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Premonitions of the Past

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A HUNDRED YEARS AGO, on January 9, 1915, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi returned to India after approximately two decades of living and working in South Africa. In 2003, the Government of India designated the day of Gandhi's return as official Pravasi Bharatiya Divas or Overseas Indian Day. The centenary of Gandhi's return was marked at this year's thirteenth annual Pravasi Bharatiya Divas with appropriate official fanfare. The occasion was also observed in a wide variety of public celebrations, including a full-scale reenactment of the disembarkation from on board the S. S. *Arabia* of Gandhi and his wife, Kasturba, at Apollo Bunder in the Bombay Harbor; and with rallies and functions held all across India (see NDTV 2015; *Outlook* 2015; see also Roy 2015).[1] These centenary celebrations follow upon more than a decade-long shift in official Indian policy towards overseas Indians, or, in official parlance, Non-Resident Indians and Persons of Indian Origin (see Amrute 2010; Hercog and Siegel 2013; Upadhya 2013; Varadarajan 2014). The policy, at first, was directed mainly towards attracting the wealthy in such places as the United States and the United Kingdom. Even though it now extends to the much larger labor diaspora, both old and new, settled throughout the regions of the world, the focus remains on the rich, whose investments in India are greatly coveted. The embrace of a diasporic and deterritorialized Indian imaginary—anchored, ironically, in the commemorations of Gandhi as the poster boy for the global peripatetic Indian—is a symptom of the changes in the nation-state's relationship to global capitalism in these times of accelerated globalization.

The scholarship on Gandhi has, to a large extent, followed suit. We have some excellent new work, the focus of which has been on foregrounding a non-national Gandhi, from an emphasis on the diasporic experience of his South African years to the networked world of the Indian Ocean (see, e.g., Devji 2012; Hoffmeyer 2013; Natarajan 2012). It was a part of this work to reconsider his contributions from the expansive frames of the imperial, transnational, and global. Once celebrated as the "Father of the Nation," albeit only after some distortion to his legacy, Gandhi has been recovered for our times as the ancestor of the Global Indian. This shift, of course, registers in part the fact that the nation-state itself, as it was once constituted, seems to have passed its peak: on the one hand, besieged by the forces of neoliberal globalization, inaugurated, at least officially, in India with the structural adjustment program of the International Monetary Fund in 1991; and, on the other, eroded, now some sixty tumultuous years

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[1]The most ambitious tribute to mark the centenary of Gandhi's return, perhaps, is Madhukar Upadhyay's 100-episode series, "Khamoshi Ki Dastaan" or "Chronicles of the Quiet Days," aired from January 9, 2015, on the All India Radio's FM network (see Upadhyay 2015).

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since decolonization, by the fading romance with the nation-state as the *sine qua non* of counter-hegemonic critiques of an imperialist world order. This is, of course, an uneven development: from Kashmir to Tibet to Palestine to the Pacific Islands, passionate nationalisms retain great resonance. I am not referring here to such struggles, but rather to the critical purchase of nations, nationalisms, and the nation-state as default ethical horizons of critique.

The wooing of the twenty-five million–strong Indian diaspora—second, according to Government of India statistics, only to that of the overseas population of Chinese ancestry—and the creation in 2004 of the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs for all diaspora-related services represent the kind of national retooling deemed fit for a globalized neoliberal age. The love affair with the Indian diaspora, of course, is also part and parcel of the ways in which market forces have contributed, along with a flattening of the historical imagination, to the hollowing out of democratic state structures, not least through the rise of a transnational elite that is largely unaccountable to these structures in the states within which it operates. What kind of oppositional futures are possible to imagine against the new class divisions of global capitalism at a moment when, as one scholar puts it, the "only *true* question" is whether global capitalism contains within itself "antagonisms strong enough to prevent its indefinite reproduction" (Zizek 2009, 53)? What order of historical imagination is at stake here? What kinds of anticolonial history can discover, by way of different futures, the seeds of political change?

Even before the onslaught of globalized capitalism on democratic state structures had become fully evident, however, the nation-state ideal of the "Bandung era"—so named after the 1955 Afro-Asian conference in Bandung, Indonesia, held to envision futures of an anticolonial world order—was already in seemingly terminal retreat. The disillusionment with post-independent states and with the national movements of the 1970s has been registered in a wide variety of critical scholarship.[2] The anticolonial framework of "national liberation," which had reached its heyday in the post-1945 era of decolonization, has for some decades now undergone a remarkable reversal of fortune: consigned, in the context of our times, to an anachronism—in effect, to the proverbial dustbin of history.

I have chosen, perhaps, somewhat unfashionably, to reflect precisely on the relevance of this anticolonial past and its possible reorientation, in the wake of our contemporary postnational moment, towards the future. What does it mean, in David Scott's (2014) poignant words, to inherit the anticolonial futures of previous generations as ruins in our present? In the wake of the exhaustion of the nation-state imaginary, what can do the oppositional work of counter-hegemonic critiques of the inequalities of the contemporary world-order? What kinds of anticolonial histories can open up the

[2]For the Bandung moment, see Lee (2010). The elaborate fiftieth and sixtieth anniversary commemorations of the conference, in 2005 and 2015 respectively, might mark a revival of the spirit of the south-south solidarity represented by Bandung, but not necessarily of the nation-state imaginary that underwrote it (see Asian African Conference 2015). For a discussion of the scholarly turn away from the anticolonial nationalist critiques of that grand era of decolonization, 1945–75, and a turn towards a new era of critique, "after Bandung," as it were, see Lazarus (2013); see also Scott (1999).

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present to the past and the future to discover the seeds of progressive political change? These questions, in effect, provoke me to return to the historical conjuncture of Gandhi's return from South Africa when, ironically, an emergent politics of the nation-state and of national independence was beginning to take root in India, in order to demonstrate, to paraphrase Frederic Jameson (2000, 5) from a different context, that we do not need to be antiquarian or nostalgic to appreciate the ways in which that moment is "still alive for us."

To be sure, in the last several years there has been a considerable body of scholarship that has revised our understanding of decolonization: questioning, in effect, the aura of naturalness that long surrounded the transition of empires into a world of nation-states. From the perspective of a long history of the past, and from a history of the world, as we are being reminded, empires have enjoyed a remarkably successful run: not only have empires been one of the most influential political forms for over two millennia, but also the outcome of the reconstruction and collapse of empires has never been predictable (see Burbank and Cooper 2010). So it was for the European colonial empires. The nation-state, in short, was only one of several possible—and certainly never inevitable—outcomes of the collapse of the colonial empires. Furthermore, for much longer than we would like to remember, anticolonial movements, even as their demands threatened to reconstitute the very foundations of existing empires, often identified their political and ethical horizons with the contours of the larger imperial polity. Indeed, as scholars of the French empire are beginning to demonstrate, the substitution of empires with some sort of imperial federalism or confederalism remained a viable political option as late as the 1950s, pursued vigorously by a variety of anticolonial intellectuals as well as actual struggles on the ground (Cooper 2014; Wilder 2015; see also Banerjee 2010; Gorman 2006; Sinha 2011).[3] By the same token, over the last several decades, we have learned not to collapse anticolonialism with nationalism and to pay attention to the range of anticolonial imaginaries—not limited to the aspiration of a nation-state of one's own—that have constituted its long history. The transimperial and international histories of anticolonialism, in all their various permutations, have also been by now so well documented as to warrant little comment (see Manela 2007).[4] Even the more explicitly nationalist aspirations of anticolonial movements, moreover, were more often than not complemented, rather than subverted, by a range of universalisms, both religious and secular, as well as broader civilizational, international, and extraterritorial affiliations.[5] This steady accretion of scholarship, indeed, has begun to loosen the grip of methodological nationalism, which, at least from the 1940s onwards, has dominated the

[3]The idea of alternative futures is also the theme of two joint-conferences organized by King's College London and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (see King's College 2012; University of North Carolina 2014).

[4]For colonial India, see, among others, A. Bose (1971). There has been a recent revival of interest in the international aspect of Indian anticolonialism (see S. Bose 2006; Fischer-Tiné 2007; L. Gandhi 2006; M. Goswami 2012; Manjapra 2014; Ramnath 2011; Raza, Roy, and Zachariah 2015; Sohi 2011; Viswanathan 2004).

[5]For the significance of the "civilizational" and "regional" idea of Asia for anticolonial Indian nationalism, see Aydin (2007), Bayley (2004), Duara (2001), Frost (2010), Prasad (1979), and Stolte and Fischer-Tiné (2012).

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understanding of anticolonialism.[6] It provides us, as such, with what the American historian Van Wyck Brooks (1918) called a "usable past": a longer historical tradition with which to affiliate current postnational forms of opposition to a dominant world order.

While I draw on this revisionist scholarship on anticolonialism to defamiliarize what is otherwise a fairly familiar history of the advent of Gandhi in Indian politics, I do so to make a somewhat different point. The post–First World War moment of Gandhi's return, and the emergence of a nascent nation-statist politics in India, does not translate quite so easily as a usable past in the present. Yet thinking about the contemporary postnational condition in the light of—from the perspective of—what was different and specific to that earlier historical conjuncture does give us the means to ask more refined questions about the present.[7] It is, as such, indeed, that histories of the past can continue to serve as a guide in the present and to the future. The relevance of the post–First World War moment of Indian anticolonial politics does not lie in recovering any easy solutions applicable for the present. Rather, it lies precisely in directing attention to the specificity of its historical conjuncture: the coming together of different forces, conjuncturally, to create the new terrain that called for a different politics—that of the nation-state—to emerge. It is precisely thus that this moment is relevant for thinking about the contemporary conjuncture and the potential for envisioning futures different from the seemingly endless reproduction of neoliberal capitalist globalization, its recent structural problems notwithstanding.

I will highlight three points in my analysis of the post–First World War moment of the inauguration of a nation-state politics in India. First is the importance of attending to what Stuart Hall (1987, 16) calls "the discipline of the conjuncture," where the latter refers to the coming together of the different social, political, economic, and ideological contradictions at play in any given moment to give a period its distinctive shape. Second is the implications of the emergence at this moment of an anticolonial mass subject for new forms of civic—non-identitarian—solidarity. And third is the recognition in the hopes and aspirations of the past of a future constituted in the subjunctive mode of the *not-yet*—that is, not as a future that is deferred but one that is open and hopeful—before ending with some concluding thoughts about their relevance for the present.[8]

What a concrete and conjunctural analysis highlights is precisely the decisive shift that occurred in the political terrain of anticolonial struggle in the post–First World War period. There have, of course, been several critical histories of anticolonial nationalism in India: from those that trace its central contradiction to the constraints of universalizing post-Enlightenment epistemologies to those that locate its development in the uneven global history of capitalism.[9] By the late nineteenth century, and in the context of an intensification of colonial socioeconomic domination, as Manu Goswami (1998, 2004) has argued, Indian nationalists had already begun to produce a distinctive

[6]This has prompted scholarship that historicizes from various angles the contingent relationship between state, nation/people, and territory (see Abraham 2014; Amrith 2013; Mongia 2007; Sinha 2013; Zachariah 2012).

[7]I am loosely paraphrasing Hall (1987, 16).

[8]This anticipatory mode of the "not-yet conscious" is elaborated by Ernst Bloch ([1986] 1995); see also Daniel and Moylan (1997).

[9]These arguments are exemplified respectively in Chatterjee (1986) and M. Goswami (2004).

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Indian national space—a spatially national project of political economy. Yet we know far less about the context in which these spatial and moral imaginaries of national space came to take the concrete political form of a nascent nation-state or how demands for self-determination came to be identified with state sovereignty. The convergence of forces in the post–First World War period, as I will argue, produced an unexpected imperialist recourse to the "national"—a moment that could thus be aptly named an *imperial-nationalizing* conjuncture.[10] Naming the conjuncture thus serves to defamiliarize, and make contingent, the conditions for the emergence of a new politics of nation-state sovereignty in India.

The political terrain of anticolonial struggle was already beginning to shift in the early decades of the last century, paradoxically, in the context of this imperialist push for a "national" conception of the British Empire. The early intimations of this shift were in full display in London on July 27, 1909, when Gandhi, along with representatives of the colored and African populations of South Africa, watched the debate on the future of the four self-governing British colonies in South Africa from the Stranger's Gallery of the House of Lords (Hunt 1989; Meredith 2007, 511–20). The debate on the future of South Africa provided one of the few occasions for coordination between Gandhi, as the representative of the Indians in South Africa, and representatives of South Africa's colored and African populations, even though the prospect of such collaboration and the possible ripple effect of Indian demands in South Africa on the indigenous population was the constant nightmare of European South Africans. The passage of the South African Union Bill in Parliament created a single state in South Africa under white control and abandoned Britain's non-European subjects to the tender mercies of European settlers. The defeat of hopes for a nonracist South Africa, entertained by that loose multiracial coalition present at the Stranger's Gallery, was not entirely unexpected. It was preceded by vigorous lobbying, in the aftermath of the bitterness of the South African Wars, on behalf of a pan-European settlement in South Africa even at the cost of reversing formal imperial guarantees against race-based disabilities. The architects of this settlement—dubbed as "Milner's Kindergarten," after Lord Milner, Governor of the Transvaal and the Orange Free Colony, and later known as the Round Table Group—were laying the foundations for a new vision of empire.[11] They were setting the stage, in effect, for deflecting anticolonial demands on imperial justice through a gradual "nationalizing" of empire. This involved the devolution by degrees of some limited state sovereignty to constituent national units within the empire. The South African decision, even if its implications were still not quite evident beyond the confines of the colonies of European settlement, began the process of an imperialist reconstitution that would eventually also alter the terrain for anticolonial struggle in India.

[10]The recognition of India as a separate "national" unit within the empire was acknowledged officially in the first-ever official declaration of the goal of British policy in India in August 1917 and in the changes in the international status of India during the First World War and after (see Danzig 1968; Legg 2014; Robb 1976; Varma 1968).

[11]For the Round Table Group, see Dubow (1997), Kendle (1975), A. May (1995), and Nimocks (1968). For the Round Table's engagement with India, in particular, see Ellinwood (1969, 1971) and Lavin (1991).

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The implications of the South African decision were not lost on Gandhi. He registered London's betrayal in a letter of commiseration to Dr. Abdullah Abdurrahman, the representative of colored South Africans, advising him to continue his work back in South Africa but along the path of "passive resistance": "You expected something from the Parliament or the British public," he wrote, "but why should you expect anything from them, if you expect nothing from yourself" (M. Gandhi 1963). This was also the message that he elaborated for India in his storied manifesto, *Hind Swaraj*, written in a ten-day frenzy against the background of the London fiasco on board the S. S. *Kildonan Castle* on his way back from London to South Africa (see Parel 2009). Gandhi chose to devote his remaining years in South Africa to fine-tuning his novel weapon of revolutionary nonviolent resistance or *satyagraha* and, in the penultimate year before his departure, discovering the power of mass struggle through his first mobilization of indentured and working-class Indians in South Africa in 1913. The locus of struggle for Gandhi had clearly moved away from expecting redress from London to creating the conditions for change on the ground.

Already, by then, a modified "nationalizing" solution to the Indian demands overseas was making the rounds—courtesy of Lionel Curtis, a veteran antagonist of Gandhi's South African struggles and founder of the Round Table Group—among the premiers of the Dominions, or the colonies of "white" settlement.[12] This was in response to the growing imperial crisis created by the long-standing "Indian question": that is, the status of Indians as British subjects made the racial exclusion and discriminatory treatment of Indians in several parts of the British Empire an enormous challenge with implications for the place of India in the British Empire. The issue, apart from inflaming anticolonial sentiment in India, was also creating embarrassing discords—between old-style imperialists and proponents of the new national-style of empire—in imperialist circles. It reached a crisis with events in South Africa and Canada right on the eve of the First World War.

Even before the scandal created by the brutality of the South African government's response to nonviolent Gandhian resisters had fully subsided, trouble was brewing in Canada in what came to be known as the *Komagata Maru* case, whose centenary was also observed last year in Canada and India.[13] The *Komagata Maru*, a Japanese steamship hired by a Punjabi businessman, carrying some 340 Sikh, 24 Muslim, and 12 Hindu British subjects, sailed from Hong Kong, picking up passengers in Shanghai, Moji, and Yokohama before arriving in Vancouver on May 23, 1914, in defiance of Canadian exclusion laws. The Canadian authorities refused to allow the ship to dock and to let the passengers disembark; after a long stand-off, in July 1914 the ship was eventually forced to return to India, where British attempts to arrest the ringleaders led to the Budge Budge riots in Calcutta that left nineteen dead. Few issues at the time divided imperialists, and unified public opinion in India, more than the question of free, or non-indentured, as well

[12]Curtis's original memorandum on the question of "Asiatic immigration" was presumably lost at sea. But a typescript that was circulated among officials at the India Office in London and the Government of India in Delhi became the basis for the future policy of "reciprocity" between India and the Dominions (see British Library 1916a, 1916b). For a general overview of the "Indian Question" in the Dominions, see Huttenback (1973, 1976); see also Mongia (1999) and Tinker (1976).
[13]For the *Komagata Maru* case, see Johnston (1979) and Mawani (2012).

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as "unfree" or indentured Indian emigration to the Dominions and colonies of the British Empire. The imperialist push to "nationalize" the Indian Empire occurred against this background.

The outbreak of war and Britain's enormous reliance on India for wartime manpower and financial and material resources now coincided with the prescient terms of Curtis's ingenious proposal to produce the contours of a "resolution," that is, to change the status of *India*—rather than that of *Indians*—within the British Empire. The South African lobby and their sympathizers had already in 1911 persuaded Indian political leaders to accede to an important reversal in a long-standing Government of India policy: henceforth the government would no longer recognize freedom of mobility within the British Empire as a right that Indians could claim as British subjects (see Sinha 2011, 35). The wartime "resolution" went further in extending to the Government of India—not unlike what had been acquired by the Dominion governments—power over regulating the composition of its own national population. By 1917, Curtis had persuaded the premiers of the Dominions to accord India the status of a partner in the imperial decision-making assembly that had hitherto consisted only of the governments of the Dominions and of Great Britain.[14] India, as a full member of the Imperial Conference along with the Dominions, could come to a supposedly mutual understanding on the vexed issue of Indian immigration. The understanding took the form of a Reciprocity Resolution that for the first time gave India formal equality with the Dominions in the control over immigration: the hollow privilege, in effect, to reciprocate against any of the Dominions that discriminated against Indians. And the failure of the Government of India, under pressure from public opinion in India, to secure a better status for Indians domiciled abroad prompted another curtailment: the limiting of the jurisdiction and influence of the Government of India formally to the territorial borders of India.[15] Curtis's influence on India has been acknowledged primarily in connection with the postwar political reforms, which gave cognizance to the wartime acknowledgment that committed official policy towards India for the first time to the devolution of power by stages (see Lavin 1991, 1995). But his ingenious solution to the Indian Question—the elevation of India, at least in terms of its external standing, to the status of the Dominions, in lieu of empire-wide rights for Indians—was just as important for the altered terrain of political struggle in India after the war.

This gradual "nationalizing" of the Indian Empire, in effect, was an imperialist project in response as much to the political crisis created by the empire-wide struggles of Indians as to the pressures of a postwar political economy that was forcing changes on earlier forms of metropolitan-colonial relations.[16] In imagining a possible, albeit still

[14]For Curtis's tour of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand to persuade the premiers of the Dominions, see British Library (1916a, 1916c).

[15]The impatience over the Government of India's influence outside of its borders reached its peak with the question of the Turkish Peace Treaties after the First World War (see British Library 1922). The new policy of "India as Nation," which received official sanction during the war, also prompted the imperial government by the 1920s to "empower" the Government of India to negotiate directly—without recourse to the mediating role of London—with Dominion governments on matters affecting Indians domiciled in Dominion territories (see National Archives of India 1925).

[16]For an overview of post–First World War economic changes, see Tomlinson (1979); see also Balachandran (1996).

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distant, future for India in the 1920s, the Secretary of State for India, Edwin Samuel Montagu, envisaged a national party consisting of an amalgamation of European and Indian capitalist classes, represented at present through their separate Chambers of Commerce, in charge of the affairs of India.[17] Gandhi's postwar mobilization of a national-popular collective, seen in the light of imperialist imaginings of possible Indian futures, begins to look quite different: not just the "passive revolution" that incorporated the masses to create the largest possible nationalist alliance for the overthrow of a recalcitrant old colonial order, but also a critical political intervention precisely to change the terms of the emerging imperialist nationalizing of the Indian empire.[18] It amounted, in effect, to reappropriating this imperialist project, in anticipation of an impending yoking of the nation to the state, towards more critical imaginaries of the nation. Nation-state projects, as this example illustrates, were not all the same: it mattered, crucially, which particular form the conception of the new national polity would take. Gandhi's conversion to the demand for complete political independence for India—belated and throughout ambivalent—likewise, was, to paraphrase Hall, a coming face-to-face with the revolutionary character of history itself. Because, as Hall puts it, "when a conjuncture unrolls there is no 'going back.' History shifts gears. The terrain changes. You are in a new moment." Gandhi's, indeed, was a nationalist project that was born out of paying scrupulous attention, with all "the pessimism of the intellect" at his command, to the "discipline of the [imperial-nationalizing] conjuncture" (Hall 1987, 16).[19] The politics Gandhi began to enact in India of course quickly exceeded the terms of allowed imperialist nationalizing.

The emergence of an anticolonial mass subject in India—even though the potential of this development remained unrealized—provides a second perspective on the politics of the conjuncture. And though conventional historiography identifies the advent of anticolonial mass mobilizations in India with Gandhi's national campaigns, the first popular, village-level movement on an all-India issue predated, by a bit, Gandhi's return to India. This movement in India, which was directed against the British-sponsored system of the emigration of indentured labor from India to colonies overseas, was once described by a historian with, perhaps, only slight exaggeration, as "enlist[ing] wider public support [among the masses] than any other movement in modern Indian history, more even than the movement for independence" (Gillion 1962, 182).[20] The strength of this popular mobilization, in part, led to the stopping of recruitment from India in 1917

[17]Clive Rattigan, the former owner of the *Pioneer* newspaper in Allahabad, India, took up the idea of a National Party along these lines. The idea was warmly supported by Montagu, who hoped to interest Indian moderates, also known as the "Montagu-Moderates," in the scheme (see British Library 1921b, 1921c).

[18]For an analysis of the Gandhian phase of the nationalist movement as a "passive revolution," see Chatterjee (1986, esp. 48–49 and chap. 4). For Gandhi's defense of his vision of nationalism, see Bhattacharya (1997).

[19]Coincidentally, Antonio Gramsci attributed his oft-repeated aphorism "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will" to the French novelist Romain Rolland, who, in turn, was an early biographer of Gandhi (see Fisher 1988, 87–88; Rolland 1924). My reading of Gandhi here aligns with the recent revival of interest in his political realism (see esp. Mantena 2012).

[20]Gandhi's inspiration of the abolition movement is invoked inadvertently in the title of Giriraj Kishore's award-winning novel, *Pahala girmitiya* (The Girmitiya saga; Kishore [1999] 2011, 2010).

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and to the abolition in 1920 of the indenture contracts of Indians in Fiji.[21] The anti-indenture or abolition movement, inspired by Gandhi's struggles in South Africa, especially the 1913 Natal strike of indentured workers, was related to, but also independent of, the mainstream nationalist movement. While largely erased today from both public memory and national historiography, this inaugural moment of the emergence of an anticolonial mass subject opens up the conjuncture differently to the "optimism of the will." Indeed, it enables me to make strange the overly familiar history of the advent of mass national politics in India.

Indian abolitionism has remained largely misrecognized in the historiography of India's twentieth century: temporalized as politically backwards, identified with an elite nationalist movement before the advent of the mass politics of the Gandhian era; and located spatially as external, as having to do more with the diasporic politics of South Africa and the colonies than with that of India proper. Yet beneath the radar of the anti-indenture pronouncements of political parties, legislative debates, and official commissions and conferences in India, a much broader popular protest was carried out in the press, especially the Hindi-language newspapers, and in popular culture through the proliferation of poems, tracts, plays, folk songs, and public performances, especially in the migration-inspired folk genre of eastern India called the "*bidesiya*," literally meaning the foreigner, in the years leading up to abolition.[22] Organizations dedicated to the cause, like the Indentured Coolie Protection Society or the Anti-Indenture Emigration League, set up branches in small towns and in cities and employed a cadre of itinerant speakers who were active in villages, market towns, pilgrimage centers, and railway stations across the recruiting districts of eastern India for the purpose of disrupting recruitment for indenture. This grassroots anti-indenture movement, as such, was a democratizing moment, in Jacques Rancière's sense, whose egalitarian impulse brought into view a novel representation of the national common, or the community as a whole, in the political landscape of India.

The class from which indentured workers were recruited—hitherto only objects of either disdain or humanitarian concern and protection—gave the movement a new type of anticolonial subject. The shift is noted, for example, in a telling note by the publisher of one of the most famous abolitionist tracts, written by an ex-indentured worker from Fiji, Totaram Sanadhya, in response to the public curiosity in India about the identity of the author.[23] The note appended in the second edition of the tract in 1915 assured the readers that Sanadhya was neither, as some seemed to believe him to be, merely a "coolie," nor was he some great man. He was, as the publisher insisted, just an "*aam admi*" (common person) who could read and write in Hindi; he was a student of the Fijian language and spoke a little broken English. The publisher's note went on to

[21]The most comprehensive account of the abolition movement remains Ray (1980); see also Northrup (1995) and Tinker (1974). The scholarship on the indentured labor system itself, of course, is vast. For a sampling, see Behal and Mohapatra (1992), Carter (1996), Kale (1998), and Sturman (2014).

[22]For a discussion of some of the popular oral genres produced by the anti-indenture movement, see Kumar (2013, 2015) and Vatuk (1964); see also Majumder (2010). For the role of Hindi print culture in abolition, see Gupta (2015), Nijhawan (2014), and Sinha (2014).

[23]For discussion of Sanadhya's book, see Sinha (2014). For the original text, see Sanadhya ([1914] 1973), and for the first English translation, see Sanadhya (1991).

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acknowledge this "*aam admi*" or "common person" as a "great patriot," and it detailed his work for the anti-indenture cause both in Fiji and, since his return, in India (cited in Sinha 2014, 173). The movement helped constitute the *aam admi* and the *sarvasadharan janta*, or the ordinary public, as proper subjects for an expanded anticolonial politics. Fittingly, perhaps, the abolition of indenture was the only empire-wide reform that was prompted by a change in public opinion in "dependent India, and not in metropolitan Britain" (Tinker 1974, 288).

The true stakes of Indian abolitionism, given the actual numbers in India directly affected by the indentured system, were never just the explicit demand (the abolition of indenture), but the expansion of what until then had counted as legitimate public opinion in India. The demand for the removal of a particular grievance, the indentured system, was articulated in such a way as to identify it with the entire nation or with the whole of society.[24] By 1913, when the abolition movement began to spread beyond the confines of resolutions by political parties and debates in the legislative chambers, only a very small proportion of the population in India—no more than 10,000 to 13,000 annually were still being recruited for indentured labor contracts overseas—and a very localized area—only a handful of districts in the United Provinces of India, for example, provided more than 80 percent of annual recruitment—were directly affected by the overseas indentured labor system.[25] Yet a much larger section of the population—from ordinary people to rich industrialists and capitalists, from orthodox community associations to middle-class women's organizations—were newly politicized by the movement for an expanded civic solidarity. The exceptional conjuncture of circumstances enabled different classes and different social and political strivings to come together, however briefly, to facilitate the claims of a national common from the perspective of those traditionally excluded. This included not only an acknowledgment of the potential equality of the *aam admi* as a great patriot, but also the possibility of a Dalit (or untouchable) woman worker's ill treatment being made into a *cause célèbre* for the entire cause (Lal 1985; see also M. Mishra 2008; S. Mishra 2008). The movement, indeed, called into existence new *political* subjects—not reducible to any preexisting social groups or identity categories—who as the "people" now staked their claim on the whole of society.[26] The demand for a radical adjustment of the body politic had been articulated.

When Indian abolitionism is excised from its legitimate place as an inaugural moment of popular all-India anticolonial politics, an honor typically associated with the more famous Gandhi-led mass nationalist campaigns, what is disavowed is precisely the challenge represented by its claims on the common. When the Legislative Assembly in Delhi met to enact the abolition of indenture into legislation in the 1920s, it did so against the background of a growing convergence between both imperialist and elite nationalist interests in favor of delimiting India as a separate economic and political unit within the empire. Wartime dislocations had already forced a reversal of imperial policy in favor of industrialization and the development of a national economy in

[24]I am loosely paraphrasing Jacques Rancière (see esp. Rancière 2001).

[25]From the 1880s to the end of indenture, the United Provinces provided 80 percent of the migrants, Bengal and Bihar provided 13 percent, and the rest came from Central India and the Punjab (see Chaudhury 1992; Lal 1996).

[26]This is Rancière's "*les sans-part*" or the "part with no part" (see T. May 2008, chap. 2).

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India. These changes put a premium on the utilization of India's labor supply within India rather than in the colonies (see Chandavarkar 1994; O. Goswami 1989). At the same time, the restrictions on the immigration of Indians abroad and the disenfranchisement of Indians domiciled in self-governing and crown colonies called for a response in India. Against this background, and in the aftermath of abolition, the "people"—who were once identified in universalist terms with the whole of society—were divided up to play particular designated roles in society.

The Indian Emigration Act of 1922, which put the official imprimatur on the abolition of indenture, was passed in the reformed Legislative Assembly in Delhi with Indian participation. The Act made illegal, except in the case of the hugely lucrative labor market in Ceylon, Burma, and the Federated Malay States, any scheme of assisted migration of unskilled labor from India without a special act of exemption issued by the legislature. While for Indian politicians the Act was a belated retaliation against the restrictions on Indian immigration and the treatment of Indians domiciled abroad, for Indian industrialists it ensured an adequate and cheap labor supply within India. The Act, which was passed with only a few dissenting voices in the Assembly, was justified in the name of both protecting the ignorant masses of India from exploitation abroad and securing their contribution within India to the general good of the nation (see British Library 1921a).[27] This reconstituted national common in which the masses—under elite tutelage—now played their designated part for the general good was, in effect, a reversal of that democratizing momentum of political subjectivization in the anti-indenture movement.

Even though the promise of the emergence of a mass anticolonial subject was defeated in the aftermath of abolition, it is still worth reawakening the resonance of its unrealized potential. The hopes and aspirations unleashed by that movement were never entirely lost: arguably their traces could be seen, in degrees, in the subsequent Gandhi-led mass nationalist campaigns and beyond. The potentialities and capacities generated in that moment, not least the intervention of subordinated groups in producing knowledge about their situation and participating actively in an attempt at remaking their world, could not be erased so easily. For example, the tradition of countering official commissions of inquiry with independent civilian investigations, inaugurated by the people's report on indentured conditions in 1916, would henceforth become a regular feature of anticolonial nationalist protest in India (Andrews and Pearson 1916).[28] To be sure, post-abolition village-level reports and other writings produced by anti-indenture activists on the condition of repatriated workers in India and colonial-born Indians abroad got little traction in the context of a rapidly changing nationalist struggle (see Chaturvedi and Sannyasi 1931; see also Kelly and Kaplan 2007). Yet the possible futures thrown up by this inaugural moment of anticolonial mass politics had planted the seeds of political change—the dreams of a future cracked open—that, arguably,

[27]For one of the very few discussions of the Act, see Singha (2013). The Act, besides making an exception in the case of the lucrative labor markets of Southeast Asia, did not impact other forms of India's "global labor" (see Ahuja 2013; Balachandran 2012).

[28]The report itself was inspired by Totaram Sanadhya's ([1914] 1973) abolitionist tract. For the role, by contrast, of official commissions on indenture, see Mongia (2004).

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would be usable as an inspiration and a resource at that time as well as for coming generations to think about their world through the *aam admi* or common person.[29]

Why then, beyond either antiquarianism or nostalgia, do I think this particular moment in the history of anticolonial nationalist politics in India is "still alive for us"? The territorial boundaries of the nation-state, of course, have long since been discarded as appropriate conceptual containers for the operation of capitalism or for the newer styles of imperialism. The challenges of, and momentous changes to, the economy, polity, society, and ecological well-being of the twenty-first century—as well as our ways of understanding them—seem no longer to make sense through the verities of the last century. The point of a conjunctural analysis, however, goes against a search for lessons or solutions in the past that can be smoothly transposed from one historical register to another. My analysis of the post–First World War moment—reinterpreted as an imperial-nationalizing conjuncture—has tried to highlight both the new political terrain in which Gandhi mounted his critical nationalist intervention and the seeding, at the same moment, of alternative forms of civic solidarity—of an embryonic "people's sphere," as it were—that would be available for possible reanimation in the future.[30] That anticolonial nationalist history—consigned in our times, with a great sigh of relief, to the dustbin of history—is nevertheless still alive for us precisely because it directs us to a mode of critical thinking not just about, but also *from within*, our contemporary neoliberal conjuncture.

Today it is the regional, rather than the nation-statist imaginary of Gandhi's times, that doubles as both a fertile ground for neoliberal capitalism and a site of possible contestation to the myth of a placeless globalization. The rise, or reemergence, of Asia has contributed in making Asian "re-regionalization"—the proliferation of new regional formations and interdependencies within Asia—an especially potent symbol, in particular, of our times.[31] The spatial reimagination of Asia—from without and within—both draws on earlier inter-regional connections and mobilizes newer conceptions. New regional formations facilitate greater integration of inter-regional flows of capital, resources, and labor, and the corporate media infuses popular culture with a commodified form of translocal Asianness (Yan and Vukovich 2007; see also Duara 2010). To the extent to which this Asian regionalism serves primarily as a catalyst for, and symptom of, a globally expansive capitalism—albeit one reinvigorated and redesigned in the wake of a declining Euro-American primacy—its critical potential remains limited. It cannot, inasmuch as it leaves in its wake an ever-widening gap between the haves and the have-nots, provide the critical resources for thinking about alternative post-neoliberal futures. Against this kind of "uncritically regionalist" vision of Asia, however, several scholars have offered a variety of different critical regionalist visions. In Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak's (2003) critical regionalism, for example, "Asia" serves as the name for a "position without identity"—an indeterminate form of political collectivity—from which to rescue the state, a

[29]The resonance with the sudden and meteoric rise of the Aam Admi Party in India, in the wake of the 2011 India Against Corruption Movement, is not entirely accidental.

[30]The phrase is from Chen (2003; 2010, chap. 5). The concept, of course, builds on Partha Chatterjee's (2004, 2011) important formulation of "political society."

[31]For useful explorations of the issues at stake, see Barlow (2007), Kayder and Palat (2013), Palat (2013), and Yan and Vukovich (2007).

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necessary bulwark against the free market, from the identitarian logic and exclusivity of the erstwhile nation.[32] Neither region nor nation-state, of course, need be inherently identitarian or nonidentitarian. The question about the contours of the political collectivity—whether the region now or the nation-state then—is posed for us by the different conjunctures themselves. The politics of thinking *in* the conjuncture entails precisely coming face-to-face with either nation-statism or regionalism, as the case may be, as the reconfigured spatial practice of imperialism and capitalism at that moment. The space for political intervention—as in the case of Gandhi's critical appropriation of the imperial nationalizing project—is created by redeploying these forms against themselves, or critically.

The attention to the conjuncture, the complex articulation of different social forces and rhythms, also opens up the present by reconnecting it once again to the past and to the future. The present, in this light, begins to look less static and less stable than the nostrum of the free market—even in the face of the financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent slow economic recovery—might have us believe. The perspective of the conjuncture calls attention to alternative developments in the present that are calling into question the "common sense" of the day, to the yearnings for change, for new beginnings—as in the worldwide protests of 2011—in the here and the now, that is, to a present that acts not just as a barrier but also as a horizon for thinking different futures. The various so-called "springs" of 2011—not unlike the democratizing politics of the *aam admi* or the ordinary person during the anti-indenture movement in India—are still alive for us, even after their containment, by having planted the seeds for alternative possibilities and of futures that lack blueprints but that are, it is hoped, still to come. The present, instead of being arbitrarily hived off from a supposedly irrelevant anticolonial nationalist past, may be reconnected to the unrealized potential of the democratizing hopes and aspirations of that history, to reorient it again to the possibility of alternative futures. Such premonitions of the past create an opening for imagining the world anew through the agency of what Frantz Fanon ([1961] 1965) once called the "wretched of the earth" or, in today's terms, the so-called "bottom billion" (Collier 2007): those stranded in dire straits by the logic of market fundamentalism.

The challenge for a *critical* Asian studies framework in the current neoliberal conjuncture lies in more than offering the region as an alternative to the nation-statist imaginaries of the past. "Asia," reconceived as the name for a *place*, but this time without the certitude of cartographic fixity or of identity, creates an opening for thinking about other forms of political collectivity, beyond the frequently majoritarian logic of the nation, for strengthening the democratic structures of the state against the market. But it cannot be merely the vehicle for transnational Asian elites, of course; and so this "other Asia" takes us, paradoxically, also "beyond Asia," linking to Latin America, Africa, and, even Europe and North America, by reanimating the idea of the Global South—itself a reconfiguration of the erstwhile Third World—but this time, in Vijay Prashad's (2013) terms, as emphatically "*not a place*," but a "concatenation" of democratizing struggles everywhere. This Asia, reconnected to an anticolonial past, and contrary to the triumphalist rhetoric of

[32]For some other attempts at outlining an alternative or "critical regionalism," see Chen (2010) and Duara (2010).

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the rise, reemergence, or immaculate conception of Asianness, could become the basis for thinking about a globally usable human future. We cannot predict the contours of such a future. Our responsibility as *critical* scholars of Asia, at this conjuncture, is to reinflect the "Asia" we study to the possibility—even the premonition—of different futures.[33] If the pessimism of the intellect entails a wariness toward the dynamics of dominant Asian regionalisms, an optimism of the will invites us to broadcast and nurture the seeds of alternative futures also being planted in our moment.

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[33]For one attempt to think about global futures through Asia, see Duara (2014).

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