



Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* by Partha Chatterjee

Review by: Munir Fakher Eldin

Source: *The Arab Studies Journal*, Vol. 13/14, No. 2/1 (Fall 2005/Spring 2006), pp. 141-144

Published by: Arab Studies Institute

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27933942>

Accessed: 21-10-2018 08:38 UTC

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The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World

Partha Chatterjee
New York: Columbia University Press, 2004
(173 pages, bibliography, index) \$31.00 (cloth)

Reviewed by Munir Fakher Eldin _____

In *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, Partha Chatterjee offers readers fine-tuned conceptual lenses through which to see a contemporary world of popular politics where, as he argues in the preface, “political modernity” is being forged mostly outside the industrialized countries. This is the poorly understood world of “political society,” or “the politics of the governed.” The book is divided into two parts and includes a section of photographs documenting aspects of urban life in India over the past half-century, as well as an afterword on the American invasion of Iraq. Part one, where the main thesis of the book is found, includes three essays originally given as the Leonard Hastings Schoff Memorial Lectures at Columbia University in November 2001. Part two includes various additional lectures given in Calcutta, Delhi, and Oberlin, which provide a global-local perspective on the subject matter. In both parts of the book, the author reframes important political and theoretical concepts (such as civil society, modernity, governance, empire, and globalization) in order to ground the ethnographic details that illustrate his object of study.

What is this object? In part one, and especially in chapter two, Chatterjee contrasts the term “political society” to “civil society”; political society refers to the proliferation of forms of political mobilization by unprivileged communities that violate law and are opposed to the civic norms of good citizenship (39). These forms of mobilization, argues Chatterjee, emerge at the level of developmental agencies of the state, which find it necessary to descend “to the terrain of political society in order to renew their *legitimacy* as providers of well-being and there to confront whatever is the current configuration of politically mobilized demands” (41, emphasis added). There are two main aspects of political society, which Chatterjee highlights through a discussion of several cases of mobilizations by squatters and religious minorities (in the second half of chapter two and in chapter three). First, there is the emergence of a sense of

Munir Fakher Eldin is a Ph.D. student in the joint program of History and Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at New York University and Dissertation Fellow at the International Center for Advanced Studies.

community and identity, which allows a mobilization to take a moral tone vis-à-vis the “cold” classifications of governmental agencies. Second, there is the fact that the terrain of political society is that of shifting policies and strategic alliances, depending on a number of variables, some of which could be of global dimensions (a theme that is taken up directly in chapter seven).

Although some aspects of popular mobilization could be seen to operate similarly in the colonial era, Chatterjee makes a central point that these earlier mobilizations should not be confused with political society. He locates the emergence of political society, in the Indian context, in the 1970s and 1980s (134). The difference here is twofold: first, because of the framework of citizenship and national sovereignty which existed in the postcolonial era that began after World War II; and second, because of the welfare or developmental state of the twentieth century (34). The imagination of the nation as a homogenous entity (as discussed in chapter one of the book) provides the framework for equal citizenship and popular sovereignty. However, the governmental practices of the state create a distinction between “citizens” and “population.” As citizens, people are rights-bearing subjects who ought to govern themselves; as population, they are the target of policy and are governed. It is on the plain of governmentality that the social is disintegrated and differentiated (where the nation no longer appears homogenous). Both popular sovereignty and governmentality function as legitimizing forces for the modern state—a point crucially missed in the central debates of modern political theory (30-41). This duality is central for addressing welfare politics in the industrialized countries (in terms of the class-differentiated access to governmental services) and “political society” in the rest of the world (34).

In most of the world—where large unprivileged sections of the population are not proper citizens nor culturally equipped to enter civil society, due primarily to their disadvantageous location in property relations and/or their religious minority status—*governmentality* provides a ground for the practice of popular democracy, in ways that do not fit the civic norms and ideals of civil society and ordinary political participation. Chatterjee provides a concise theoretical discussion of these issues in chapters one and two. In the first chapter, he situates his thesis vis-à-vis “progressive historicist thinking of the twentieth century” (Benedict Anderson’s work is taken as a prime representative), which conceives of “the world as one” and of politics and democracy as “being the same *everywhere*” (6, emphasis in the original). In the second chapter, he discusses the shortcomings of modern political theory (whether liberal, communitarian, republican, or Marxist) in failing to take governmentality—and by the extension, the different senses of community to which it gives birth—into account. The notion of community in these theories remains that which is regularized by the legal order of private property (that is, the community of property owners who ought to govern themselves); it is precisely those who are governed and seen as unfit to govern themselves to whom Chatterjee wants to bring attention.

Part two of the book provides a global perspective on local politics in India, and on the dynamics between civil society and political society. In chapter four (a lecture delivered in August 2001 in Calcutta), Chatterjee takes up a broad perspective on twentieth-century world history and provides an insightful discussion of globaliza-

tion and its geographic character (the global city), and the functioning of the world's single empire, after the end of the cold war era. In this chapter, the author points out the dilemma in which postcolonial nation-states are caught, between joining the global economy and losing much of their hard-won sovereignty, or remaining outside it at high costs. The chapter includes an insightful discussion of the specific conditions under which Europe could peacefully loosen up its national order and which other countries did not possess—namely, the peace provided by the United States in the shadow of the cold war. Chapter five is made up of the text of a talk delivered by Chatterjee at a meeting organized by students on 21 September 2001, in the wake of the attacks of September 11, in which he condemns the attacks and warns against the instant rallying for battle by the world's one superpower.

Chapter six uses a recent controversy in West Bengal around the proliferation of religious schools (*madrastas*) and the call for their modernization to discuss the problem of political representation for minorities in a secular democracy. As Chatterjee had argued in an earlier work (*A Possible India: Essays in Political Criticism*, published in 1997), while stressing its secular nature and the separation of religion and politics, the Indian state has continued, for historic reasons, to manage and even to fund religious institutions. At the same time, India has provided no set procedural framework for addressing the question of political representation for minorities in their dealings with the state (115-16). In the past two decades the Left Front in West Bengal has played an important role in providing such political representation, which also allowed it to initiate a process of modernization in the curriculum in the officially-supervised and funded *madrastas*. Yet recent years have brought the proliferation of private *madrastas* and the rise of imams as the most trusted political leaders among the rural poor (whom urban middle-class Muslims were unable, or unwilling, to represent) (126). While such a situation can bring the fear of communal violence, it also constitutes, in Chatterjee's view, a challenge for opening up the democratic politics of secularism in order to negotiate the question of political representation for religious minorities (129).

Chapter seven examines the impact of the "global city" on political society and urban politics in Calcutta, as a new middle class, composed of a managerial and technocratic elite, began to transform the city in the 1990s. The state is sponsoring this process through the eviction of squatters and clearing of slums to make space for business districts, shopping malls, office buildings, and segregated residential clusters for the affluent. The structure of civil society that emerged in Calcutta in the 1970s and 1980s, accommodating the large population of poor immigrants and squatters both into the physical structure of the city and into electoral politics, is being abandoned now in favor of new policies of integration into the global financial and service economy. Unlike the industrialization policies of the 1970s and 1980s, the new economy does not herald the expansion of the middle class. The emerging middle class now is narrower and more segregated, yet its political influence on urban politics is much more intense and direct than its predecessor, which had retreated into civil society, away from politics. The social consequences of this process are severe, yet the response, Chatterjee argues, "is thoroughly confused, almost mindless" (146). The leaders who sponsor this transformation are only reluctantly willing to acknowledge what is it

about (that is, integration into the circuits of global capital and inauguration of the cultural dominance of a new globally oriented elite); others are seeking to re-inscribe Bengali-ness (for example, through the law changing the English and Hindustani name of the city to Kolkata), although Bengali speakers are estimated at only fifty-one percent of the population (145-46). Chatterjee poses the question: "If democracy has indeed taken root in India's cities, will political society provide the instruments for negotiating a controlled transition to a new urban regime or will it explode into anarchic resistance?" (145). His answer seems to suggest that something in the middle will eventually take place.

Aside from its eloquent prose, the book's lucid analytical discussions and sensitivity to harsh political realities and contradictions allow for engaging insights and powerful glimpses into a world of politics that has been largely misconceived. One of the book's most remarkable achievements is that it makes the postcolonial critical perspective and Western political theory indispensable to each other. Despite its focus on India, scholars working on the Middle East and other areas of the postcolonial world can find here an applicable and inspiring text, with true imaginative power. ♦