

# Political Society and Its Discontents

## Translating Passive Revolution in India and South Africa Today

GILLIAN HART

For all their evident differences, what makes contemporary India and South Africa together so compelling is the coincidence of neo-liberal forms of capitalism generating intense inequality and “surplus” populations, liberal and popular expressions of democracy, and amplifying nationalisms—all entangled with gender power, and shot through with race (South Africa), caste and communalism (India). Partha Chatterjee’s concepts of political and civil society, and his claims about a new phase of passive revolution, seem to provide a neat ready-made comparative frame and have significant appeal in South Africa today. Yet this schema provides no resources for coming to grips with Hindutva, or with proliferating articulations of nationalism in South Africa. This article focuses on the concept of passive revolution, and suggests how substantially different understandings and translations of passive revolution might enable mutually illuminating comparative understandings.

The end of the Cold War and the global triumph of free market capitalism and liberal democracy marked a major turning point in both India and South Africa. This was the moment when the parties of liberation in both countries ushered in neo-liberal forms of capitalism; when subaltern groups and classes, long subjected to extreme forms of caste (India) and race (South Africa) oppression, wrested a degree of formal political power and recognition; and when intensifying—albeit varied—expressions of nationalism erupted in both India and South Africa.

Yet these superficially similar forces have played out in distinctively different ways, as the results of national elections announced in May 2014 made clear. Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) roared to victory in India, running roughshod over the once mighty Indian National Congress, and raising the prospect of a fascist state with a substantial parliamentary majority in the world’s largest democracy. South Africa’s African National Congress (ANC) managed to hold on to its electoral dominance despite growing challenges—most notably from Julius Malema and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), deploying a pugnacious populist politics. Of great importance is the question of how we understand the seismic changes going on in both countries, especially the forces driving fascist and populist politics.

By far the most influential conceptual import from India in South Africa today is Partha Chatterjee’s (2004, 2008a,b, 2011, 2012a,b,c) distinction between civil society and political society—a distinction, he argues, that applies not only in India but most of the rest of the postcolonial world. For Chatterjee, “civil society” refers primarily to the urban middle classes as “the sphere that seeks to be congruent with the normative models of bourgeois civil society and represents the domain of capitalist hegemony” (2008a: 57). “Political society” is comprised of large sections of the rural population and the urban poor, who “make their claims on government, and in turn are governed, not within the framework of stable constitutionally defined rights and laws, but rather through temporary, contextual and unstable arrangements arrived at through direct political negotiations” (2008a: 57).

What ties civil society to political society for Chatterjee is the imperative for reversing the effects of widespread dispossession in the era of neo-liberal capitalism. Once the bourgeoisie recognises this logic

as a necessary political condition for the continued rapid growth of corporate capital, the state, with its mechanisms of electoral democracy,

Gillian Hart ([hart@berkeley.edu](mailto:hart@berkeley.edu)) is with the Department of Geography, University of California, Berkeley and is a visiting professor, Centre for Indian Studies in Africa, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

becomes the field for the political negotiation of demands for the transfer of resources from the accumulation economy to governmental programs aimed at providing the livelihood needs of the poor and marginalised (Chatterjee 2008a: 61–62).

This analysis has huge intuitive appeal in South Africa today. Most immediately, the civil/political society framework maps very easily onto partially de-racialised glitzy malls and gated communities of the new South Africa on the one hand and the sprawling shack settlements and impoverished rural regions on the other. Many find powerfully compelling as well the claim about a split in the field of “the political,” along with the notion of political society as embodying distinctively non-Western and non-liberal expressions of democracy. Also, as in India, there was a marked shift towards “pro-poor” forms of governmental intervention in the early 2000s in South Africa. Chatterjee’s schema has of course provoked intense debates and critiques in India—some of which are echoed in recent work on South Africa.<sup>1</sup> It is also the case that Chatterjee has absorbed an array of criticisms, and has shifted and reworked his categories to some extent. A significant but neglected element in these debates is that, in responding to his critics, Chatterjee has consistently reiterated that political society represents a new phase of passive revolution in India.

My own discontent with Chatterjee’s schema of civil/political society and passive revolution is twofold. Notions of political society as a separate sphere capable of containing mutinous popular energies and civil society as the sphere of bourgeois hegemony fail to capture key dynamics in South Africa today, as I will argue more fully below. More broadly, this schema provides no resources for coming to grips with resurgent nationalisms in both India and South Africa since the 1990s, and their entanglements with neo-liberal forms of capitalism and expressions of popular democracy. Drawing on my book *Rethinking the South Africa Crisis: Nationalism, Populism, Hegemony* (2013), the central argument of this essay is that Gramsci’s concept of passive revolution provides a potentially powerful set of analytical tools, but realising this potential requires substantially different interpretations, translations and reworkings of the concepts of passive revolution from those that Chatterjee deploys.

### Critiques of Political Society

Let me start with a brief summary of debates over political society. A central claim in *The Politics of the Governed* is how the politics spawned by governmentality in political society “can create conditions not for a contraction but rather an expansion of democratic political participation” (Chatterjee 2004: 76). What many find so compelling about this claim is that Chatterjee’s conception of political society is neither backward nor traditional—rather, it holds out the possibility of a realm of distinctively modern forms of democratic politics outside and beyond “Western” bourgeois liberal democracy. In addition, Chatterjee deploys Foucault’s concept of governmentality not just as a depoliticised set of technologies of rule (as do many of Foucault’s interpreters), but in terms of ongoing contestation.

In a second formulation entitled “Democracy and Economic Transformation in India” (2008a), Chatterjee attends more directly to the dynamics of rapid capital accumulation unleashed by the liberalisation of the Indian economy since the early 1990s and the spectacular rise of a corporate capitalist class. Invoking Kalyan Sanyal’s *Rethinking Capitalist Development* (2007), Chatterjee calls attention to escalating so-called primitive accumulation through which large numbers of peasants, craftspeople and petty manufacturers are being dispossessed of land and other means of production.<sup>2</sup> He also points to increasingly capital-intensive and technology-dependent forms of production, which mean that “victims of primitive accumulation are completely unlikely to be absorbed into the new capitalist sectors of growth” (2008a: 55) and will continue to be marginalised and rendered surplus to the needs of capital. Hence his argument that “electoral democracy makes it unacceptable for the government to leave the marginalised groups without the means of labour and to fend for themselves, since this carries the risk of turning them into the ‘dangerous classes’” (2008a: 53). Hence also the imperative for reversing the effects of primitive accumulation:

[T]he bulk of the population in India lives outside the orderly zones of proper civil society. It is in political society that they have to be fed and clothed and given work, if only to ensure the long-term and relatively peaceful well-being of civil society. That is the difficult and innovative process of politics on which the future of passive revolution under conditions of democracy depends (2008a: 62).

Chatterjee’s invocation of Gramsci’s concept of passive revolution (or, more specifically, his claim that civil and political society represent a new phase of passive revolution in India) has been a major theme in his responses to his critics—to an outline of whose arguments we now turn.<sup>3</sup>

First, many critics have taken Chatterjee to task for the rigidly dualistic structure of his analysis, pointing to how these categories break down in practice.<sup>4</sup> Baviskar and Sundar also maintain that this structure “inverts what is actually the case: members of civil society break laws with impunity and demand that rules be waived, whereas members of political society strive to become legal and gain recognition and entitlements through the state” (2008: 88). Nivedita Menon notes as well that civil/political society operate as problematic spatial metaphors, and suggests instead that they be understood as distinctive modes of political engagement (Menon 2010).

A second set of critiques calls attention to what Chatterjee excludes from “political society”—most notably the militant Naxalite movement that has been the target of considerable state repression. Chatterjee defines what he calls “marginal groups” such as Adivasis (so-called tribal groups) as constituting “an outside beyond the boundaries of political society” (2008a: 61). Mihir Shah objects strenuously to this move, noting that “Adivasis are at the heart of some of the most significant political movements of our time...[including] the Naxalite movement, militancy in the north-east, the Narmada-Andolan and the more recent battles against corporate take-over of land” (2008: 79). Another crucial exclusion is the resurgence of violent anti-Muslim right-wing Hindu

nationalism (Hindutva) since the early 1990s, discussed more fully below.

Third, Baviskar and Sundar (2008: 87) among others point to his neglect of how struggles by subaltern groups and classes have driven key shifts in policy, noting that strategies to “reverse the effects of primitive accumulation” owe as much to the capacity of subaltern groups to wage sustained campaigns as to the prescience of the ruling class. A fourth thread running through many critiques is Chatterjee’s remarkably reductionist understanding of class that neglects its intermeshing with other axes of power—caste, communalism, and gender and sexuality.

In responding to some of his critics in *Lineages of Political Society* (2011), Chatterjee concedes that political society “tends to be a masculine space” with a “dark underside of violence” (2011: 20). He acknowledges as well the limits of understanding civil and political society as empirical spaces sharply distinguished from one another, and the potential usefulness of thinking in terms of “styles of political engagement” (Menon 2010) or “interlocking political practices that are arranged along a continuum” (Corbridge et al 2005). Yet, as Nigam (2012) points out, Chatterjee’s response takes features like violence and patriarchy simply as add-ons, and fails to confront the mutually constitutive relations between civil and political society understood in these terms.

Another set of responses and partial concessions to (unnamed) critics is contained in Chatterjee’s 2012 article “After Subaltern Studies,” in which he draws a distinction between two aspects of mass politics in contemporary India: “one that involves a contest over sovereignty with the Indian state and the other that makes claims on governmental authorities over services and benefits” (2012a: 47). Pointing to insurgent movements in Kashmir and the Naxalite movement, Chatterjee concedes that “there are indeed territories and peoples in India that may be described as challenging the Indian state’s sovereignty over them” (Chatterjee 2012a: 47)—and argues that the framework of early Subaltern Studies with its focus on peasant insurgency may still apply in these “relatively marginalised zones.” But, he goes on to insist, “the common techniques of mass agitation in India today—road blocks, disruption of train services, destruction of property, setting fire to vehicles, attacking government officials or the police” are far more usefully understood in terms of political society than the old Subaltern Studies frame of peasant insurgency.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, as Nigam (2012) makes clear, Chatterjee refuses to see the vast majority of popular protests and uprisings in India today as anything but ephemeral—including the Nandigram revolt in 2007, when 14 peasant protestors were killed in clashes with police while opposing expropriation of their land for a special economic zone. While Chatterjee reasserts his focus is on “the everyday,” Nigam insists that “Chatterjee’s notion of “the everyday” is that of a given, a static notion where negotiations take place only within a given configuration of power and provides no scope for thinking of mass actions and uprisings as moments of negotiating the terms of power and the content of that everyday.” Thus for Chatterjee,

“the popular is always and only oriented to governmental welfare, seeking simply as it were, a place under the sun” (Nigam 2012). This insightful critique points to the inherently static—if not homeostatic—character of Chatterjee’s analysis. Baviskar and Sundar put it concisely: “Categories such as civil society and political society fail to capture the character of domination in India today, thereby missing the brutality and desperation and, despite these, the inherent dynamism and hope that still persists” (2008: 89).

Chatterjee’s categories also fail to capture the forces that swept Modi and the BJP into power. With big capital at its back, the new regime is moving with extraordinary speed to enable intensified dispossession, dismantle labour, land and environmental protections, and dilute social programmes. It would seem that the Modi regime is not only unable to recognise the imperative for reversing the effects of dispossession, but is hell-bent on accelerating it as swiftly as possible. At the same time, the regime is taking very seriously the rewriting of history in order to reconfigure understandings of the nation, and creating conditions in which opposition to its projects can be defined as anti-national.

The Moditva moment underscores an astonishing limitation of Chatterjee’s civil/political society schema—namely, its neglect of nationalism(s). On the face of it, failure to attend to the resurgence of Hindutva in the era of neo-liberal capitalism is all the more surprising, because Chatterjee is widely seen as the pre-eminent theorist of Indian nationalism (1986, 1993). Nivedita Menon provides a key insight into this lacuna in her “Introduction” to *Empire and Nation* (Menon 2010), a collection of Chatterjee’s essays. In an essay, originally delivered as a speech in 2000 to which Menon draws attention, Chatterjee talks about how one response by the governing classes in India to pressures from below has been that of “walling in the protected zones of bourgeois civil society, and dispensing the governmental functions of law and order and welfare through the ‘natural leaders’ of the governed populations” (2010: 196).<sup>6</sup> This was, Chatterjee argues, the response of the industrial and financial elite in Bombay to the rise of the Shiv Sena, “the most overtly fascist element in the Hindu right-wing formation” (2010: 196). There is, he says, a more desirable alternative:

The other response is less cynical, even as it is more pragmatic. It does not abandon the project of enlightenment, but attempts to steer it through the thicket of contestations in what I have called *political society*. It takes seriously the functions of direction and leadership of a vanguard, but accepts that the legal arm of the state in a country like India cannot reach into a vast range of social practices that continue to be regulated by other beliefs and administered by other authorities. However, it also knows that those dark zones are being penetrated by the welfare functions of modern governmental practices, producing those effects on claims and representation that I have called the urge for democratization. This is the zone in which the project of democratic modernity has to operate – slowly, painfully, unsurely (Chatterjee 2010: 197; emphasis in original).

This key passage sheds light on why Chatterjee pays so little explicit attention to Hindutva. It appears that he is positing the governmentalisation of “political society” as the preferable alternative to Hindutva. It also suggests that political society

for Chatterjee is as much a prescriptive as an analytical category. “Chatterjee’s addressee appears to be ‘civil society,’” Menon points out; “he seems to be advising it on how it ought to conduct itself—‘taking seriously the functions of direction and leadership of a vanguard’—much as Machiavelli addresses his prince” (Menon 2010: 13).<sup>7</sup>

Chatterjee’s interpretation and deployment of Gramsci’s concept of passive revolution is also important to understanding how and why nationalisms fall out of sight in the political society schema, as we shall now see. In the remainder of this essay, I suggest how a very different set of understandings and translations of passive revolution offers analytical tools for coming to grips with the intertwining of neo-liberal forms of capitalism, new expressions of democracy, and proliferating nationalisms in South Africa today—and might also provide a useful comparative frame.

### Translations and (Re)iterations of Passive Revolution

[P]assive revolution is a category used in [Gramsci’s] *Prison Notebooks* in order to denote the persistent capacity ... of the bourgeoisie which succeeds, even in the historical phase in which it has ceased to be a properly revolutionary class, to produce socio-political transformations, sometimes of significance, conserving in its own hands power, initiative and hegemony, and leaving the working class in their condition of subalternity (Losurdo 1997).<sup>8</sup>

[P]assive revolution is the general form of the transition from colonial to post-colonial national states in the 20th century (Chatterjee 1986: 50; emphasis in original).

In developing his concepts of civil and political society, Chatterjee is quite explicit that he is taking some distance from Gramsci:

When I use that term [political society], I am always reminded that in the *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci begins by equating political society with the state, but soon slides into a whole range of social and cultural interventions that must take place well beyond the domain of the state (2004: 50–51).

Although Chatterjee discards Gramsci’s concepts of civil/political society (and hence also his theory of the state), he deploys the term hegemony but restricts it to what he calls civil society, while consigning governmentality to political society. Ironically he justifies this division by invoking another Gramscian concept—passive revolution.

Going back to his earlier work on nationalism, Chatterjee has long asserted that Gramsci treats passive revolution as a blocked dialectic, “or an exception to the paradigmatic form of bourgeois revolution that he [Gramsci] takes to be Jacobinism” (1993: 212). Moving from general claims about the discursive limits of anti- and postcolonial nationalisms in *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (1986), Chatterjee constructs a more specific account of India’s passive revolution and post-colonial nationalism in the Nehru era in *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993: 211–14).<sup>9</sup> In both instances, passive revolution serves to distinguish India (and the “non-West”) from a classical model of Western capitalist hegemony.

Although *The Politics of the Governed* (2004) makes no mention of passive revolution, since 2008 Chatterjee has insisted that the imperative of reversing the effects of primitive

accumulation generates a distinctively non-Western logic that “serves to integrate civil and political society into a new structure of the passive revolution” (2008a: 57; emphasis added). In each of his responses to his critics, as well as in his extensions of political society, Chatterjee reiterates the existence of a new phase of passive revolution as well as a sharp distinction between passive revolution outside “the West” and an ideal-type of “classical” Western bourgeois hegemony. In *Lineages of Political Society* for example, we are told that “Political forms such as passive revolution...become relevant only in contexts that can be distinguished in some meaningful way from bourgeois hegemony” (Chatterjee 2011: 138); and in response to his critics in the Gudavarthy volume that “Ruling class formation continues to be a dominance without hegemony and retains the character of a passive revolution” (Chatterjee 2012c: 307).

To appreciate why this assertion is so important to Chatterjee’s analysis, one has to recognise an implicit debate with Kalyan Sanyal (2007), on whose work he draws very heavily. Chatterjee acknowledges that his claims about the imperatives of reversing the effects of primitive accumulation come directly from Sanyal. He does not, however, engage directly with Sanyal’s stringent critique of his (Chatterjee’s) appropriation of passive revolution in his work on nationalism. What is so problematic about the concept of passive revolution, Sanyal maintained, is that it represents merely a roundabout way of arriving at the ultimate destination of full-blown capitalist transition and bourgeois hegemony. Accordingly, he insisted on breaking with what he sees as the teleological historicism that marks the Gramscian concept of passive revolution in order to produce a more satisfactory analysis of postcolonial capital.<sup>10</sup>

By asserting a new phase of passive revolution, Chatterjee is thus contradicting some parts of Sanyal’s analysis while simultaneously borrowing others. Part of the novelty that distinguishes Chatterjee’s second phase of passive revolution from the first is that postcolonial nationalism drops out of the picture, and is replaced by efforts to reverse the effects of primitive accumulation. At the same time, this construct enables him to bolster the dualistic structure of the argument and establish continuity with earlier formulations of elite/subaltern domains. The costs of this analytical coherence are, however, considerable—for all the reasons outlined in the previous discussion, including the incapacity to come to grips with Hindutva. Contrary to Sanyal, I suggest that passive revolution “does” offer a potentially powerful analytical framework—but this requires very different readings of Gramsci from those of both Sanyal and Chatterjee, as well as different ways of translating and extending Gramsci’s concepts.

**Rereading Passive Revolution:** Both Sanyal and Chatterjee subscribe to a reading of Gramsci as a Western Marxist, in which “the East” (the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union) and “the West” (Western Europe) figure as abstract ideal-types that stand in sharp juxtaposition to one another: the East in this view is characterised by coercion and the domination of the state over civil society, whereas in the West, consent and hegemony are culturally rooted in civil society which has

preponderance over the state. While in the East it was possible to overthrow the state by a frontal attack (war of manoeuvre), revolutionary strategy in the West requires a protracted war of position (or attrition) fought in the trenches of civil society. This dualistic reading informs the distinction between full-blown Western capitalist hegemony and “non-Western” passive revolution, whether as a relatively permanent condition (Chatterjee) or a deviation en route to full hegemony (Sanyal). In “The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci,” a hugely influential essay written at the height of Eurocommunism in the 1970s, Perry Anderson (1976) launched a searing critique of reformist and Eurocommunist appropriations of Gramsci—while also alleging that the slippages and ambiguities in Gramsci’s prison writings lent themselves to such appropriations. Despite recognising Gramsci’s role as a revolutionary and participant in the Third Comintern, Anderson ended up confirming Gramsci as a fundamentally Western theorist, and reinforcing dualistic readings that have dominated Anglophone understandings.

Recent years have seen a new round of Gramsci scholarship grounded in close, contextualised readings of the *Prison Notebooks* in their entirety that challenges dominant interpretations in the Anglophone literature. A key text is Peter Thomas’s *The Gramscian Moment* (2009), which builds on an extensive body of Italian and German scholarship as well as a growing appreciation of Gramsci’s theories of language and translation. In challenging Anderson and others, Thomas shows how, far from working with abstracted categories of “East” and “West,” Gramsci was drawing on insights from his experiences of post-revolutionary Russia in the early 1920s to reconstruct understandings of bourgeois class rule in Europe.<sup>11</sup> For Gramsci, “West and East are comparable, just as variations, in the West itself, because both participate in the dynamic of an expansive political and economic order that is fundamentally and essentially internationalist in character” (Thomas 2009: 203).

In addition, far from Jacobinism as the paradigmatic form of bourgeois revolution in the West to which Italy’s passive revolution was the exception, Gramsci came to see France in the first part of the 19th century as “the exception to which all other European states are the rule” (Thomas 2009: 202). The defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871 and the rise of imperialism ushered in a new era of passive revolution in France and elsewhere in Europe. Passive revolution was also central to Gramsci’s analysis of fascism in the period following World War I and the Russian Revolution. More generally, passive revolution for Gramsci was a dynamic, spatio-historical, comparative and distinctively non-teleological concept that he used to reconstruct European history from the French to the Russian revolutions, and beyond. In the process, the concept of passive revolution came to encompass bourgeois hegemony and its limits—namely “the structural inability of the bourgeois political project (particularly in the ‘West,’ but also internationally) to realise fully the potentials of this new political practice and theory” that was taking shape in Russia in the early 1920s (Thomas 2013: 25).

Central to this extended concept of passive revolution is Gramsci’s analysis of the integral state in terms of political and

civil society. Gramsci did indeed use the term “State” both in its integral sense (to denote the unity of civil society and political society) and to refer to political society (or the state in its narrower sense), but this was not the result of confusion or evasion as Anderson (1976) asserts and Chatterjee (2004) implies. It was instead “an attempt to specify that the identity-distinction between civil society and political society occurs under the hegemony of the state. It resulted not in the blurring of the boundaries of the state, but in a clearer delineation of the specific efficacy of the bourgeois state as both a social and political relation” (Thomas 2009: 191). Hence, the bourgeois state will remain the “truth” of civil society until subaltern classes become aware of their own capacity for self-organisation and self-regulation (Thomas 2009: 191). For Gramsci this was not just a matter of counter-hegemony—a term that for good reasons he never used—but an alternative proletarian hegemony that he envisaged as ongoing collective processes through which subaltern groups and classes come to develop more coherent, critical understandings and revolutionary practices (what he called “philosophy of praxis”) capable of transforming the conditions of subalternity. Far from a hierarchical political party, the modern Prince “represented the mythical form that aimed to call into being a coalition of rebellious subalterns engaged in...unlearning the habits of subalternity and discovering new forms of conviviality, mutuality and collective self-determination” (Thomas 2013: 33) crucial to which are language and translation.

This alternative understanding carries significant political as well as analytical stakes—most immediately that efforts to constitute an alternative hegemony have to be grounded in understanding the contradictions of passive revolution, broadly conceived as bourgeois hegemony. Part of what is so problematic and limiting about notions of passive revolution as a blocked dialectic, or domination without hegemony—or, for that matter, civil/political society à la Chatterjee—is that by presuming that a prescient bourgeoisie has everything is locked in place, they divert attention from the slippages, openings and contradictions of historically specific (but always globally interconnected) forms of bourgeois hegemony that are crucial to challenging and transforming the conditions of subalternity.

### Translating Passive Revolution in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Let me turn now to the question of translation. Peter Thomas’s close philological reading provides a much deeper understanding than has been available in the Anglophone literature, but does not adequately engage the question of what it would mean to translate Gramsci in relation to the challenges of the present conjuncture, and to regions beyond Euro-America. Rather than mechanically “applying” a concept such as passive revolution (or going to the other extreme and evacuating its original meaning), translation requires careful attention to the spatio-historical contexts from which concepts emerged; to the dialectical, dynamic and praxis-based character of Gramsci’s analysis; and to revising and reworking such concepts in relation to different spatio-historical

conjunctures in ways that entail working against and beyond, as well as with Gramsci.<sup>12</sup>

On the face of it, South Africa can be seen as a prime exemplar of official efforts to reverse the effects of primitive accumulation and manage populations rendered surplus to the needs of capital. Moreover, the shift to far more interventionist “pro-poor” policies in 2003–04 coincided with those in India following the defeat of the BJP and the formation of the Indian National Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in 2004. In a statement eerily reminiscent of political society, former President Thabo Mbeki announced the existence of a first and second economy in South Africa at a press conference following a cabinet *lekgotla* (policy consultation) in July 2003:

Now, this is, as it were, the modern part of South Africa, with your aeroplanes and your computers and the people sitting around this room, who read and write and so on. We, all of us, we are this modern sector... So, you then have this large part of South Africa, which is relatively uneducated. It is unskilled. *It is not required in terms of modern society.* I am saying ‘required’ in the sense of employability. So, we have recognised this from the beginning, that large numbers of our people are poor and are in this condition. You can make the interventions we make about modernisation of the economy and so on, but it wouldn’t necessarily have an impact on them, because of that degree of marginalisation. Therefore, you needed to make different sorts of intervention (Mbeki 2003; emphasis added).

This was, in fact, a significant turning point in the post-apartheid order, when the fierce fiscal austerity of the first phase of neo-liberal economic policies gave way to a far more overtly “pro-poor” official stance, as part of an effort to contain rising popular discontent since the late 1990s. Such discontent initially found expression in an array of feisty “new social movements” that erupted in the early 2000s, sharply opposing the ANC’s embrace of orthodox neoliberal economic policies and severely embarrassing the ruling bloc (Hart 2013). In addition to an immediate crackdown on several of these movements, from 2004, the Mbeki regime started channelling significantly more resources from national coffers into social grants as well as to municipal indigence projects run by local governments—policies that the Zuma faction of the ANC continued after they ousted Mbeki in late 2008.

Going back to Mbeki’s statement, what is striking are the parallels between his invocation of a first/second economy and Chatterjee’s civil/political society in terms both of their dualistic analytical frameworks, and their deployments of these frameworks as efforts to contain popular discontent. The key point, however, is that it is one thing to specify an official project of containment, and quite another to presume that it is accomplished in practice. In fact, what we have witnessed in South Africa since the early 2000s are (1) multiple, proliferating expressions of popular discontent that far exceed the organisational capacity of the first round of new social movements, that have largely imploded; (2) intensifying official efforts to manage poverty, rising expenditure at all levels of government, and amplifying “pro-poor” and developmental rhetoric in the face of shrinking employment and extreme inequality; (3) growing tensions within and between the ANC and its

alliance partners the SACP (South African Communist Party) and COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions); and (4) the ramping up of populist politics that has gone hand in hand with intensified invocations and articulations of nationalism, as well as increasingly authoritarian tendencies.

In *Rethinking the South African Crisis* (2013), I attempt to elucidate these contradictory dynamics in relation to one another. One core argument is that since the early 2000s, local government in South Africa has become the key site of contradictions. Drawing on an array of evidence, including in-depth ethnographic research in two communities in KwaZulu-Natal where I have been working since 1994, I focus on the complex circuits through which official efforts to set in place “pro-poor” measures are inflaming the popular anger they were designed to contain. More broadly, I show how local government has become the impossible terrain of official efforts to manage poverty and deprivation in a racially-inflected capitalist society, marked by massive inequalities and increasingly precarious livelihoods for the large majority of the population.

I suggest as well that the practices, struggles, and contradictions so powerfully evident in the realms of everyday life at the level of local government are both shaped by and feed into simultaneous processes of re-nationalisation and de-nationalisation. When the parties of liberation were unbanned in early 1990, the South African nation did not exist. It had to be conjured into existence from the rubble of a brutal history. Re-nationalisation refers to efforts to produce a new nation. The redemptive, ecclesiastical rhetoric of “the rainbow nation,” and the towering moral authority of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, represent one dimension—but there are others, as we shall see below.

At that same moment, powerful South African conglomerates were straining to break away from the confines of the national economy and to reconnect with the increasingly financialised global economy from which they had been partially excluded during the 1980s by sanctions, exchange controls, and the heightening crisis of the apartheid state. De-nationalisation directs attention to the highly advantageous terms that heavily concentrated South African corporate capital negotiated with key figures in the ANC; how these conglomerates restructured and de-nationalised their operations; massive and escalating capital flight; the formation of a small but powerful closely allied black capitalist class; ongoing corporate influence over ANC government policy; and the multiple ways these forces have intensified the brutal inequalities and the degradation of livelihoods of a large proportion of the black South African population.

The concept of de-nationalisation calls attention to the historically specific character of capital accumulation in South Africa—its grounding in what has been called the Minerals Energy Complex, and that it has always taken place on a terrain deeply marked by racialised dispossession and racial oppression. De-nationalisation includes the extremely conservative package of neo-liberal economic policies set in place in 1996 but also precedes and extends beyond it, providing a fuller understanding of the forces generating race/class inequality than

that provided by neo-liberalism per se. It does not, however, provide a sufficient basis for understanding contemporary political dynamics.

For this we need to focus on issues of nationalism and hegemony, and the multiple practices and processes of re-nationalisation. The erosion of ANC hegemony—along with proliferating populist politics, including the rise of the EFF—are most usefully understood in terms of how de-nationalisation and re-nationalisation are playing out in relation to one another in increasingly conflictual ways.

### The ‘Nation’ and ‘Liberation’

By far the most important dimensions of post-apartheid re-nationalisation projects are embodied in the keywords of the ANC alliance: the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) and the “national question.” The NDR makes clear that re-nationalisation is not a separate “political” process. Instead it makes the case for accommodation to the inequalities of post-apartheid capitalism as a transitory phenomenon, to be superseded by an ever-receding second, socialist phase. Within the ANC alliance, the NDR has become a site of increasingly vociferous contestation. It also functions as a whip with which to discipline those who step out of line.

Understandings of the national question are distinctively different from the NDR. They were forged in the context of fierce debates over race, class and nationalism in the early 20th century, further elaborated during the anti-apartheid struggle, and reworked in the transition. The national question continues to have deep popular resonance, and for many South Africans is embodied in the ANC’s 1955 Freedom Charter.<sup>13</sup> Official expressions of “the nation” and “liberation” and invocations of the Freedom Charter are not just cynical manipulations from above. They carry powerful moral weight and connect with specific histories, memories, and experiences of racial oppression, racialised dispossession, and struggles against apartheid.

Because official articulations of nationalism tap into these popular understandings of freedom, justice, and liberation from racial oppression, they are crucial to the ANC’s hegemonic project. At the same time, because nationalist calls are linked to redress for the wrongs of the past and visions of a new nation, they are vulnerable to counter-claims of betrayal—a vulnerability that is intensified by the fallout from processes of de-nationalisation. Many of the struggles over the material conditions of life and livelihood that erupt in local arenas are simultaneously struggles over the meanings of the nation and liberation—now often rooted in a profound sense of betrayal by the leadership of the moment, despite continuing adherence by many to a transcendental conception of the ANC.

This framework also sheds light on the xenophobic violence that has marked the post-apartheid era. Another key dimension of re-nationalisation has been the ANC government’s continuing use and adaptation of harsh late apartheid-era anti-immigration legislation for the control, exclusion and expulsion of “aliens,” producing what some have called “Fortress South Africa.” This rebounding of the nation, along with popular vigilantism,

abuses by police, and brutal detention of “foreign nationals” deemed illegal have ramped up and fed into xenophobia in conditions of ongoing degradation of livelihoods.

More generally, the capacity of the ruling bloc in the ANC to tap into deep veins of popular understandings of “the nation” and “liberation” is both the linchpin of its hegemonic power and, at the same time, a source of growing instability. In *Rethinking the South African Crisis*, I show how these contradictory imperatives of de-nationalisation and re-nationalisation, operating in relation to one another, have played into the erosion of ANC hegemony, and have also driven the amplification and proliferation of populist politics since the early 2000s. In addition, I argue that the dialectical relations of de-nationalisation and re-nationalisation define the contours of post-apartheid South Africa’s passive revolution. In a nutshell, capital, along with the middle classes in South Africa more generally, need the ANC to keep the lid on things—which it tries to do with re-nationalisation, as well as an array of “pro-poor” policies. Yet simultaneous processes of de-nationalisation are rendering this project increasingly difficult, as evidenced by recent and unprecedented challenges from the left.

These challenges are focused most immediately on the ANC alliance’s collaboration with corporate capital, enduring deprivation in the face of extreme concentrations of wealth, and spectacular official corruption—but they also invoke articulations of the nation and liberation. The formation of the EFF party was a direct response to the horrendous massacre of striking miners by police and paramilitary units at the Lonmin platinum mine in Marikana in August 2012. The EFF’s demands for nationalisation of the mines, appropriation without compensation of white-owned land, and greater state involvement in the economy are laced through with re-articulations of nationalism in terms of race, nature, and an intensely masculinist militarism.<sup>14</sup> They also embody claims about betrayal of the Freedom Charter, and a vanguardist politics not that different from their archenemies in the South African Communist Party, as Noor Niefagodien (2015) has astutely pointed out.

Challenges to the ANC alliance and its complicity with capital intensified recently when the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), the largest union in the country, was expelled from the COSATU. In alliance with other social movements, NUMSA is engaged in efforts to form a United Front to challenge the ANC alliance. Crucial to this effort will be NUMSA’s capacity to reach beyond the organised, predominantly male working class, as well as its own vanguardist tendencies. Not surprisingly but somewhat ironically, an important plank in NUMSA’s challenge is the ANC’s failure to live up to the Freedom Charter. The irony is that NUMSA’s predecessor and other independent unions in the early 1980s rejected nationalism and were deeply suspicious of politics associated with the Freedom Charter. These invocations from the left of the nation and liberation serve as a sharp reminder of the challenges confronting any left project in South Africa today.<sup>15</sup>

In short, we are witnessing some potentially promising (although still highly ambiguous) new political openings. At the same time, eroding moral authority and the diminishing

capacity of the ruling bloc to manage and contain dissent has gone hand in hand with escalating state-sponsored violence and tendencies to authoritarianism. In addition, the recent resurgence of xenophobic violence unleashed by the Zulu king's statement that "foreign nationals" must pack up and leave his kingdom signals an ominous new manifestation of ethno-nationalism rooted in traditional authority. Taken together, these developments serve as a sharp reminder that "the anger of the poor can go in many directions," as S'bu Zikode, one of the leaders of the Durban shackdwellers' movement, put it some time ago.

This is where Fanon becomes directly relevant. My translation of passive revolution has been deeply influenced by Ato Sekyi-Otu (1996), which enables us to understand Fanon as having stretched and reworked key Gramscian concepts, including passive revolution and philosophy of praxis. In the final chapter of the book, I suggest how this interpretation of Fanon points the way towards denaturalising nationalisms and moving beyond populist "big man" politics in the era of neo-liberal forms of capitalism.

Even though I did not cite them directly, my efforts to translate passive revolution in the context of post-apartheid South Africa were also shaped by several Indian analyses of Hindutva from a Gramscian perspective that I will discuss more fully and in relation to Fanon in future work: Aijaz Ahmad's extraordinary essay "Fascism and National Culture: Reading Gramsci in the Days of Hindutva" (in Ahmad 2000) penned in the immediate aftermath of the destruction of the Babri Masjid in December 1992, and a related piece entitled "On the Ruins of Ayodhya" written a year later; a collection of essays by Himani Bannerji (2011) on nationalism, gender and ideology; and Sumit Sarkar's "Inclusive Democracy and Its Enemies" (2006), originally delivered as a lecture in Johannesburg, that lays out with great clarity the imperative for South Africans to take Hindutva seriously. All three anticipate key themes in recent Gramscian scholarship, and represent powerful and illuminating translations of these concepts. All speak as well to the comparative and conjunctural character of passive revolution.

### Towards a Comparative Frame

From a South African perspective, what makes India so compelling is the richness of intellectual engagements, as well as the striking parallels and divergences since the early 1990s: entanglements of neo-liberal forms of capitalism with what Kaviraj (2010: 224) calls "the delayed but decisive entry of common people into the life of the state" through struggles that intensified in the 1970s–80s, and with proliferating articulations of nationalism. In this essay, I have sought to engage more explicitly with a set of Indian debates that have profoundly influenced my analysis of post-apartheid South Africa, with the purpose of moving towards a more substantive comparative study framed in terms of passive revolution—understood as an inherently comparative, dynamic, and conjunctural concept with the capacity to yield mutually illuminating insights.

The next step is to develop more fully the comparative and conjunctural dimensions of passive revolution through extending a method that in my earlier work I called relational comparison (Hart 2002, 2006). The idea is to bring key forces at play in the two countries into the same frame of analysis—neither as discrete "cases" nor as variants of some universal process—but as connected yet distinctively different nodes in globally interconnected historical geographies. Incorporating an explicitly historical and conjunctural dimension entails situating India and South Africa in relation to one another and to specific global conjunctures not just as recipients of global forces, but also as sites in their production. It focuses in addition on race, ethnicity, gender, and other dimensions of difference (most notably caste and communalism in India) as actively constitutive in formations of class and nationalism, and as crucial to understanding how they play out in relation to one another. By viewing diverse but connected historical geographies in relation to each other, relational/conjunctural comparison has the potential to render taken-for-granted categories peculiar and open to question. It also holds out the possibility of illuminating new connections, claims, and re-articulations that might clarify the limits and contradictions of bourgeois hegemony, as well as openings for political change.

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## NOTES

- 1 Claire Bénit-Gbaffou and Sophie Oldfield, for example, conclude that “Chatterjee’s framework makes it difficult, if not impossible, to understand social and political change” (2011: 451).
  - 2 See Levien (2015) for a useful critique of the concept of primitive accumulation in this context.
  - 3 The first critiques of “Democracy and Economic Transformation in India” by Mihir Shah, by Mary John and Satish Deshpande, and by Amita Baviskar and Nandini Sundar were published in *Economic & Political Weekly* in November 2008, along with a response by Chatterjee (2008b). Other engagements include Nigam (2008); Menon’s introduction to Chatterjee (2010); Mukherjee (2010); and a wide-ranging collection of essays on political society brought together by Gudavarthy including a response by Chatterjee (2012c). In *Lineages of Political Society* (2011) Chatterjee in effect responds to a number of points raised by his critics. For a useful review see Nigam (2012). Some key South African engagements with civil/political society are contained in a special issue of the *Journal of Asian and African Studies* edited by Bénit-Gbaffou and Oldfield (2011).
  - 4 In addition to Baviskar and Sundar, see also Corbridge et al (2005) and Bawa (2011).
  - 5 Chatterjee in fact declares political society as a successor project to Subaltern Studies. For a dissenting view, see Chakrabarty (2013).
  - 6 Originally delivered as the Saadat Hasan Manto Lecture at the Centre for the Study for Developing Societies, Delhi in January 2000 and reprinted as Chapter 11 in Chatterjee (2010: 18–202).
  - 7 For an illuminating discussion of sharply opposed readings of Machiavelli by Croce and Gramsci, see Fontana (1993).
  - 8 Domenico Losurdo (1997) *Antonio Gramsci: dal liberalismo al ‘comunismo critico’*. Rome: Gamberetti (cited by Thomas 2009: 147).
  - 9 This account seems to draw heavily on Kaviraj (1988).
  - 10 See Gidwani and Wainwright (2014) for a critical appreciation of Sanyal (2007).
  - 11 See also Brandist (2012), Frosini (2012) and Thomas (2013).
  - 12 See Morton (2013) and Kipfer and Hart (2013) for a fuller development of this line of argument. Referring to some of the ways Gramsci has been used in Latin America, Bosteels (2014) points out that Thomas’s analysis neglects to acknowledge translations and deployments of Gramsci beyond “the West” that are in fact closely attentive to his theory of the integral state, bourgeois hegemony, and passive revolution such as Coutinho’s (2012 [1999]) work on Brazil. The same is true of India, including the work of Ahmad (2000), Bannerji (2011) and Sarkar (2006) to which I refer later.
  - 13 Quoted in Hart (2013: 38).
  - 14 See Magadla (2014) for an astute analysis.
  - 15 For a useful discussion, see Veriava (2015).
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