

Response to Auritro Majumder, *Insurgent Imaginations: World Literature and the Periphery*

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What is the connection between twentieth-century communist imaginaries, literary practice, and the contested concept of ‘world literature’? This is a question that surely merits far more attention than it has hitherto received. There is, of course, the enigmatic reference to ‘world literature’ in the *Communist Manifesto*, and certainly there is a vast and often impressive body of theory and criticism that adjoins a Marxist critical methodology to theories of world systems and combined and uneven development. And yet, the literary traditions and innovations of communist writers and thinkers, and the cultural practices of resistance that characterize the radical movements of the century, are held at some distance or even obscured.

The question has received some, albeit not always direct, attention in recent years, via a renewed interest in internationalism and, more generally, an engagement with questions of the cultures that attend political activism, both developments that have questioned some of the tired binaries of literary-historical writing (modernism/realism, autonomy/commitment, and so forth). The networks of leftist internationalism have been the subject of some productive attention in Anglophone criticism recently, offering ways to conceptualize literature’s relationship with the ‘world’ (variously imagined), and with transnational cultural relations under capitalism that do not reify the world of the capitalist imaginary by reducing all such relations analogically to trade, exchange and markets. A notable example of a text attempting this would be the late Katerina Clark’s *Eurasia Without Borders: The Dream of a Leftist Literary Commons 1919-43* (2021). Clark’s book tracks the cultural streams that were set in motion by the Second World Congress of the Communist International (Comintern) held in 1920, at which Lenin called for communists to support national liberation

and peasant movements throughout the colonized world, even where those movements were not communist-led, and the ‘Congress of the Toilers of the East’ held in Baku, Azerbaijan, a few weeks later. In his speech at Baku, the Soviet poet Mikhail Pavlovich elaborated a vision of a ‘single common international ocean of poetry and knowledge’ created by the ‘harmonious intermingling’ of the literature of ‘toiling humanity who have been freed from national and class oppression for the first time’ (Clark 2021, 5). A kind of ‘red’ world literature, then; but one perhaps quite different from the one famously described by Marx and Engels since it emerges not from the bourgeoisie’s expansion of the capitalist social relations into non-capitalist areas, but from direct contestation and struggle. For Clark, the cultural resonances of the Second Congress and the Baku conference can be traced in the activities of cultural intermediaries and adepts who translated, re-presented, and adapted texts and genres across national and linguistic borders. The cultural relationships and solidarities that they forged underwrote a transnational literary culture that eludes the net of ‘world literature’ as it has come to be conceptualized in Anglo-American criticism, and complicate simple configurations of the colony-metropole hierarchy via a remapping of the Asian continent. A rich and heterogeneous, if often labyrinthine, cultural world was supported by the Soviet-sponsored Comintern and its vast array of front and satellite organizations (see Glaser and Lee, eds., 2020). Across the world communist movement, we find writers and thinkers who were convinced of literature’s transformative, world-making capacities, not merely its propaganda value. But by the mid-1930s, countervailing forces were in the ascendant, and for all that the Comintern’s culturalist turn engendered new ways of thinking about culture and the world, it also exposed intellectuals and artists to the increasingly provincializing and counter-revolutionary pressure of Stalinism.

The dissolution of the Comintern in 1943 certainly marks the end of this cultural period in one way, and Clark’s book cites Mao Zedong’s 1942 talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art as announcing, albeit equivocally, the ending of this phase. Certainly, after the mid-1940s, the engagements of Anglophone writers and intellectuals with communism diminished, and those ‘cultural adepts’ whom Clark discusses were mainly lost to retreat, defeat, exile or death. The emergence and institutionalization of Marxist (and, indeed, postcolonial) cultural theory in the Anglophone academy would have few connections to that vision of a ‘red’ world literature. The aesthetic questions posed would be taken up again, in very different historical circumstances, and generally at a distance from the political practices and communist cultures of the earlier period. In the post-war years, much of the thought of that period was, indeed, summarily dismissed as dogmatic and crude, although a notable exception is the work of Raymond Williams, who both engaged seriously and critically with interwar Marxist thinking on culture (Williams 1960, 283-303) and, later, to see in Mao Zedong’s 1942 talks transformed possibilities for the relationship between writers and popular audiences (Williams 1977, 202-3).

There is, of course, an enormous amount missing from the sequence outlined above, constructed as it is primarily by the connections between Europe and the Soviet world, particularly in terms of the complex relationship between communism and national liberation after 1945, and the far-reaching influence of the Chinese Revolution outside China. To return to my opening question, what, if anything, might be salvaged from the literary worlds of twentieth-century internationalism, that appear so distant today, that might illuminate the connections between that history and our own moment? This question animates my own work, but here I will turn to *Insurgent Imaginaries* to briefly identify some of the ways that it seems to me to answer it.

In attending to a ‘peripheral’ world constituted by internal cultural dynamics, rather than by metropole-(ex)-colony relations, the book illuminates a history that traverses the geographic and temporal sequence outlined above that constituted the communist experience elsewhere in the world. Firstly, through its particular focus on the struggles of rural, ‘lumpen’ and Maoist grouping in the periphery, it demonstrates the continuing resonances of Maoist positions in the culture of the twenty-first century. Paradoxically, this is best exemplified, in my view, by Majumder’s reading of Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*, in which the Naxalite movement is to be found at the novel’s periphery, shadowing the protagonist’s consciousness. Majumder compellingly argues that novel’s failure to ‘banish the rural’ (191) signifies a relation of continued dependence and, by extension, the still-fundamental link between socialism and national liberation.

Secondly, the book provokes a welcome rethinking of ‘world literature’ that distinguishes it both from certain Marxist positions and from Anglophone liberal formulations. Where the 1920 Baku Conference envisioned a *future* literature of liberated national cultures, freed both from imperial power and national bourgeoisie, here we find the records of cultural struggle directed to those ends: ‘a *situated* conception of literature that emphasizes the counter-hegemonic role of intellectuals, the processive forging of popular sovereignty, and anti-imperialism’ (3, emphasis in original). This is not the ‘dream’ birthed by the Bolshevik revolution, but it is also, crucially, far removed from some reified conception of world literature as *merely* the reflection of capitalism’s dynamics of development. Rather, literature is positioned as a site of contestation and antagonism. At the heart of the book lies a concept of imagination, conceived in a lineage from Vico through Hegel (echoed too in Gramsci); imagination as labor, struggle, and revolutionary world-making.

Finally, the book suggests a method of reading that reads form allegorically (in a Jamesonian vein) but not reductively or symptomatically. Majumder offers analysis of mixed forms that constellate the local and the foreign, the popular and experimental, the modernist and realist, not in the incoherent mixing that was so abhorred by Georg Lukács in his polemics against modernism but in ways that register the cultural particularity of the peripheral experience in the world system. This is best exemplified in the chapter on M. N. Roy. Roy’s anticolonial memoir, Majumder argues, speaks of ‘the imperative to

translate freely *across* diversely located anticolonial communities or groups' (53, emphasis in original), testing experience against theory, against questions of teleology. Crucially, we are reminded of the 1920 debate between Roy and Lenin at the Comintern's Second Congress, in which the two men presented different positions on the role of peasants and land-workers, and on the question of the necessity of bourgeois-nationalist revolution as a transitional stage of communist revolution. Roy's contribution there was significant in itself (pointing to a different strategy that might have been endorsed), but his memoir, with its elisions and gaps, emerges here as a significant anticolonial work that, on a formal level, might be read in terms of a critical account of development, as the labor of reconceptualizing and re-presenting past narrative forms undermines any simple model of cultural development and teleology. Where, by the 1930s, Soviet-influenced theory had ossified into the doctrine of socialist realism, in part under the pressure of Stalinist conceptions of stadial historical development, reading beyond that purview, as the book demonstrates, reveals insurgent energies that could not be, or refused to be, contained within such schema.

Insurgent Imaginaries, then, may be read as a compelling response to the question with which I began, and it therefore enriches our understanding of the interrelations between communism, anticolonialism and 'world literature', linkages that, as the latter chapters of the book demonstrate, remain significant not only for South Asian literature today, but also for postcolonial theory in general.

Works Cited

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