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Singularity as Ethical Closure?

A Review Essay of Aniruddha Chowdhury's Post-deconstructive Subjectivity and History

Aniruddha Chowdhury, *Post-deconstructive Subjectivity and History: Phenomenology, Critical Theory, and Postcolonial Thought*, Brill, 2014, 174 pp., \$127.00 US (hbk), ISBN: 9879004259898.

This is a book of many merits addressing the possibility of conceptualizing subjectivity and history after the poststructural turn—i.e., after deconstruction and the retreat of ideology critique. In more than one way this is also an effort to think of history, historiography, and the subject of history itself beyond modernist narratives—liberal or Marxist—as well as beyond the historiography of linearity and progress; hence, also beyond narratives of underdevelopment and backwardness which are the corollary of Western hegemonic versions of world history and politics. In that sense, this is an important book, not only philosophically or epistemologically, but also politically, as the conceptualization of subjectivity underlies the kind of philosophy of history on which counter-hegemonic histories of the world can be told, and radical democratizing of our unequal, capitalist, meta-colonial societies can become possible. Although three of the authors addressed by the book precede the break of deconstruction in philosophy and social theory, the author persuasively draws a genealogical line from Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, and Walter Benjamin to Wilson Harris and Gayatri Spivak to enable a post-deconstructive project of subjectivity and history to emerge.

The author states that the aim of his book is to demonstrate that deconstruction is more than the dissolution of the subject but rather it opens up the possibility to think of subjectivity free from the constraints of transcendental philosophy or even ontology. Tracing a genealogical trajectory from the singular subjectivity articulated in Heidegger's *Being and Time* to Levinas's eschatology versus teleology and the event-ness of the time of the Other, to Benjamin's historical actualization and the critique of the homogenous and empty time of modernity, to Harris's postcolonial phenomenology and conception of dwelling, and finally to Spivak's postcolonial critique of the sovereign Western subject and the asymmetric temporality produced by the displacement of the order of representation, Chowdhury extracts those potentialities of imagining subjectivity beyond deconstruction. By doing so, he sets himself the difficult task to finish the unfinished business of the poststructural turn and its deconstructed, decentered, yet impossible subject. This is even more important as the

question of Eurocentrism and the rise of post-Western projects and epistemologies comes to challenge the Western ways of inscribing history in a teleological, and hence hierarchical perspective of necessary stages of development. In that sense, this is a much needed book which offers not so much a straightforward ‘program’ but sketches the contours to think around questions such as what historiography may look like beyond linearity, what kind of subjectivity is possible after the dissolution of totality, or what kind of philosophy of history could disrupt hegemonic schemata of progress and give space to those suppressed stories, those snapshots that do not fit into the developmental course of modern narratives.

As the author acknowledges, the centerpiece of his attempt to think of subjectivity in the post-deconstructive condition is the concept of singularity “as distinct from the universal-particular dyadic relation” (4). Chowdhury explains that “the post-deconstructive conception of history articulates a singular yet non-essential conception of historical time” and that what unites the thinkers addressed by the book is “the philosophical affirmation of singularity conceived as event, alterity and non-identity” (4). Singularity is, therefore, the thread that binds together a certain post-historicist philosophy of history that stems out of the book’s learned and sophisticated account. Indeed, Chowdhury identifies Peter Hallward as being the first to articulate the centrality of the singular—rather than the particular—in postcolonial theory, explaining further that unlike the specific, the concept of the singular is essentially non-relational. It is this aspect of non-relationality and the kind of subjectivity and philosophy of history it enables—a key trait of such post-historicist approaches—that I would like to question, not so much as a criticism of the book, but as an entry point for discussion around the issues raised by Chowdhury’s important intervention.

As this journal seeks to engage with works pertaining to the Islamic world broadly conceived, I would like to draw attention to two authors, whose work—in my view—follows a post-historicist, singularizing understanding of subjectivity and history, Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood.

Asad has consistently argued in favor of considering “each tradition in its own terms” and thus to “understand ways of reasoning characteristic of given traditions.”¹ From this perspective, Asad offers a significant challenge to the modernist conceptualization of tradition as “the inheritance of an unchanging cultural substance from the past—as though ‘past’ and ‘present’ were places in a linear path down which that object was conveyed to the ‘future’”²; he challenges the modernist idea that “the present is merely a fleeting moment in a historical teleology connecting past to future.”³ For Asad, tradition is traversed by a different sense of temporality, in which the present is always in the center; that is, he invites us to attend to “the way time present is separated from but also included within events and epochs, the way time past authoritatively constitutes present practices, and the way authenticating practices invoke or distance themselves from the past (by reiterating, reinterpreting, and reconnecting textualized memory and memorialized history)” in order that we might “move toward a richer understanding of tradition’s temporality.”⁴

As interesting as it is, however, the idea of the present and future being conditioned by the “discursive tradition” of Islam, which by Asad’s own admission fuses too close together

¹ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 200.

² Talal, Asad, *Formations of the Secular. Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 222.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

“eschatology” and “sociology,”⁵ is rather problematic from the point of view of history, historiography, and the process of history-making. This is because such collapsing of secular and divine temporalities borders on straightforward political conservatism; i.e., conceiving of the making of history as not necessarily oriented to the creation of the future, but “as seeking to maintain the ‘local’ status quo, or to follow local models of social life”⁶ amounts to “the disavowal of history itself,” to use Dirlik’s well-known phrase.⁷ It points to a philosophy of history with its gaze fixed backwards, toward the previous epoch, and, in an important sense, it reduces culture to a space filled by a perpetual reiteration of the same. Asad’s view of Islam as a tradition to be preserved, and the view of history as stasis rather than change, and entirely specific to one location only, is strangely similar to the Eurocentric, Orientalist, ‘positivist’ view of Islam. Deep-seated in this view, I contend, is the *logic of radical singularity* of which Asad is an instructive instance.

As Hallward observes, what often passes for specific or particular in ‘post’ approaches of Otherness is, under scrutiny, singular or singularizing: the *specific* “implies a situation, a past, an intelligibility constrained by inherited conditions... [It] is the space of interests in relation to other interests, the space of the historical as such, forever ongoing, forever incomplete.”⁸ On the contrary, the *singular* “will operate without criteria external to its operation,”⁹ it is not “constrained by any logic outside the immanent criteria of its own operation.”¹⁰ Indeed, such post-historicist approaches which seek to account for the Other in his/her own terms, operate in singularizing terms according to which “each historical moment must be treated as *sui generis* and as carrying within itself its own explanation,”¹¹ and as a consequence they define the non-secular Other in terms of absolute alterity. As such, history is re-conceptualized from a skeptical, conservative angle, and the teleology of progress is dismissed in favor of the teleology of insurmountable difference, the teleology of cultural incommensurability, where Islam—or perhaps any other religious difference—is perceived as essentially elusive to any secular epistemology and in fact to any external explanation. As I have argued elsewhere,¹² the skepticism against the ability of Western or secular epistemology to produce any substantive understanding without committing an act of violence against the object of research, has been constitutive of postcolonial thinking since its formative moments. Spivak’s observation that, “Explaining, we exclude the possibility of the *radically* heterogeneous,”¹³ summarizes succinctly the post-historicist suspicion against any attempt to explain the social world in terms of causality, i.e., in the last instance, in terms of relations. As such, in an important sense post-historicism undermines any possibility to critically deconstruct power relations and disrupt the hegemonies they sustain—a commitment all critical ‘posts’ share—since to do so, one needs to explain how the social world works in terms of relations.

⁵ Ibid., 91.

⁶ Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 19.

⁷ Arif Dirlik, “Is There History After Eurocentrism? Globalism, Postcolonialism, and the Disavowal of History,” *Cultural Critique*, 42 (1999): 2.

⁸ Peter Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing between the Singular and the Specific* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2001), 5.

⁹ Ibid., xii.

¹⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹¹ Aijaz Ahmad, “Post Colonial Theory and the ‘Post-’ Condition,” *Socialist Register*, Vol. 33 (1997): 373.

¹² Rosa Vasilaki, “Provincialising IR? Deadlocks and Prospects in Post-Western IR Theory,” *Millennium-Journal of International Studies*, 41(1) [2012]: 3-22.

¹³ Gayatri C. Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 105.

But what are the ethical and political consequences of understanding the Other in a singularizing logic? I would like to submit that in the case of analyzing cultural difference, the discourse of cultural singularity cannot have any genuinely disruptive or subversive implications. The radical cultural relativism that such views promote as the cornerstone of pluralism and openness is perhaps the strongest version of essentialism: the one that re-affirms stereotypes like Islam as stasis versus Europe as change, Islam as tradition versus Europe as modernity, and ultimately shares the politically conservative view of Islamophobes—i.e. that when cultures mix, a violent act against their essence is taking place. Second, the insularity of cultures across time and space, or the lack of continuity in terms of relationality between cultures, eventually neutralizes the ability of post-historicist analytics to account for the Other. Its singularizing logic is totally exclusive: “ultimately, it will act even in the absence of others as such.”¹⁴

It is exactly this absence of others as such that raises further ethical dilemmas with regards to the singularizing logic. Take for instance Saba Mahmood’s *The Politics of Piety*,¹⁵ an analysis of Islamic revivalism through the ethnography of a women’s piety movement in the mosques of Cairo. Following Asad’s theoretical thread, Mahmood challenges the normative liberal assumption that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom, that they all seek autonomy, and that agency is the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the constraints of tradition, custom, or transcendental will. Mahmood argues that in the case of the women she studied acts of subordination have a different meaning. These subjects are found to cultivate docility, piety, and the submission to an external authority—that is Islamic precepts—as a form of practice of ‘positive ethics’ in order to achieve the self’s potentiality. She maintains that the fundamental distinction between the subject’s real desires and the social conventions in progressive political thought is deeply problematic in the case of Islam because these socially prescribed norms constitute the conditions for the emergence of the self (as a pious subject) and are essential to its realization.¹⁶ In a nutshell, the distinction between desire and social norms is indistinct in non-liberal cultures, like the Islamic ones. Mahmood points out the theoretical failure to think historically about the applicability of its norms on the ‘Other’ in order to understand forms of agency that are not created by the desire of autonomy. In that sense, she considers autonomy as Eurocentric, which makes it cross-culturally untranslatable, and redefines agency as the way in which one inhabits and practices a culture’s norms.

As I have shown elsewhere,¹⁷ by defining autonomy as Eurocentric and specific to the Western subject only, Mahmood reduces subjectivity—or political agency—to the eternally reiterated, unreflective, embodied experience of one’s culture. What stems from Mahmood’s argument is not only that subjectivities are cultural or discursive products, or that agency is more diverse than acknowledged in theories of resistance, but that there are (pre)determined, fixed subjectivities specific to particular cultures, which is a typically essentialist understanding of culture: on the one side of the fence, the Western female subject is constituted around the questioning and subversion of prescribed norms whilst on the other,

¹⁴ Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial*, xii.

¹⁵ Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁷ Rosa Vasilaki, “Between Postcolonialism and Radical Historicism: the Contested Muslim Political Subject,” in *Postcolonialism and Islam: Theory, Literature, Culture, Society and Film*, G. Nash, K. Kerr-Koch and S. Hackett, eds. (London: Routledge, 2013), 65-75; and Rosa Vasilaki, “The Politics of Postsecular Feminist Agency,” *Theory, Culture and Society* (forthcoming, 2015).

the Muslim female subject is fulfilled by docile embodiment of religious norms. Philosophically, the representation of the Other's agency as the incarnation of the normalcy of a given culture is, at the end of the day, antithetical to poststructuralist ethics and their radical openness to otherness. As Waggoner argues, "reducing ethics to the embodiment of a culture's norms and by equating it with the status-quo of a culture's traditions, ethical embodiment stands in opposition to an ethics that takes seriously the role of the other. In fact, it entirely excludes consideration of the other."¹⁸

In both cases, Asad's post-historicist philosophy of history and Mahmood's subjectivity beyond autonomy, the logic of singularization and non-relationality works in a way that is exclusionary, impermeable, and rather essentialist. From this perspective, sketching a post-deconstructive subject around the concept of the singular does not necessarily leave us with a subject radically open to the Other, who seems trapped in his/her singularity. It is not necessarily conducive to ethical openness to alterity, but to its negation too, to ethical closure. In conclusion, Chowdhury's *Post-deconstructive Subjectivity and History* is an important book, albeit the reservations raised about the logic of singularity discussed above. Chowdhury creates the conceptual space for such questions to be debated and he genuinely seeks to open-up the space for a new, post-deconstructive, post-sovereign, and post-Western subject to emerge.

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¹⁸ Matt Waggoner, "Irony, Embodiment, and the 'Critical Attitude': Engaging Saba Mahmood's Critique of Secular Morality," *Culture and Religion*, 6(2) [2005]: 258-259.

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