate domain called the domain of practice but in its ability to change our sense of the world. In other words, instead of seeing theory as thought in abstraction and thereby getting forever trapped in a theory/practice binary, we could productively reimagine theory itself as practice.

At one level, this is not an entirely new point. Theory, like thinking in general, is itself a particular kind of practice that

exists in complex entanglements with, and not in any simple alterity to, life. Drawing on Shamsur Rahman Faruqi's characterisation of Indo-Persian and Arabic poetics, we could say that for us theory is about the production of new meanings and effects in the world and not about a perfect representation of the world (as presupposed in classical Greek notions of mimesis and aesthesis). If we agree that theory (and philosophy), like other modes of thinking, pertains not to some hallowed domain called "knowledge" or "thought," which both reflects and reflects upon the world out there, but is an aspect of our being in the world, several implications follow.

At its most rudimentary, "theory" can itself be seen as a moment of ordinary "practice." All practices take form through arguments (whether explicitly made or not) that either position them in context to existing practices or justify themselves against them. Arguments or claims can be seen as modes of everyday theorisation, wherein facts are reordered in specific ways so as to refute earlier arguments and make possible new ones. Concepts and generalisation immanent to such arguments can be called practical concepts. In the hands of philosophers, these can become more complex and elaborate. Note, for example, how the everyday practice of assembling and making do with available materials, given the name *jugaad* (or "bricolage" in its French incarnation/or to make do with available resources), has today become a general concept with new valences. From being a term of everyday use, bricolage, in Claude Levi-Strauss's hands, eventually became a concept/metaphor for describing how mythical thought works, taking over elements and fragments of older cultural formations, and deploying them for the fashioning of new ones. From Levi-Strauss, the concept then travelled as we know, not only to the domains of art criticism and critical theory, but also to sciences such as molecular biology (Johnson 2012). Similarly, *jugaad* is also undergoing a metamorphosis as scholars increasingly see potentialities in it of articulating ways of being that have hitherto been deemed impoverished and illegitimate.⁵

This is not to say, however, that everyday life and philosophy can be collapsed into one another. As indicated above, everyday practical concepts need scholarly and philosophical re-articulation, a process that involves considerable rethinking and rigour. For, like all practices, scholarly practice too has its own norms, rules, and disciplines to be learnt, cultivated, and taught. However, this is to bring theory down from its rarefied heights and to align it with other aspects of ordinary living and thinking.

Theory and History

To redefine theory as activity is to reopen the question of the relationship between history and theory, fact and concept. It is to determine, in a new way, the plane of operation of thinking. Most of us will agree that theory must in some sense be free of history and context; it must acquire a certain generality, a certain trans-contextual and transhistorical significance. But we also have stakes in history itself, because it is precisely by denying the theoretical salience of other histories and other traditions, that Western theory maintains its universal claims.

So we need to creatively construct a plane of theorising, which admits to historicity while also being emancipated from it. This is one crucial aspect of reopening the basic question—what is theory? That is to say, we must begin our theoretical enterprise by determining the degree and quality of abstraction we seek to achieve from our own historical context and from the empirical materials we work with.

Very simply speaking, this is to question every thinker's choice of materials—say the historical document for Michel Foucault, the theological text for Giorgio Agamben, and the cinematic image for Deleuze. This is also to carefully attend to the ways in which each invokes these materials—does s/he invoke them as source, as evidence, as illustration, as a tradition to inhabit, as a *sutra* (a rule) to elaborate, or as a *purva-paksha* (building a deep familiarity with the opponent's point of view before criticising it) to criticise and refute? We should also attend to the ways a thinker stages or frames her materials—are they part of footnotes, citations in the text, examples, invocations, or a medium of thought. All these aspects combine to produce a particular theory's relationship to the material and the empirical. It is this relationship with materials that determine what can be called the plane of operation of a theory—which is never settled inferentially before the actual work of theorising.

To grasp the implications of this, we need to unpack the history/theory configuration that grounds theory in its current familiar form. The rise of Enlightenment thought, we know, was based on the rise of universal history. Originally based on a theological imagination in which the whole world was seen as potentially a boundless Christian imperium, universal history was reconfigured in modernity from being evangelical to being colonial—with the world ruled now by reason rather than by Christianity. In this modern form, "world history" functioned not so much as a narrative of the past as a unitary philosophy of reason's earthly march. In colonial times, reason was seen as aligned to political sovereignty. So Hegel saw the state as the embodiment of universal reason, just as the colonial state justified itself in the name of reason, as reflected in "rule of law."

Following decolonisation, it is capital that is seen as a personified and automated global agent of history, subsuming all histories of all peoples everywhere in the world. Even critics of capitalism buy into this totalising theoretical category and this narrative of the relentlessly universalising drive of capital (Nigam 2014: 482–514). In other words, it is through the exercise of universal history that the West posits, even today, its particular history as the driver of global history. Thus, despite its proclaimed transhistorical status, hegemonic theory draws sustenance from the proclaimed universality of history itself.

The rise of universal history was in turn based on the rise of a universal history of philosophy. This was achieved by Kant's invention of the concept of "a priori history." Kant proposed, in the fourth article of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, that a true history of philosophy must be an "a priori history," that is, a rational history rather than simply a historical history. By this he meant that the history of philosophy must not approach

philosophy like any other object of study—instead philosophy's history must be internal to philosophy itself. That is, the history of philosophy must be understood as an unfolding of philosophy's self-knowledge rather than a contextualisation of philosophy in a particular time and place. Kant was addressing those in his times who compared different thought systems of the world—European, Chinese, Indian, and so on—comparisons which, even if unfair, granted a certain autonomy and alterity to a multiplicity of traditions. With Kant's incorporation of the history of philosophy within philosophy itself, the autonomy of other thought systems was lost. Hegel gave this the ultimate twist by recasting "history of philosophy" into "philosophy of history"—by which all thought systems of the world were now subsumed as historical moments of the unfolding universal "idea." So Hegel could say that while Indians and Chinese had truths, their truths were yet to acquire the form of thought. That is, these were not different kinds of philosophy. These were philosophy's prehistory. What we have with Hegel then is not so much a monopolisation of truth as an attempt to discipline and control "how to think" in the first place (Halbfass 1988).

Thus, in the European tradition, Kant onwards, the history of theory was subsumed within theory itself, in a way that made theory immune to historicisation and therefore to the challenge of counter-histories. This resistance to historicisation made possible the setting up of a seamless contemporaneity between European thinkers of diverse times and diverse contexts, from Plato to Marx to Deleuze, from antiquity to the present, such that theory seemed to assume an eternal and universal form. Note the stark contrast with the non-West, where precolonial thinkers—such as an Abhinavagupta or an Al Farabi—are so deeply historicised and contextualised that we find it next to impossible to approach them from our modern locations, even though we find it perfectly legitimate to read archaic European thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle.

Western theory has come a long way since Kant and Hegel. However, the particular history/philosophy configuration outlined above still remains hegemonic. It is for this reason that aspects of European history continue to function as philosophical/theoretical archetypes rather than as what it is, namely, empirical history. This allows for the unmediated slippage between history and philosophy, fact and concept that we often encounter when we read European theory, wherein a historical statement can masquerade as a theoretical statement and a historical event function as a philosophical event quite easily. So the French Revolution becomes transformed from a local, empirical occurrence to the moment the philosophical concepts of liberty, equality, and democracy were enunciated. Such a privilege is of course, never accorded to the Russian or the Chinese revolutions, let alone Asian and African liberation struggles, which remain always, purely empirical/historical events. It is in the same way that a specific chapter of English history, "enclosure of the commons," comes to be endlessly re-tailed as "primitive accumulation"—at once theoretical norm and historical necessity, undergirding the universal history of capital.

In other words, our current theoretical predicament is not just that we think with concepts that carry the mark of histories not our own. It is also that these concepts do not wear the marks of their own historicity directly. Rather, they operate in the form of an erased historicity. What we know as theoretical abstraction is precisely this erased historicity, where the erasure functions to institute both exclusivity and universality at the same time. Thus, while traces of European history continue to drive theory, history in itself is denied theoretical efficacy. Other histories therefore remain confined to the status of mere counterfactuals.

How then do we recalibrate, in our favour, the relationship between history and theory without falling into the trap of either an unqualified universalism or a naïve historicism, which believes that mere production of different histories will lead to new theory? Clearly, this can only be done by reformulating the rules of the theoretical game. We propose that instead of seeing theory as a level or domain unto itself—of thought (and not practice), the abstract (and not the empirical), and so on—we see it as a movement between different levels. Theory then becomes the activity of moving to and fro through details of the empirical—historical documents, ethnographic notes, literary texts, visual images, and so on—onto the register of the conceptual, the creative, and even the speculative, only to return to the empirical/historical; and so on. This passage must be imagined as a movement across multiple registers—from the most particular to the most abstract and the many zones in between—without reducing these registers to any pre-given duality such as the universal/historical or abstract/concrete or transcendent/immanent as is done today in the dominant theoretical formulations.

To reiterate, in our understanding, there is no pre-existing plane of operation of thought, no given degree of abstraction (or otherwise). Rather thought makes a place by pausing and tarrying at a point and not at another. Determining that point, where stakes are reconstituted and new possibilities opened up, is therefore a political task in a very special sense.

Ideas Have No Borders

One way to achieve theoretical generality, without nullifying historical difference, is to think across traditions. This is quite the opposite of any kind of nativism in ideas. As a theoretical map of the precolonial world would unmistakably show, ideas always moved by cutting across national and continental borders. So North Africa, Asia Minor, and Mediterranean Europe constituted one node of theoretical activities in earlier times, as did China, Tibet, and eastern India. So it is blatantly false to claim a tradition of thought to be exclusively one's own in a national or civilisational sense. Of course, European thought happily presents itself as purely European, eradicating centuries of West Asian and North African contributions and disingenuously claiming a direct link between Enlightenment European and classical Greek thought.⁶ There is then a false nativism to mainstream European theory, which is really the other side of its proclaimed universalism. Our refusal to be nationalist is part of our general insistence that no thought,

modern European thought included, is ever entirely self-possessed and entirely indigenous to itself.

So thinking across traditions rests on the prior recognition that any theoretical tradition evolves in the first place through cross-contextual transactions. Sarukkai reminds us that a term acquires its conceptuality only by travelling across languages and paradigms, in the process acquiring connotations that are more than its literal or linguistic meaning (2013: 311–30).

A good example of thinking across traditions is the recent work of the new media and Deleuze scholar Laura Marks. Marks undertakes a genealogy of Deleuzian concepts, and shows how Deleuze drew upon earlier thinkers such as Gottfried Leibniz and Duns Scotus, who in turn drew upon earlier Muslim philosophers such as the 11th century Arab thinker from Bukhara, Ibn Sina. This intellectual past, she suggests, lies deeply enfolded within European thought and is therefore often invisible. But if one “unfolds” Deleuze’s thought, one begins to see connections between his concept of univocity of being and the Islamic concept of *tawhid*, his enfold/unfold duality and the Islamic duality of *zahir* and *batin* and, above all, his notion of infinity and the Islamic imagination of God as unthinkable, un-representable, and infinitely creative of new forms.

For Marks, however, all these are not merely interesting historical facts, a reminder of a sort of a lost world of theoretical equality. Nor is it an exercise in comparison across two pre-constituted traditions. Marks works through the medium of Deleuze’s own thought and uses his own concept of the fold as central to her thesis. She first disassembles Deleuzian philosophy into the distinct traditions of Christian scholasticism and Islamic *falsafa*. She then reassembles particular strands of Islamic and European thought, even in instances where there might not have been any prior historical connection. She then shows how abstract and computer-generated art and Islamic art and philosophy can be thought together to rethink a range of concepts highly relevant to our current digital condition, such as unity, infinity, code, vector, aniconicity, algorithm, and indeed abstraction itself (Marks; to be published). In the process, she completely sidesteps the religion and secularism problematic that conventionally frames all discussions of Islamic philosophy.

Of course, thinking across traditions cannot happen simply by an act of theoretical free will, for there always remains a danger of it becoming simply a mode of shopping for concepts from a variety shop. We therefore need to think hard about how to approach another tradition without instrumentalising, cannibalising, or exoticising it. One way is to approach other traditions of thought with the how question in mind rather than merely the what question. That is, instead of approaching a tradition in terms of its substantive concerns in the first place, we could begin by asking how thinking proceeds in that tradition.

Asking how thinking proceeds in a particular tradition is to bring into play a notion of theoretical agency. Theoretical agency must not be confused with either the authorial intention of a theorist or the “ideological” potential of a theory. It

must be understood, literally, as the moves—present and future—that are made possible (or even foreclosed) by a certain act of theorisation. In other words, theoretical agency is the circuit of movement that a theory enacts, clearing hitherto unavailable routes for further thinking and producing a lateral network of spin-offs and by-products. Theoretical agency also involves the production of a new temporality of thought, from out of the anticipations, promises, and indeed mysteries built into a particular theory.

A good example of theoretical agency is the minimalist form of the sutra in classical Indian philosophy. A sutra’s agency lies in its ability to resolve an idea to its most economical form imaginable, so that the idea itself becomes like a seed. It is through this hyper-condensation—quite the opposite of what we understand as intellectual elaboration—that a sutra acquires the capacity to invite and provoke future thought, in the form of unprecedented unfoldings. The long tradition of commentaries that constitutes classical Indian thought was generated precisely through this theoretical agency of the sutra form.

More familiar examples of theoretical agency are the Platonic dialogue and the Hegelian dialectic. The dialogue allows the simultaneous staging of diverse points of view and enables further thought by the adding of new characters and new questions to what seems like an already ongoing exchange. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s *Dharmatattva* and M K Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* made use of precisely this dialogue form to engage the unprecedented experience of colonial subjection. The dialectic on the other hand propels thought through negation (and negation of negation), leading to a synthesis of contraries at a higher plane. Some thinkers, such as Deleuze (2006: ix, 195), argue that dialectics forecloses rather than enables thought by neutralising difference and multiplicity through such synthesis.

Contemporanising and Reassembling

There is a widespread belief that precolonial intellectual traditions, whether of India or China or Persia, are irrelevant today because they neither speak to our present nor have resources to respond to the global condition of modernity. To invoke such traditions is to be obscurantist if not anti-modern. It seems we can read Plato and Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas today, but not Kumarila, Dignaga, Confucius, Al Farabi or Al Ghazali, except with antiquarian interest. Indigenist intellectuals have contributed to this state of affairs in no small measure. For, they have largely been content to talk of their intellectual “golden age” without making any attempt at bringing the intellectual resources of these traditions to bear on our present. Thus our question: how can one think through non-modern traditions of thought so as to make them part of our contemporary thought apparatus? The question of theory then becomes also a question of contemporanising traditions that might appear arcane or foreign today.⁷ But that, we believe, can bring new insights to our times.

Let us first be clear what contemporanisation is not. One, to contemporanise is not to make relevant in some instrumental way. We are not suggesting that Kautilya or Abul Fazl should

be made relevant to today's politics. That would be to recast these traditions in the image of our present, thus nullifying their very alterity. Two, contemporanising is also not to show, point for point, how, say, elements of Nyaya or Sankhya are akin to elements of analytical philosophy or phenomenology. It is also not about reading older philosophers through the lens of modern Western theorists (Nagarjuna through Jacques Derrida, Kautilya through Nicol  Machiavelli and so on). Three, contemporanising is also not about influence—influence of the *Ramayana* on today's India and so forth—because such a formulation presumes that agency lies solely with the tradition that exercises influence at the cost of that which is influenced.

Understanding Thought Tradition

Contemporanising involves, in our view, a change in the very understanding of what thought traditions are. It involves treating diverse intellectual traditions as lived traditions, whose style and substance reverberate in the present, structuring the way people live and making sense of the world. This is true not only of so-called traditionalists but also of those who are deeply engaged with modernity. After all, Rabindranath Tagore and Gandhi were what they were because they engaged modernity by thinking across Western as well as Indian philosophical traditions, thus constructing a distinctive third template for modern thought.

In their notions of *swadeshi samaj* (self-sufficient society) or *gram swaraj* (village self-rule) for example, we see glimpses of an earlier political tradition that was not state-centric. And

yet they were also moving away from traditional village society as an empirical phenomenon. Instead, they were trying to work out a new form of social life that was aside of both forms of power—that of the state and that of caste. Another example here could be the way in which the Advaita Vedantic notion of the ultimate unity of Brahman and Ibn Al-Arabi's Sufi idea of *wahdat-al-wujud* (unity of being) came to be reworked in a secular form to underline the modern idea of India as unity in diversity, where diversity was seen as the phenomenal form of an underlying deeper unity. In some popular renderings, such as in Ramkrishna Paramhansa's, this came to signify a fundamental unity of all religions across different paths to god.

Philosopher of history Eelco Runia says that many pasts do indeed have a presence in our contemporary, which we either fail to notice or wish away as leftovers. But these pasts nevertheless “move” us—that is, they retain a certain efficacy. To be able to sense the presence of these pasts, we must move away from historicism. History, we know, thinks of the past as fully finished and accomplished, of which all that remains today are memories and ruins, from out of which historians reconstruct a picture of the past. The historian's past is therefore a representation and not a presence—which is why the writing of pasts and the past itself are given the same name in modernity, history. Runia invites us to step aside of this representational framework and sense the power and presence of pasts, in terms of the ways in which they actually operate in our lives, in our common sense and in our common languages—as

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monuments, memorials, persistent practices, free-floating words, ideas, tastes, sensibilities, and so on (2014: 49–83).

Take some older terms that pervade our common sense today such as *karma*, *rasa*, *himsa*, *rajniti*, and *siyasat*. We could read these terms, following Runia, as sedimentations of long traditions of thought around notions of action, emotion, violence, politics, and power. One of the important tasks of theory then would be to unfurl the thought traditions that are condensed in these usages.⁸ This is what Sibaji Bandyopadhyay does in his long essays on the *Gita*, where he traces the career of the term *adhikara* through many translations from the late 18th century onwards. In so doing, he not only helps us see the complex process by which *adhikara* and “right” come to be equated in colonial modernity. He also opens up the liberal notion of right to rethinking.

Arindam Chakrabarti too does something similar when he dwells on the significance of words in the *mahakavya* (epic poetry) tradition. Chakrabarti distinguishes Greek epics (structured around heroic action) from the *Mahabharata* (structured around conversations, and conversations within conversations). After all, the *Gita* itself is nothing but a discourse between Krishna and Arjuna circled by a discourse between Sanjay and Dhritarashtra. In light of this distinction, Chakrabarti goes on to read a particular episode in the *Mahabharata*, the conversation between philosopher-king Janaka and the young mendicant woman Sulabha, two highly unequal interlocutors sparring with words in full public view.

Chakrabarti reads the Janaka–Sulabha exchange as a theory of speech, where speech is understood as always already imbricated in a hierarchical context—something that theorists of dialogue and communicative rationality do not wish to admit. In this story, Sulabha trumps king Janaka by speaking well, rightly and effectively, demonstrating the pros and cons of diverse modes of argumentation such as *vitanda*, *tarka*, *nyaya*, *uha*, and *yukti* (reasoning for the sake of victory, reasoning based on hypothesis, reasoning based on examples and general rules, reasoning based on extrapolation from paradigms, and reasoning based on empirical generalisation). By contemporanising this *Mahabharata* story, Chakrabarti gives us an image of reasoning as activity, in place of the Enlightenment notion of reason as universal entity/agent. He also argues that if democracy is a mode of public contestation, then a study of different historical practices of disputation actually helps us enhance the machinery of public reason in a way that merely proposing an abstract norm such as “dialogue” does not (2014: 244–83).

The stance vis-à-vis Western theory exemplified by Bandyopadhyay and Chakrabarti represents for us the fourth possible way of doing theory. Chakrabarti calls his stance that of “trans-traditional anachronistic analysis,” where different traditions of thought from different times are rendered contemporary, that is, brought into encounter with each other. For us, this represents the most important aspect of the methodological imperative of contemporanising. We should add here that contemporanising does not pertain only to remote pasts. In fact, it must proceed by suspending the very idea of linearity of time. For there are ways in which remote pasts, recent pasts, presents—

even futures—not merely coexist but can be proactively brought together in a project of transforming the contemporary.

That the task of contemporanising is not a neutral but a politically-charged task becomes evident when we read B R Ambedkar. Ambedkar not only recovered but also actively contemporanised Buddhism. By bringing a lost and alienated Buddhist tradition to bear upon a deeply conflicted and unequal present, Ambedkar sought to make possible a future that was impossible to realise only through reason of state or social mobilisation. It was a future that had to be philosophically accomplished first. Ambedkar sought to philosophically arrive at a future—a future that the present could not engender from out of its own logic—by staging a complex encounter between the modern and the non-modern and between tradition and counter-tradition in his thought. In his complex meanderings through scriptural Hinduism, Buddhism, anthropology of worship practices, Gandhism, liberalism, American pragmatism, Marxism, and so on, Ambedkar was, above all, contemporanising—bringing together traditions of different times and different places. Something similar has happened to Ambedkar himself today. From being a figure consigned to oblivion for a good part of the life of independent India, he has now become our contemporary. His thought and his persona reverberate through our present, re-ordering it in unprecedented and unexpected ways.

This brings us to our final point about contemporanising—its relation to the act of historicising. If historicising helps us situate thinkers and their thought in their proper historical context, it often ends up making them prisoners of that context. We certainly need to understand what a particular thinker might have “actually meant” and historicising helps us acquire that perspective. However, it is only by liberating a thought from its context—assuming that it is always possible to identify the specific context—that we can actually mobilise the possibilities that it might open up in contexts vastly different from its past conditions of emergence. This is precisely what Ambedkar did with Buddhism and Tagore did with Upanishadic thought in the course of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Contemporanising, in this sense, is a political act finer than any other of its kind that involves simultaneous decontextualisation and recontextualisation.

However, contemporanising as a scholarly practice must go beyond the initial political moment by renewing and reconstituting thought. It does entail the unpacking of tradition and the “recovery” of counter-tradition/s of the kind that we have seen not only in the case of Buddhism but also in the dramatic re-emergence in modern times, of an interest in Charvaka/Lokayata as constituting a lost tradition of materialist philosophy in India. At a second level, however, beyond the preliminary act of recuperation, contemporanising must also involve critically engaging that thought, its concepts and categories, in a dialogue across times and places such that it produces new insights and new concepts that help us deal with new challenges of the present. This requires a self-conscious “work of theory”—the work of illumination via production of new optics. Therefore, we need to follow up on the initial moves made by an Ambedkar or a Tagore, working through their own

thought as well as working through the past traditions they mobilise, to try to produce a new optics that they themselves might not have imagined.

A thought, to conclude, becomes “theoretical” when it liberates itself from its origins and opens itself out to strange places and times. Otherwise, even the most abstract thought can be venerated as part of an once-resilient tradition but will remain

incapable of helping us navigate the world. That is why theory can only be context-transcending, though this should not be confused with being “universal” in the way that modernity proposes. For, that is when the “work of theory” in a manner of speaking begins—when ideas and concepts generated by a tradition are reworked and resituated, producing new resonances and new effects upon the present.

NOTES

- 1 See, for instance, the essays in Black et al (2014), especially Rajeev Bhargava, “Should Europe Learn from Indian Secularism?”, pp 39–58.
- 2 Nandy, of course, does not work conceptually with myth or religion, he simply invokes them.
- 3 See Mohanty (1994).
- 4 As is known, one of the earliest uses of “anviksiki” is in Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* in the context of statecraft.
- 5 An early recognition on the potentialities of “jugaad” was made by Benjamin in “The Multi-Headed Hydra of East Delhi” presented at a Sarai-CSDS conference. See *Contested Commons/Trespassing Publics: A Public Record*, The Sarai Programme (2005: 72–73) and Benjamin’s “Rethinking the Urban: India and China’s co-produced Urbanism,” a lecture delivered in the NMLM Public Lecture series, October 2015. Also see Chattaraj (2012) where she develops jugaad as an “empirically grounded concept” that thematises both aspects of the postcolonial state and the “political society” activities of the urban poor.
- 6 Martin Bernal’s 1987 classic made this point first, leading to a massive controversy where the nature and the place of intellection and specialisation were hotly debated. See Lefkowitz (1996) and Berlinblau (1999).
- 7 The term “contemporanising as method” was initially used in one of our panel discussions during our teaching programme, “Researching the Contemporary” by D L Sheth. We gratefully acknowledge his suggestion though we are not sure he would have developed the idea in the way we have tried to.
- 8 While we talk of words here, it is possible to also unfurl the conceptual dimensions of historical monuments, paintings, food, clothing, and so on—that is, of what is today called “material culture.”

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