

Marx, Arendt and Habermas on Common Interest and Public Action:

Reflections on the Modern Indian State¹

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INTRODUCTION

Believing that the pursuit of reason would allow for the fulfillment of human freedom, Enlightenment theorists emphasized rationality as an essential aspect of human nature and placed faith in reason above all else as the model for human action. With the development of the modern nation-state, and the pursuit of democratic ideals, democracy and collective decision-making are espoused as the highest public goods. In democratic societies, public discussion and debate are supposed to facilitate the adoption of laws and policies that best reflect the desires of the people. Marx, Arendt, and Habermas reacted to the idea that reasoned rational discourse would prevail as the premier form of collective discourse in modern society. Focusing on public action as the key to the creation and realization of communal interests, all three writers identified aspects of modern society that make such reasoned political action more difficult. Their analyses, however, focus on aspects of modern Western societies. Thus, we need to critically assess the relevance of their ideas as a model for ideal political action in the rest of the world.

With the development of the modern nation-state, individual identity is supposed to transcend the particularistic and local and instead coalesce around the “nation.” While none of these theorists spoke explicitly about the idea of nationalism, each outlined the ideal form of individual engagement in the political realm. For all of them, political participation via discussion and interaction with others constitutes the development of individual identity. For Habermas, in particular, rational-critical dialogue about common concerns is essential to the adoption of laws and rules that best serve the interests of all. Diverse identities and pluralistic conceptions of the common good are supposed to be heard, yet not necessarily embraced. Only one course of action will prevail through discussion and debate, but since the course of action decided upon resulted from rational public discourse, it will be the best solution.

Whereas democracy encompasses ideally the ideology of various groups and individuals, nationalist thought embraces unity and sameness. The ideology of nationalism grew out of the power and dominance of a particular kind of social structure—the nation-state. According to Craig Calhoun, nationalism represents “one of the greatest challenges to the ideal of rational collective decision-making through peaceful discourse” (1997: 80). For, in the formation of the public identity of a nation, the identities of unique individuals and distinct groups are often ignored. More than that,

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however, as Partha Chatterjee (1986) points out, nationalism is part of the universalist discourse of progress and development espoused by the West. Thus, its adoption within the postcolonial world, particularly in India, can also be viewed as a particular response to Western ideas concerning appropriate political action. In Europe, the construction of a public sphere where critical public discussion took place was crucial for creating and maintaining the new system of governance developing there. As bourgeois identity developed with the growth of a market society, the discussion of ideas through the press and literary journals, the ownership of private property, and the rise of education, public opinion was simultaneously created and shaped within the newly developing public sphere. Through the press and other public spaces, people conducted debates about the political system. Criticizing public officials, the goal was not to revolutionize, but rather to engage with and challenge public leaders in order to “better” their rule. While still in its infancy when the British first established their presence in India, they carried with them the political and economic ideas that shaped the development of the modern nation-state in Europe. The ways in which these ideas (of political liberalism and egalitarianism) were received in India shaped the formation of individual and group identity, especially in relation to the state, in particular ways.

In India, in comparison to Europe, a number of important differences shaped the development of the public sphere. A key feature of the bourgeois public sphere in Europe was to define the role, power, and function of the state, as it was beginning to emerge. This was not the case in India. Instead of working to engage with the state, Indian elites opted to define themselves in opposition to the political sphere, with important consequences for the kinds of debates and discussions taking place and for the development of a homogeneous national identity.

The remainder of this paper explores the ideal political community as posited by Marx, Arendt, and Habermas. Their notions of public and private realms, appropriate forms of civil society, and their prescriptions for public action all examine the political realm of the modern world. Aspects of capitalism embraced by modern Western societies that impede the development of such a political space will also be explored. The relevance of their ideas for assessing the modern state of India will be discussed. Habermas both responds to and furthers the ideas espoused by Marx and Arendt; thus, the section on India examines most his explanation of the public sphere and its potential for creating and sustaining rational-critical dialogue about common concerns. As we will see, the historical emergence of the public sphere and the concept of nationalism in the West developed within particular socio-historical circumstances. In order to grasp more fully the course of state and political development in the postcolonial world, we must assess the unique social, political and economic circumstances in which ideas of nationalism and political action develop. Faced with particular external pressures that did not exist when the modern state developed in Europe, state leaders in more recently developing countries often engage in behavior that differs from their counterparts in the developed world. Thus, the relevance of social and political theories that both offer critiques of and solutions to the problems plaguing the political realm in the modern West need to be assessed critically before they are assumed to speak for the rest of the world.

HUMAN FREEDOM VIA POLITICAL ACTION

To all three thinkers, communal action is the cornerstone of human interaction and the key to political life. Humans shape themselves and their nature as they shape their environment and their world. As the realm where human interaction is expressed and defined, the political sphere serves ideally as a space for communal interaction. For Marx, political life and communal action define human existence. Made up of people engaged in collective activity, the political realm represents the space where true freedom lies, since “only in community with others is personal freedom possible” (1932: 197). Similarly, for Arendt, politics is the essence of history and the source of meaning in human life comes from political action. She writes, “the political realm rises directly out of acting together...[and] action not only has the most intimate relationship to the public part of the world common to us all, but is the one activity which constitutes it” (1958: 198). Through acting and speaking, since neither is possible in isolation, humans are surrounded by and in constant contact with other humans. Like Arendt, for Habermas (1991), it is through speech and dialogue in the public sphere that individuals engage with each other and with the state. The potential for human freedom exists via communicative action. Thus, serving as a space where critical reflection and dialogue occur, the public sphere offers a place for political action.

Along with emphasizing the importance of action in political life, each theorist describes the ideal political realm as existing apart from all other realms.¹ Habermas, for example, highlights the importance of the public sphere. Through public discourse, or communicative action, the public sphere could be viewed as a possible mode of coordination of human life, existing apart from the influences of money or power. As will be explained further, he views the

ideal public sphere as the space where individuals interact as individuals; that is, not just as people representing particular interests, but as fellow human beings. Similarly, Arendt describes the ideal realm of the political as existing separately from the economic, social, cultural, and moral realms. She praises the ancient Greek polis because of its strict separation between private and public. There, labor and work, aspects of private life, existed in a realm apart from the political. With the focus off of maintaining survival, individuality and uniqueness could be celebrated in public life and human freedom experienced. Marx, too, views the political realm as the place where humanity experiences true freedom. However, since it is through meaningful engagement with others that the political realm exists, the creation of a realm apart from the state (i.e. a public sphere within civil society) does not represent ideal public action. Instead, it serves as a constant reminder that humans are not yet truly free.

ASPECTS OF MODERN SOCIETY IMPEDING COMMUNAL ACTION

Whereas Marx viewed capitalism as the force that prevented humankind from true political action, and the development of civil society as an expression of that fact, Arendt saw key features of the state itself as preventing communal interaction. She believed that the expression of uniqueness and individuality occur only through action and speech in the public realm. Action makes up the public world and is the one activity that is truly common to us all: “the reality of the world is guaranteed by the presence of others” (Arendt 1958: 199). By acting and speaking, we create history as we create ourselves. Since action and speech are public activities, requiring the presence and interaction of other people, the public realm represents the space where human freedom becomes possible. In the modern world, however, with the rise of mass society, “distinction and difference have become private matters of the individual” (Arendt 1958: 40). When engaged in aspects of public life various rules guide behavior. Bureaucracy essentially “excludes the possibility of action” (Arendt 1958:41). Instead of difference and distinction, equality and conformity guide public life.

Interestingly, neither Habermas nor Arendt calls for the abolition of the capitalist system itself; only Marx does this. They seek instead to highlight aspects of the modern world, under the capitalist system, which limit the realization of human freedom. If under capitalism distinct public and private worlds could exist, and if the laboring process did not define the individual in their relationship to others, then perhaps true human freedom (defined as acting on and speaking about common interests) could be experienced. Marx disagrees completely. He writes, “the division of labour implies the contradiction between the interest of the separate individual...and the communal interest of all individuals who have intercourse with each other” (Marx 1932: 160). As long as the division of labour in society exists, humans are not truly free. Required to work within a particular sphere, or on a particular kind of activity, “man’s own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him, which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him” (Marx 1932: 160). Identity equates to social class, not individuality.

Arendt furthers this idea when she states that within modern society “membership in a social class replaced the protection previously offered by membership in a family” (1958: 256). Instead of the family operating as the unit where individuals learn to develop their uniqueness, society becomes the focus of individuals. Since individuals view themselves and others as “jobholders,” economics becomes the focus of public life. One’s position in the division of labor signifies one’s existence; labor and work become the individual. For Arendt, the realm of the social—most importantly, the world of economic activities—has permeated the public realm. Whereas once people expressed their individuality and uniqueness through public action, now individual behavior is marked by conformity in the public realm.

Habermas, too, laments that the world of work and organizations became more public in the modern world. As people became dependent upon their jobs, the world of work “link[ed] people to institutions, not other people” (Habermas 1951: 152). His analysis echoes both Marx and Arendt when he argues that the realm of the social has impinged upon private society. He goes further, however, in describing the impact of the rise of large corporations. “Established as a sphere in its own right between the private and public realms,” the “world of work” defines and shapes the existence of the individual laborer in modern society (Habermas 1991: 159). The problem for Habermas, then, is not just that rational-critical dialogue is lacking, but that the space where this dialogue occurs distorts ideal communal action. No longer do humans view each other as individuals capable of engaging in sustained dialogue about common concerns. Their collective existence is defined according to their relation to the means of production—or, more generally, according to their social class. Meaningful dialogue occurs within this context and “mutual willingness to accept the

1. Not as an ideal-type, but rather as reachable goal. Both Arendt and Habermas describe particular periods in history when the ideal (according to them) was reality and Marx celebrates communism as the ideal political (and economic) system.

given roles and simultaneously to suspend their reality” does not occur (Habermas 1991: 36). Since an economic and political system based on rationality and homogeneity does not encourage individual uniqueness, as Arendt points out, the extent to which individuals view each other as such is limited. Hence, if action and speech lead to meaningful collective engagement at all, ideas and arguments presented by individuals exist simultaneously with their existence as market participants—where uniformity and ‘sameness’ are celebrated above all else.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE IN CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Arendt describes the ancient Greek polis as the time and place when the ideal distinction between the public and private realms existed. Habermas describes 17th and 18th century Europe, with the development of the bourgeois public sphere, in the same way. Both assess political action as an important part of the life of an individual. However, their ideas about what constitutes the private sphere differ. Habermas describes economic and civil society (where public discussion takes place) as part of the private sphere. Arendt, on the other hand, believes that any public action should take place and exist apart from economic life. This, she says, is the problem with modern society. While Habermas, too, laments the encroachment of economics in the public sphere, his analysis allows for greater freedom within the public realm if economic life is considered a part of the public discussion.

For Habermas, the separation of civil society from the state represents political emancipation. That is, once the king no longer embodied the state and was instead represented by individuals within society, a space for a public sphere was created. Marx believed that this separation actually entailed the “abolition of the political character of civil society” (Marx 1843: 45). Because civil society is a space existing apart from the state, it is “an expression of the fact that man is *separated* from the *community*, from himself and from other men” (Marx 1843: 35, his emphasis). Since economic life exists within civil society, people view themselves as individuals and focus more on their material interests than on the general, public affairs of all. Rather than embrace a theory which calls for the abolition of capitalism altogether, Habermas instead focuses on the aspects of modern capitalist society which impede communal interaction with the state through civil society. Importantly, he does not see civil society as made up solely of people acting on their economic interests. With the rise of coffee houses, salons, and literary circles, spaces were created for private individuals to interact publicly. These “networks of associations” also constitute civil society, for Habermas.

In the modern world, the economic realm has impinged upon the political to such an extent as to alter its potential to serve as the realm where human freedom can be experienced. What is private has been made public and what is public is no longer critical discourse about common concerns. Labor, the most private human activity (as described by Arendt), has become the highest political principal in the modern world. Made up of a “society of laborers,” Arendt writes that modern society creates a situation whereby “the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life [i.e. sustenance] and nothing else assumes public significance” (1958: 41). Capitalism and the division of labor require that people be dependent upon one another for survival. As a result, all become focused upon labor as a public activity, while action and speech are relegated to the private realm. Labor, then, becomes the highest political principle in the modern world, making the private the only common concern left. An idea espoused by Marx, who laments that the “only bond [between people] is natural necessity, need, and private interest” (1843: 43). Moreover, since labor occupies the public realm, as Arendt points out, “there can be no true public realm, only private activities displayed in the open” (1958: 134).

As stated, for Marx and Arendt meaningful life is created in community with others. It is only through interaction that humans can create their world, and then only through continual interaction that the world that has been created survives. When labor becomes the focus of political life, what is private becomes public. On the other hand, when labor alienates humans from each other as they participate in the division of labor, what is public is no longer common. Forced to interact as economic agents, rather than as fellow human beings, private matters become public concerns. Engaging with the state about economic matters, public action becomes an individual, instead of a collective concern.

Civil society, the space where community develops in dialogue with the state, is made up ideally of private individuals acting publicly. Habermas identifies the historical development of this space and highlights the aspects of modern society that distort its existence as a realm where public interaction takes place. When the family is no longer idealized as “shielding” the individual from their existence as economic laborers, the world of work defines the individual. Without an intimate sphere where human interaction takes place outside of their role in the capitalist market, uniqueness cannot be celebrated. Similar to Habermas, Arendt views the encroachment of economics on the political realm as detrimental to political life. When the lines between public and private are no longer distinct, the potential for

public action is diminished.

LOOKING BEYOND WESTERN EUROPE: THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN COLONIAL BENARAS¹

As we have seen, for Marx, Arendt and Habermas, communal action is the key to political life. Through speaking, creating and interacting, humans shape themselves as they shape their world. With the creation of the modern nation-state and the development of capitalism, public action becomes more difficult. While each point out aspects of modern Western society that contribute to the decline in public political action, what is the relevance of their ideas outside of Europe? In order to analyze the significance of their ideas in a non-Western context, the development of a public sphere in the modern state of India will be assessed. Within the public sphere, ideas about identity and public life are created, shaped and debated. As we will see from the public sphere that developed in India in the city of Benaras in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and in the public sphere at Independence, these ideas developed in opposition to the state, with important consequences for both individual and national identity today.

Some of the most important work on the development of nationalist sentiment and nationalist identity demonstrates that in Western Europe nationalist discourse formed in conjunction with the development of the political sphere via an emphasis on “sameness” and “boundedness” (Gellner 1983, Anderson 1991). In India, nationalist sentiment developed in opposition to the political domain. Rather than emphasize homogenization, the focus instead centered on difference. Under colonial rule, an imperial power governed the political sphere. Thus, even before anti-colonial sentiment began to set in, there was not an attempt by local or regional elites to work with the ruling powers in making the authority of the state more legitimate, nor did they see this as a possibility. Rather than engage with public officials through the emerging public sphere, local and regional elites instead used the public arena as a way to develop their own power and authority. In Benaras, the use of symbolic resources, especially language and religion, dominated the realm of the public sphere and became the tools by which Indians created a sense of difference between both themselves and the colonialist powers. As anti-colonial nationalist ideology developed within India, elites also began to differentiate themselves from the masses. Symbolic resources became the means for constructing difference and delineating group boundaries, with important consequences for the formation of a unified national identity in the sub-continent.

In India, communalism and communal politics, whether based on language, religion or some other form of social identity, threaten the existence of any unified national identity. While nationalism and national identity are supposed to transcend all other forms of individual and group identity, instead various groups compete to define the Indian community. Communal interaction, as defined by Marx, Arendt and Habermas, where people work together and engage in speech and dialogue about shared interests, takes place in India, but not necessarily in an effort to address common concerns. Instead, the public sphere marks the space where contested ideas about identity and public and private life are created and debated. As we will see, this does *not* make the Indian experience a “failure” as compared to their European counterparts. Rather, the emergence of communalism in India demonstrates that particular historical, political and cultural conditions surround the development a national identity. Nationalism, encompassing the public identity of a nation, will therefore look different depending on the socio-historical circumstances surrounding its development.

Again, the main distinction between the Indian and European public spheres rests on the fact that the British were an imperial power and, thus, never intended interaction with the local population within the political sphere. By focusing on the differences within various groups in Indian society, the British sought to create a “need” for their rule. Emphasizing unique aspects of local neighborhoods and towns, and seeking to rule through local representatives, rather than using their own officials, the British believed themselves to have superior abilities to recreate these “particularistic” groups into a political whole (see Freitag 1989a, and Cohn 1987). As a result, public arenas differed depending upon the specific policies enacted and the kind of symbols and rituals that served to create a shared popular culture (Freitag 1989b: 41-42). And, most importantly, public arenas constituted a space outside of the control of the British

1. Benaras (or Varanasi) is located in North India in the state of Uttar Pradesh. One of the largest cities in this state, Benaras is home to over one million people. The holy river Ganges flows through this city and it draws thousands of pilgrims and worshippers everyday. Nineteenth century Benaras was the site of both Hindu and Muslim religious ceremonies and within the public arena people often took part in both. By the twentieth century, however, public spaces came to be defined as strictly Muslim or Hindu; thus the opportunities for a shared public culture among all people living within Benaras were lessened.

Raj and became a place for establishing identity in contradistinction to the colonizer. That is, unlike Europe, the public sphere in India did not develop in tandem with the state. Believing these spaces to be “apolitical” places where only religion and religious identity were expressed, the British instead helped to create a place where opposition to state rule flourished.

During the late nineteenth century, important changes in the political, economic and cultural realms began to take shape in India. The expansion of the British Raj brought the spread of liberal political ideology and shaped the public discourse among both the elite and those of the emerging middle-classes in Benaras. The introduction of print and the increasing emphasis on the importance of vernacular languages allowed for the expression of these new political ideas and expanded the space of public debate. The spread of English, and the growth of the press, literature and public debates introduced particular kinds of ideas into the cultural sphere. The use of these cultural forms by particular elites and their concomitant reception by the masses had important consequences for the development of the public sphere and the creation of cultural, social, and status distinctions in Benaras.

Through the early part of the nineteenth century, both Muslims and Hindus participated in the shared cultural traditions of Benaras. That is, Muslims participated in Ramlila and other Hindu rituals and Hindus participated in Muharram and other Muslim rituals. Freitag (1989a) demonstrates that the riots of 1809, traditionally understood as an example of religious or communal conflict among Hindus and Muslims, was actually an expression of the competition for power and dominance among the three groups highlighted above. The clash over sacred spaces in the city between Muslims and Hindus was actually a symbolic representation of their struggle to become the legitimate “defender” of Hinduism against what Mughal power still remained (Freitag 1989a: 290-291). She argues that religious symbols played a part in the riots of 1809 because these were symbols that were already being used within the public arena to legitimate authority. (Recall that public arenas drew upon religious symbols and rituals to create a shared popular culture.) Her argument is supported by the fact that two years later, during the riots of 1811, Hindus, Muslims, elites, and non-elites all came together in collective protest in order to resist the dominance of the British in their imposition of a new tax.¹ Thus, the activities taking place within public spaces in Benaras reflected symbolically the larger changes taking place within Indian society. That is, collective action within public arenas occurred when elites needed to unite with non-elites against British power. Yet when seeking to establish their own power and dominance within the public spaces, religion was used as a marker of distinction among these same groups.

According to Partha Chatterjee (1993), anti-colonial nationalism represents the attempt of colonized groups to create their own identity apart from the colonizer. He demonstrates that while within certain spheres in India (the political and economic) Western forms are adopted, within other spheres (the spiritual and cultural) they are strongly resisted. Chatterjee argues that Indian cultural identity formed in marked opposition to Western influence in these “internal” spheres.² Discussing the competing narratives of capital and community, Chatterjee argues that Indian nationalism was developed within the cultural domain where a unique identity could be developed as apart from the colonial oppressors. This, he says, is what separatist movements are all about—creating identity in the internal or cultural spheres untouched by the colonialists (Chatterjee 1993).

As we have seen, the colonial powers impacted the development of state institutions in particular ways in India. From Freitag’s analysis we understand that Indian identity which developed in marked opposition to the colonialists in the cultural sphere resulted from British policies, rather than representing complete Indian agency. She also demonstrates that the “narrative of community” highlighted by Chatterjee had important consequences for the development of a homogenous “public opinion.” As Chatterjee demonstrates, rather than embracing the all-encompassing narrative of capital, with its emphasis on homogeneity, territoriality, and relationships of formal rationality, Indian identity turned instead toward the cultural and spiritual domains and embraced the narrative of community.

British attempts to rule through local representatives created opportunities for certain groups or individuals to assert their power and influence in local communities. In addition, the British emphasized the differences between and among communities as a way of sustaining and legitimizing their rule; thus, by emphasizing communal identity, rather than regional or national identity, difference instead of sameness was emphasized. In resisting the state and colonial powers, each community attempted to define *itself* as representative of the general interests of all. As a result, “too many definitions of community-as-nation competed” for legitimacy and difference instead of sameness was embraced (Chatterjee 1993: 195).

1. In order to increase their control over local areas, the British sought to impose a “house tax,” which would give them access to more resources.

2. While focusing primarily on Bengal, his analysis offers important theoretical ideas beyond this area.

THE STATE AND CAPITALISM IN MODERN INDIA: THE PUBLIC SPHERE AT INDEPENDENCE

In assessing the reasons for the lack of public political action in the modern world, Marx, Arendt and Habermas each point to the development of capitalism. For Marx, the division of labor in society prevents communal interests from ever being realized. Individuals alienated from their labor and alienated from others focus on their own private interests instead of the interests of the larger community. Arendt laments the emphasis on sameness and uniformity guiding behavior in the modern nation-state and believes that the intrusion of economic life in the public realm has forever altered the possibility for true public action in the political sphere. Similarly, Habermas decries the “world of work” for distorting the possibility of meaningful dialogue. Under capitalism, with the division of labor, one’s social class cannot be “bracketed,” and the possibility for rational-critical discourse about common problems is limited.

At the time of independence from British rule, India’s political leaders were committed to socialism. They believed that the goal of the state should be to provide public and collective goods and, like leaders of other developing nations, believed that state intervention in the economic sphere allowed for the promotion of policies to best alleviate poverty. Alongside state involvement in the economic sphere, political leaders adopted a “secular nationalism.” Western notions of democracy view the separation of the political and religious realms as ideal. Accordingly, community should develop within civil society, a common space where discussion allows for the enactment of agreed upon laws. State leaders in India adopted secularism, in order to ensure that majority groups would not ignore or disregard the concerns of minority groups.

Whereas Calhoun argues that nationalism is a threat to rational collective decision making, Chatterjee maintains instead that reason has “seduced, apprehended and imprisoned” nationalism (Chatterjee 1986: 11). At independence, Indian leaders embraced nationalist discourse which emphasized their belief and confidence in progress; hence, they embraced rational thought. At the same time, however, they also believed that the cultural and moral values of Indian society were far superior to those of the West. Nehru emphasized the important role of the newly formed state in promoting economic reform.¹ In order to embrace modernity and progress, the Indian state needed to develop and transform the economic realm. This, Nehru argued, would allow for the promotion and expansion of social justice throughout Indian society. With a strong state, conflicts and differences within India would be controlled, as material situations improved. Thus, Chatterjee maintains that nationalism “is rational and progressive, [and] a particular manifestation of the universal march of Reason” (Chatterjee 1986: 161).

But just because Indian anti-colonial nationalism succeeded in overcoming British domination, does not mean that the contradictions within Indian society have been resolved. Recall that for Marx and Arendt capitalism distorts public political action. Since economic matters are the sole concern of individuals in modern society, public action becomes an individual, instead of a collective concern. When communal identity, emphasizing particularistic groups and not the whole of society, is embraced, public action is a collective concern. Yet, the collective concern is for certain groups at the expense of all others. Chatterjee maintains that certain contradictions within Indian society have never been resolved. While Indian nationalism at Independence embraced Western notions of progress and scientific reason, it could not overcome the tensions within Indian society. British ideas of communities as particularistic and distinct became quite salient at Independence, with groups competing to define the cultural and moral values making the East superior.

Chatterjee’s assessment of the competing narratives of community and capital suggests that Indian national identity within the spiritual and cultural domains developed in marked opposition to Western ideas of individuality and rationality embraced within the political and economic domains. Nehru adopted the “narrative of capital” at Independence, believing that economic progress offered the best opportunity to promote social welfare in Indian society. According to Chatterjee, “this narrative of capital seeks to suppress that other narrative of community and produce in the course of its journey both the normalized individual and the modern regime of disciplinary power” (1993: 234).” That Nehru sought to adopt rational economic policies in order to make “a society organized on a planned basis for the raising of mankind to higher material and cultural levels,” does not mean that communal and particularistic identities have been suppressed (Nehru 1936: 552).

Importantly, Arendt’s concerns about modern society whereby sameness, equality and conformance are stressed

1. Nehru became the first prime minister of India at Independence in 1947. He was committed to socialism and believed state involvement in the economic sphere offered the best solution to the problems of capitalism. Nehru did not support the Partition of India to create Pakistan.

through the adoption of capitalism and bureaucratic rationality, seems only partially true. In India, national identity, while embracing the discourse of capital, celebrated the communal aspects of Indian society. Thus, difference and uniqueness are emphasized while adopting the language of bureaucratic rationality in the political sphere. The British never succeeded in “overcoming” religion and tradition in Indian society, but neither did they do so in Britain (see Guha 1987, Van der Veer 1999). Civil society has not necessarily transcended the particular and adopted the national. Rather, communal and particularistic identities persist alongside rational political and economic systems: a tension that has never been fully resolved in the West either.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Nationalism and the nation-state are both constructs of modern society. More than just an aspect of state formation, however, nationalism is a cultural phenomenon that serves to identify individuals as belonging to a particular state, rather than to particular social groups within the state. In India, the British forced the Western concept of the “nation” as a bounded territorial group on an area that had been proclaimed as having particularistic and communal identities. Since a public space for discussion and critical engagement with (i.e. alongside) the political authorities never developed, in India difference and uniqueness, rather than homogeneity and “sameness” were celebrated. In order to fully grasp the course of state development in the postcolonial world, Western ideas about the historical development of the concept of nationalism, may need to be understood as Western ideas. The unique historical circumstances that coalesced in the creation of the state of India need to be recognized as distinct from what occurred in Europe. While some concepts can be generalized, a framework for understanding the particular instead of the universal may be more helpful in understanding the emergence of micro-national religious and linguistic identity movements in postcolonial states.

Political and social theory developing out of concerns and reactions to broader changes taking place within Europe can be used in assessing non-European societies in one of two ways. One, we can assume that similar social, political, cultural and historical circumstances are/were present outside of Western Europe. Capitalism, for example, expanded and became a powerful economic structure throughout the world and the modern nation-state is recognized as the dominant institutional form legitimating state authority. Thus, we can look at the particular socio-historical circumstances surrounding the emergence of these two phenomenon in order to make general statements about how and when they develop and about the particular kinds of states and varieties of capitalism that might emerge. In the same way, we can assess the concepts of civil society and the public sphere in non-European societies. However, though the institutions may be similar, they developed out of particular events unique to the postcolonial world. We must recognize, then, that the shape, space and elements making up these institutions may not look the same.

A second way of thinking of the relevance of theories that assess Western European institutions is to deny any socio-historical similarities at all, and thus to deny any generality. At the risk of ignoring the particularities that make up a group emerging from colonial oppression, we can only assess institutions as they emerge, without any outside reference or expectation as to their shape or form. According to this view, to look for the emergence of a public sphere in India is to essentialize certain ideas and historical circumstances.

Habermas’ notion of the public sphere as a unified space where discussions about common interests took place is contested. Historians and feminist scholars, for example, demonstrate that other public spheres existed that were nonliberal and nonbourgeois. Subordinate groups created “subaltern counterpublics” as a way of countering liberal, bourgeois interpretations of their identities and interests (Fraser 1992). Importantly, these competing public spheres demonstrate “the extent to which the public sphere was always constituted by conflict” (Eley 1992: 306). In expressing opposing assessments of the common good and common interests, the existence of these groups demonstrates that the public sphere, as identified by Habermas, did not speak for all. Thus, Eley argues that the public sphere would be better understood as the space where “cultural and ideological contest or negotiations among a variety of publics takes place,” not just where bourgeois ideas became institutionalized (1992: 306).

Thus, even though what occurred in India seems to negate Habermas’ idea of the ideal public sphere, Eley’s definition of a public sphere where alternate claims to legitimate authority, norms and identity competed for recognition, may allow us to discuss the historical emergence of a public sphere in more general terms. That is, we can still highlight how public action and political life require an autonomous realm where public opinion and public debate about issues and interests important to various individuals and groups take place. But revisions to Habermas’ theory demonstrate the existence of competing public realms in Europe—spaces where contested ideas about norms, values and identity developed apart from those of the dominant classes. In Benaras, multiple publics existed. Sometimes defined by reli-

gious identity, sometimes by neighborhood, and sometimes in collaboration where Indian national identity took shape apart from the colonial oppressors. At Independence, state leaders embraced Western notions of progress and scientific rationality, especially in regards to the economic realm. But, as the unique cultural and moral aspects of Indian society were also celebrated, competing definitions of “community-as-nation” existed. As revisionist historiography continues to develop, both in the West and in India, more accurate descriptions of state development, nationalism and national identity will allow us to better understand how certain aspects of modern society, as highlighted by Marx, Arendt and Habermas, help or hinder public political action.

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