

## **Response to Comments on *Decolonizing Theory***

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At the very outset, I want to thank the authors of all four reviews – Dhritiman Chakraborty, Sanjeeb Mukherjee, Vijaisri Priyadarshini and my former teacher, Sudipta Kaviraj – for their deeply engaged, critical comments on my book. It is particularly heartening to read these comments and the points raised by all four of them because they have all considered the arguments of the book and its forays into relatively uncharted waters with some degree of sympathy and understanding. In a manner of speaking, that is what also makes their critical comments very important for me to consider. I should add that whatever I have to say here, by way of response, is only a small part of what I am taking away as food for further thought – and I am sure that some of those questions will help me in further self-clarification, given the very preliminary and tentative nature of investigations I have undertaken in the book.

I will try and respond to most questions specifically and separately but will have to also club some of them together in my response to Sudiptada's long review, since some concerns seem to overlap.

First, let me take a cluster of questions raised by Dhritiman Chakraborty. Why only decolonize and not also 'de-prejudicize', de-brahminize? Related to this is his question of what is the 'our' or 'we' that I keep invoking quite often through the book. I am sure a lot of things need to be done and are indeed being done to theory and knowledge in general. Feminists long ago started interrogating the masculine notions that undergirded theory, not just in the social sciences but also in the sciences. They did not just interrogate all disciplines and knowledge; they actually went on to reconstitute theory in very significant ways, though unfortunately, our references seem to still remain quite male nevertheless. Similarly, serious dalit-bahujan scholarship today is engaged in trying to de-brahminize knowledge. All these enterprises have their own specific – often very tentative and unstable – 'we's, but they could not have moved one inch in their specific enterprise had they not started

off by making some preliminary claims to a common ‘we-ness’. My concern is specifically with decolonizing and, as I have stated at various points in the book, it is occasioned by an urgent need to reconstitute theory that leads, in its present form, to what I have called, borrowing from Sudipta Kaviraj, an ontological depletion of the non-West. And here is the answer then, to the question of who is the ‘our’ or ‘we’ that I keep referring to: it is not any narrow nationalist ‘we’ but in fact refers to all those who inhabit this ‘non-West’, which I have suggested is best understood in the way a Vedantin understands ‘Brahman’ – through a ‘*neti, neti*’ (not-this, not-this) move, because to her Brahman is indescribable in positive terms. If the ‘non-West’ is to be understood to include all those who were colonized and indeed, exterminated for a large part in say, the settler colonies of the Americas, this cannot be a purely geographic descriptor. In that sense, it is a category that is more epistemic and cultural – that is to say, it refers to all those who have been cultural subjugated and epistemically dispossessed by the modern West.

Dhritiman has also asked what ‘doing theory’ might mean after the demise of Theory and whether ‘postcolonial theory’ and ‘theory in the postcolonial world’ are the same thing? I should state here that, in my view, it is precisely the ‘demise’ of Theory (with universalist pretensions) that demands (and makes possible) that we change our relationship to ‘theory’ (with a small ‘t’). The expression ‘doing theory’ recalls a distinction made by Bhudev Mukhopadhyay about science – that Sudipta Kaviraj talks of – where Mukhopadhyay supposedly said that in India ‘we don’t do science’ but only ‘tell stories about science’. So yes, doing theory is about apprehending our time in thought rather than regurgitation of what has already apparently been thought for the rest of the world by European thinkers or philosophers. This practice, clearly, has to be more situated – theory *in* the postcolonial world, rather than postcolonial theory that has largely been an enterprise based in the global academy.

I also want to clarify that my ‘solution’ to the difficulties presented by incommensurable epistemic worlds is not ‘democratic dialogue’ – I only bring that up in reference to a solution proposed by Dipesh Chakraborty, which I only endorse *with a caveat*. Increasingly, it seems to me that a dialogue or conversation is never quite benign and ‘democratic’ but always framed by power. What is more, the rationalist modern is always so convinced about the correctness of his or her position that s/he can only see the dialogue culminating in convincing the other of his/her mistaken views. Perhaps, it is more advisable to exchange stories that do not carry the burden of having to convince and convert the other to one’s own positions.

Sanjeeb Mukherjee has argued that I have downplayed the ‘deep contradictions’ of modernity’, which is not as seamless as I have made it out to be. Perhaps, there is some truth in this claim, because my purpose here was to sidestep the continuous referencing of the European experience as narrated by European thinkers then (at the time of the birth of modernity), and now (at the

time of its crisis). This is especially so for example, where Sanjeeb mentions the contest between a capitalist interpretation of liberty and equality and a democratic imaginary where the two are seen in a different relation with each other. The point is well taken and there is no disagreement with him here but it interests me only up to a point, for the problem is that any discussion on this takes us right back to a discussion of Western history.

Nonetheless, his point that I do not recognize the deep contradictions within democracy is only partially correct. The whole point of my chapter on modernity, looking at it via Kaviraj's revisionist theory was to take his logic forward by *unpacking that moment when many different sequences, many different histories, going off to different geographical locations, came together in Europe to produce 'modernity'*. But my argument actually affirms his claim that what makes for different modernities are the different sequences in which its different components arise in different societies. I am sure this will not yield a picture of modernity that is free of contradictions.

I do want to thank Sanjeeb however, for the very interesting and important suggestion about the Nation and nationalisms being instance of the paramodern. His point that 'actually existing modernities are unthinkable without the nation, nationalisms and nation-state', actually opens out many interesting possibilities that I want to keep in mind for further exploration.

Alongside my argument that the nationalist project of decolonizing knowledge got trapped in narrow Brahminical idea of tradition, Sanjeeb posits the story of Santiniketan and Sriniketan and the labours of Rabindranath Tagore, Kshiti Mohan Sen and Hazari Prasad Dwivedi in digging out the thought of subaltern thinkers like Kabir, Dadu and the Bauls. Actually, I entirely agree – and I am sure we would also agree that this is not quite the nationalist endeavour that I criticize, though it may have been happening in some kind of synergy with it.

I also quite like the point he makes about the panchayat as a traditional institution of self-governance that might in fact give another dimension to our thinking of the dispersed foci of power. Despite the fact these institutions were organized along *jati* or community lines, they do need to be studied more seriously, beyond mere superficial nationalist invocation of them as evidence that 'we too had democracy'. It is, as he says, a question of *the idea of the panchayat* rather than their actually existing form/s that one needs to explore, as also the interesting connection with the recurrent number 'five'.

I have to thank Vijaisri for her most accurate rendering of my argument regarding modernity including what she calls a 'reversal of the diffusionist thesis', while avoiding any suggestion that it is thereby a 'global product'. For some reason, this second part has been quite a common misunderstanding of my argument. Underlining that the thing called modernity is a purely European assemblage, though it sources its ingredients from all parts of the world, is of fundamental importance, for that indeed is what necessitates the need to decolonize, centuries down the line. I also want to thank her for

reading and commenting on the Zizek chapter closely – adding her own remarks to it – also because I think it is one of the most unabashed and vigorous defenses of Eurocentrism to have emerged from the European Left. I am certainly not interested in discussing all of Zizek’s work but as an instance of a Leftist defense of Eurocentrism and considering how influential he is, especially among a section of philosophers in the West, I thought it was necessary to present a critique of some aspects that are relevant from my point of view. I also take heart from her encouraging comments regarding my deployment of Nagarjuna’s concepts of *sunyata* (emptiness) and *pratityasamutpada* (dependent co-arising) as ways of understanding relationality without referring back to a ‘structure’ or ‘totality’. Needless to say, some of these conceptual moves are still in the process of being worked out at greater length and her feedback encourages me to explore further in that direction.

There is one very important critical comment that Vijaisri’s review raises and which I need to perhaps think about a bit more. This has to do with my comment about ‘the absence of philosophical reflection on social and political matters’ which she finds puzzling. In her words: ‘the problem with this gestured idea is the ascription of ahistoricism to philosophical practices and thought and the assumption that the social operated independently of philosophical rationalizations.’ I think what I meant here was not prescriptive texts and writings like the *Manusmriti* or the *Dharmashastras* in general, which are not really argumentative texts of a philosophical nature but concern themselves with putting in place a set of codes of behaviour – as opposed to those, for instance, that we find in abundance on the Self or Brahman, logic and evidence, poetics and *rasa* and so on. But I think it is a question that I need to probe a bit more considering that I have no direct, first-hand knowledge of the field but depend mainly on the work of scholars who have worked on them for decades.

There is one more thing that I feel grateful to Vijaisri for – and that is for underlining that a search for a more grounded understanding of the social polity and the micro powers of caste indicate my attempt to show up the ‘darker side of the social’ rather than use ‘indigenous categories’ to sing praises of such traditional notions. However, in this regard I wasn’t very sure I got the criticism Vijaisri makes about my ‘ascription of the transformation of the political, so as to now re-inscribe the “social”... to the colonial rupture’, which she believes ‘simply dodge(s) the paradigmatic case of the Peshwas.’ For she argues that the Peshwa case illustrates how it sought to institute the “normative vision” of the social coercively, through political authority. I would not disagree with this second part of her statement at all but as far I remember, my point is a bit different. I argued that it was during the anticolonial struggle, that figures like Ambedkar and the social reformers, who emphasized the social question against the proponents of the ‘freedom first’ argument, wanted to inscribe the heterogeneous social in the very heart of the emergent political. I do not ascribe this to colonialism – unless I am missing the point here.

I am quite overwhelmed, of course, by Sudipta Kaviraj's very detailed review, where he has in fact, gone on to flesh out his own ideas on the issues involved. In the process, he has refined the terms and introduced distinctions that are certainly worth reflecting upon and I take such comments as points for further thinking and exploration. However, I do want to respond briefly to two kinds of comments here: the first has to do with a few places where I think he seems to have misunderstood my argument, while the second set relates to questions where we seem to have somewhat more fundamental disagreements.

The first misunderstanding has to do with the 'origins of modernity'. He says in this context that 'I do not think however that these irrefutable facts should persuade us to trace the origins of modernity to Islam ...Simply, modernity was either European, or not. I still believe it was.' I have in fact argued precisely this at some length and have reiterated the point above with respect to Vijaisri's comments. My point in this respect was twofold: One, that despite its ingredients being sourced from different parts of the world, *the assemblage was peculiarly European*. Secondly, the point following from Quijano's observation was that if all these different elements like secular statecraft, rationalism, science and technology and so on are to be identified with modernity then you can find them to have existed in all parts of the world, at all times. His point then – and mine in quoting him – is precisely to underline that we need to specify what it is that is specifically modern (and European) in this mix that gives it that explosive character. My own answer is that apart from developing each of these elements, what was Europe's unique contribution, was 'capitalism' and its mode of being, linked to which, of course, is the discourse of rights and individual autonomy.

The second issue of misunderstanding is when he says 'I cannot understand his objection to my argument (regarding modernity).' Actually, if I may say so, I have no objection at all to the sequentiality argument and I have often used it as my own. There was only one point of discomfort – it turned out that *there was no single sequence* in which one followed the other. The moment at which modernity arises in Europe is a moment of the *intersection of many sequences – different histories, each of which actually reaches back to some part of the globe other than Europe*. That immediately complicated the story – but it also did something else: it revealed that any moment in time is complex and heterogeneous which cannot be immediately traced back to the immediate proximate moment gone by. Parenthetically, I may also underline that therefore, mine is not a simple juxtaposition of 'linear' versus 'cyclical' time. Rather, my problem with linear time is that it simply reduced the complexity of every historical moment by tracing its antecedents back to the immediate past in a single linear sequence. Clearly, somewhere behind this is also the discussion of 'historical time' and the objections to the category of the 'historical present' raised by Althusser in *Reading Capital*, to which Sudipta refers too.

A third point of clarification has to do with Sudipta's statement in the section on capitalism that 'I find it hard to accept Aditya's opening statement

that in Marxist theory time is so tied to the notion of totality that there can be only one present (the most advanced form), all other social forms being residues...’ The clarification is at one level minor but important. He finds it difficult to accept this claim because he is thinking of the Althusserian notion of a complex/ structured totality and the ways in which it opened out possibilities of talking about co-presence of more than one mode of production in a social formation in the debates of the 1970s. Once again, I do not disagree with this point at all but I do not consider the Althusserian intervention as representative of dominant Marxism even within Western Marxism (that is to say, even if we discount the vulgarities of Stalinism). Within mainstream Marxism Althusser and his intervention remained marginal. Ultimately, it seems our disagreement here is about what we consider as mainstream Marxism and what as ‘supplements’ that can end up rewriting the main script itself.

A final clarification concerns my use of the Blochian expression ‘nonsynchronous synchronicities’, which Sudipta finds ‘fashionable’ and not of much use perhaps. There is also a statement he makes towards the end, in continuation with the above point about the Althusserian structured complex totality that has no point of termination in a fully capitalist economy. The statement is as follows: ‘If Germany, as Bloch says, is “the classic land of nonsynchronism”, what can we say of Gramsci’s Italy, not to speak of India? In my reading, the appendix to Althusser’s essay, “Contradiction and Overdetermination” – on the idea of “the last instance” – does not refer to the termination of a transformation process leading to the formation of a fully capitalist economy.’ Actually, I am not aware what fashion he is referring to but I have been struggling with the question of ‘nonsynchronous synchronicities’ even when I did not have access to the term – largely through the recurrent motif of ‘survivals’ and ‘remnants’ in Althusserian Marxism. It is in fact a theme that *Decolonizing Theory* is shot through with, from beginning to end – and it is something that continues to occupy me even now. I consider this problem of ‘nonsynchronous synchronicities’ to be a question of utmost urgency; indeed it seems central to the decolonizing enterprise, from my point of view.

In a sense, this brings me to the first key point of our disagreements – the relation to the non-modern. Why is it so urgent today to think through what this ‘not reaching the termination into a fully capitalist economy’ – and a fully modern state – might mean? In the first place, I think it has to do with the fact that both the significant material presence of indigenous people, peasant or agrarian communities, as well as their modes of being (along with their ancestors, gods and spirits), are very closely tied to the Earth and its future. They – and the Earth – are not threatened by some inexorable internal logic of capital but by state and economic-political elites forcing capitalist development down their throats. This is a direct consequence of the way in which ideas, theories and knowledges reveal a ‘performative’ dimension – term that Sudipta is allergic to. Undoubtedly, this is tied to material economic interests as well but that this not my point here.

In the second place, the question of nonsynchronous synchronicities relates to the question of the spiritual and the supernatural that is tied to these life-forms. Often these are framed as questions of ‘incommensurability’ and Sudipta asks apropos my discussion of Ranajit Guha and Dipesh Chakrabarty: a historian cannot obviously say that Thakoor asked the leaders of the Santhal ‘hool’ to revolt, and must find rational explanations. My problem is not so much with the historians’ explanation as it is with our (as social scientists) inability to understand ‘popular consciousness’. The category of the ‘Puranic’ mode in the book, points to precisely such a chasm. I have referred to this in my response to Dhritiman above that mere ‘democratic dialogue’ is not a solution for dialogues and conversations too are not conducted in situations devoid of power. More importantly, I should underline, ‘incommensurability’ is the rationalists’ problem – for the non-modern, non-rational mind, connections with the modern too are made in ways that do not require convincing the other of the correctness of its ‘worldview’ (if one may be permitted to use that expression). Endless disquisitions on ‘overlapping consensus’ may be the modernists’ problem but ‘incommensurability’ does not really present any problem to people who have no investment in ironing out contradictions that emerge when you think in propositions rather than in images and stories. Their connections are, so to speak, transversal and rhizomatic – to borrow expressions from Deleuze and Guattari.

The second major point of our disagreements concerns the question of ‘structure’ and/or ‘totality’. Here I do not have much to say at this point except to say that I do not think I need it anymore. There have been any number of relational ontologies in the past, including the Buddhist as elaborated in Nagarjuna, which do not refer to any structure or totality, just as feminism’s understanding of patriarchy as a ‘structure’ is not quite one of an enclosed totality with an internal logic. One could refer to Derrida’s notion of a structure that is driven from its locus – decentred in so far as that centre is ever shifting – which while maintaining a formal connection to the idea of the structure, actually inscribes indeterminacy at its very heart. It is also possible to think of relations in terms of the idea of the ‘machinic assemblage’ (Deleuze and Guattari) which, in my opinion is closer to the Late Althusser’s return to some of the themes of *Reading Capital*, especially those related to Balibar’s essay on the *Grundrisse*. I have discussed some of this in the book and will not repeat that discussion here except to say that the image that the Late Althusser uses is that of milk ‘taking hold’ – and becoming curd. In this reading, the milk, the bacteria and external conditions like correct temperature *are not parts of an ever-pre-given structure but rather elements that produce the curd as a result of an aleatory encounter*. The logic of coherence arises out of the encounter itself and does not pre-exist it. So we can have ‘structures’ of this kind which can exist for long periods of time but which are purely contingent. They might even have some discernable logics at work but they are always subject to newer encounters that might disrupt those logics and introduce newer ones. I am interested in trying

to work out an idea that can combine the Buddhist relationality-without-structure with the idea of an aleatory encounter producing certain unstable and temporary logics of coherence.

### **About the Author**

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