CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Negotiating Engines of Difference

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When Paula Chakravartty and Mara Mills invited us to a conversation on what it would mean to decolonize computing, we attempted not simply to go back to our earlier work on "postcolonial computing" but to rethink postcoloniality and its limitations in the practice of technopolitics.

South Asian historiography, experimental and theoretically sophisticated since the 1980s, has influenced almost all contemporary theorizing about colonialism and its aftermath. But how useful are global generalizations and future-oriented strategies that begin from such a specific experience of British imperialism and Indian de-colonization? Latin American countries, for example, experienced colonialism and imperialism in radically different ways from South Asia, both because of the earlier ends of direct Spanish or Portuguese colonization, and because of their proximity and strategic significance for the US during the

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Cold War. Indigenous peoples in the Americas have experienced multiple layers of colonial violence that are not captured by the frameworks honed in the study of the nineteenth-century British Empire.

Decolonial theory and postcolonial theories alike often pose their struggle as against “Western civilization” and “Western modernity” (Kumar 2015, Maldonado-Torres, 2016, pp. 10-11). Yet contemporary forms of indigenous nationalism rewrite modernity via computation and entrepreneurship while schooling Euro-American state and corporate actors in new forms of accommodation of non-Western difference. Careful decolonial accounts must recognize these diverse experiences of subjugation by the West, while refusing to render the non-West innocent (de la Cadena & Lien, 2015, p. 442; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009).

Our earlier work on “postcolonial computing” problematized histories and sociologies of technology by drawing on work from targets of Eurocentric development: India, Brazil, China, and indigenous Australia. There we worked to unsettle the presumed universality of technoscience by offering analytical tactics for accounting for difference and uneven circulations. This essay grapples with engines of difference; we now call attention to attempts by technonationalist and capitalist actors to claim and configure (profitable) essential difference.

In 2018, the corporate leaders, financiers, and heads of state at the World Economic Forum (WEF) turned their attention to “the multiconceptual world.” The WEF is better known as Davos; it is one place where state and capital meet to co-ordinate their efforts, work out shared interests, and deal with legitimacy crises. Economist Sebastian Buckup, WEF Head of Programming, explained the multiconceptual turn thus: “We have moved out, gladly so, of a time when the West is in a position to lecture other countries if I might say so … It’s not just about more even distribution or more widely distributed power, we also have different concepts of global governance” (CGTN, 2018). India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, and China’s Xi Jinping all challenge the dominance of “the West” in defining governance and rights norms (Babones, 2018); they cite difference as

grounds for multi-polar global governance.

Modi's rule in India has come with a turn toward *Hindutva*, a form of Hindu religious nationalism and the aggressive facilitation of accumulation in the name of economic growth and technological nationalism (Mishra, 2018). Under his rule, India has seen "cow protection" vigilantes — in the name of vegetarianism — lynch Muslim cattle traders and *Dalit* (oppressed caste, formerly known as "untouchables") leather-workers (Mander, 2018). Struggles over land and resources in South Asia, once rooted in principles of indigenous sovereignty or citizenship rights, now find themselves overrun by technological nationalist projects. Industrialists and state actors call on citizens to sacrifice their lands and relations so the nation can manufacture a "people's car," or futurist military drones (Dam, 2016; Environment Support Group, 2014). Without an analysis of capital and of power within difference, how do we decolonize new techno-nationalisms that re-invent indigeneity as modern power, while seeking legitimacy with ongoing imperial formations of the nation-state and capital?

The WEF's multiconceptual turn still accommodates the very hierarchies of humanity that decolonial theories so forcefully identify (Subramaniam, 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2016). For those of us grasping at a decolonial politics of resistance, what are the dangers of embracing a politics that rests simply on revealing and celebrating difference? We proceed with patience, humility, and cautious optimism. We cannot make pronouncements about the future or the forms of politics appropriate to this moment. We only point to a conjuncture and the challenges it throws up for our familiar political categories and problematics. As states claim nationalism as a form of decolonization, we turn to the long history of political contests over the meaning of decolonization beyond South Asia-British relations.

Frantz Fanon, observing decolonization taking place in the context of the Cold War, noted that Americans "advise the European countries to decolonize on gentleman's terms" while they "take their role as the barons of international capitalism very seriously" (Fanon 2004 (1961), p.

38). Anti-colonialism, Fanon warned in his anti-colonial treatise *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), was being deployed in the interests of an emerging global structure of imperialism and capitalism. The mid-twentieth-century transfer of sovereignty to formerly colonized nations was, in some imperial visions, regarded as a mere legal formalism — a transition to a different mode of white trusteeship in which imperial global influence was to be re-forged through novel economic and cultural mechanisms that would place markets rather than militaries, and trade rather than territory, at the center of global networks. It proceeded through "practical tactics such as the creation of Radio Free Europe and committees for the defense of oppressed minorities." (Fanon, 2004 (1961), p. 39). Reading Fanon reminds us that one cannot read these texts and practices (e.g., US-funded radio broadcasts and social movements for diversity in the Third World) with a naive attention simply to the slogans they circulated for or against, decolonization. One would have to pay attention to their contexts, asking: Who funded them? Whom did they recruit? What other movements did they displace or scramble? What practices accompanied these media and social-movement discourses?

The invocation of "decolonization" marked a struggle over the terms of who and what could live, work, trade, and move in the world. Communists, social democrats, and religious nationalists were just some of those who struggled to fill the vacuum left by colonial power. In the context of the Cold War, Americans and Europeans employed technical assistance and community development programs to direct new nations and their poor away from communism. The Ford Foundation, for example, fostered religious difference as a weapon against communism (McCarthy, 1987). It supported Buddhist political groupings in Burma to bolster social democratic leadership; Buddhism, a Ford Field representative wrote, is "inherently opposed to the tenets of communism" (McCarthy, 1987, p. 101). In India, the Foundation seeded the *Books for India* program, later supported by Indian philanthropists; the program sought to "intensify the revitalization of traditional indigenous values …

which may prove an even stronger barrier to the acceptance of Communism by Hindus and Moslems than imported Western ideals" (McCarthy, 1987, p. 98). At the same time, anti-colonial nationalist projects shored up cultural difference in the name of national sovereignty (Lu, 2010).

During the Cold War, imperialists and diplomats alike used the terms anti-colonialism, decolonization, and post-colonialism. The terms could be used as a marker of a problem as well as the site of a solution. They were used by advocates of paternalistic economic policies as well as autarkic ones, by imperialists as well as by revolutionaries. Diplomats could speak the terms to stabilize the existing world order, even as rebels spoke them to overturn existing orders. Decolonization was not a straightforward, liberating process. Rather, it was a contest over the very meaning of liberation itself. As the century wore on, the terms of an anti-colonial nationalism grew in many directions, including sectarian leftisms and authoritarian populisms. The anti-colonial coat served to cloak the holes in the spaces of practice, administration, and governance that needed to be repaired; yet often it was expedient to continue inhabiting colonial institutional structures (Jaffrelot, 2009).

The end of the Cold War shifted terrains of opportunity and languages of legitimacy for multinational companies and national formations. Globalizing corporations shifted sharply in the 1980s from seeing uniformity and standardization as necessary to global expansion to seeing diversity as the key to generating consumption. Companies engaged with difference to globalize their markets, first by localizing their products by adapting them for cultural variations. Pizza Hut, for example, added tandoori in Bangalore and Starbucks added bean paste pastries in Shanghai. Even manufacturing supply chains can be reorganized to work through ethnic networks and cottage industries, sometimes celebrating or reifying particularities of cultural practice to strengthen production (Bear et al., 2015).

The dazzling array of global difference has been good for products and profits. Globalizers did not have to sweep the globe free of difference

in order to prepare it for increased rates of commodity circulation (Kraidy, 2005); they readily cathected narratives of national difference, regional variation, indigeneity, and gender variation. Ambivalence and hybridity helped build paths toward product diversity and consumer choice more often than they produced effective resistance against malleable, flexible, creative new flows of capital (Kraidy, 2005).

In twenty-first-century India, as resurgent nationalisms erupted, the entrepreneur became the figure that promised cultural authenticity even with integrations into global capital (Philip, 2016; Upadhya, 2009). This form of technonationalism idealizes economic growth and spectacular corporate stories, such as Indian CEOs at Google and Microsoft, or Indian industrialist family Tata's ownership of prestige brand Land Rover. Champions of Indian business work to demarcate Indian distinctions as business advantages; they transform *jugaad* — a word that connotes clever, highly-constrained improvisation — into a national brand (Kaur, 2016; Philip et al., 2010). In the shadows of this pursuit of profitable difference and economic dominance lurk policies that treat labor rights, social movements, small landowners, and forest dwellers as barriers to accumulation and enemies of the nation (Irani, forthcoming; Subramanian, 2017). Special Economic Zones since the 1950s, technological reconfigurations like India's 2016 demonetization (Patel & Weston, 2017), and a host of other development projects actively call on people's varied aspirations to enroll them in futurities of capitalism (Mankekar, 2015; Cross, 2014).

Institutions that stabilize capitalism or mitigate its disasters promote entrepreneurship as a way of channeling the aspirations and frustrations of people in developing countries into financially generative, rather than unprofitable directions (Clinton, 2010; Baumol, 1991). The World Bank, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the US Department of State encourage start-ups, hackathons, and "innovation cultures" to redirect energized, dangerous Third World bodies away from terrorism into entrepreneurship (Clinton 2010; Baumol 1991). Technology companies invite feminists and civil rights activists to generate voice

online, fueling circuits of attention-capital even as these groups pursue human rights or liberation. Indian and global policy experts promulgate "the digital" as a promising enabler of accumulation, achievement, access, and the accommodation of difference (Irani, 2017; Turner, 2006). Firms do not simply try to obliterate difference; rather, they study difference as a tactic of transforming citizen-subjects into consumer-entrepreneurs through techniques of empathetic design thinking and NGO partnerships (Irani, forthcoming).These promises of computing are forged in the settler colonial United States and brought into articulation with nationalist-capitalist promises in India.

Indian economist Kalyan Sanyal argues that capitalism negotiates with "the world of difference" (2007, p. 8), as firms, states, and NGOs partner to manage the informal economy and the surplus populations produced by dispossession. We argue, a step further, that firms and states not only valorize difference, but also massage, de-construct and re-construct difference into forms that can live well with capital (Foucault, 2008 (1978-79)). Capitalism does not always annihilate its Others; it can come to regulate some differences profitably while violently suppressing and disciplining others. Post-colonial and de-colonial frameworks, then, cannot in themselves produce recipes for liberation. In "Postcolonial Computing," we wrote "The seams among differences are not simply a source of undesirable unevenness and aberration, but also sites of creativity and possibility" (Philip et al., 2012, p. 8). A decolonial computing, however, cannot rest on a celebration of difference, creativity, and possibility. While our prior attempts emerged from an optimistic pedagogical critique, our renewed efforts begin with a caution, situated in a changing political economy. Culture and innovation industries now systematically take up counterhegemonic efforts, profitably stripping them of their activist intent (Costanza-Chock, 2018, p.12). A celebration of difference alone is not enough to sustain a pluriverse – a "world where many worlds fit" (Escobar, 2018, p. 16).[1] How can we resist or even overthrow the forces that make a pluriverse impossible?

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Notes

[1] Escobar (2018, p.16) quotes the World Social Forum which, in turn, echoes the Zapatista call: "*Queremos un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos.*"

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