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# floating. No gears shifting.

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It is impressive how, in Prasenjit Duara's essay, Asian regions are understood and presented—in the breadth of the world, not as objects with sharp edges, or compact entities of cultures, economies, and politics, not as blocks of which the present and the global so often are still thought to be made. Reading Duara's essay, I was made to think of the celebrated Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki's current grand plan for Singapore, the epitome of Asia today, a design conceived not as a space made of buildings, offices, and flats, not of blocks, but of flows—bridges and flyovers, "links," as Maki calls them. These links are there as the most powerful part of the whole, making the city-state space by cutting through it, over the blocks, and along them. The links are empowered to make everything in the city-state to face the open, and to move into the open. A skeptic, of course, may ask, "into what open?" Indeed, the "links" of Singapore, at least those already in action, often lead from offices, flats, and blocks into one mega-supermarket and then into another.

The notion of speed came to my mind first as I read the paper—the speed of political movement, of ideology, of development, the myth of speed, the fear of speed, speed continually increasing as well as the possibility of speed deceleration and sudden stops, the history of speed, the structure of speed. In Duara's Asia, I missed most of this. His Asia, the web of it, the model of interconnectedness, "inter-referencing Asia," as he calls it, the intriguing plethora of extraterritorial metropolises, biopolises, fusiopolises, as he presents it, (or "Disney Land with the death penalty," as William Gibson might call it), the nebula, in all the intensity and sophistication of Duara's paper, to me, is not much else but floating. No gears shifting.

I can hear too much clicking in this history, the steady rhythm that makes machine owners happy, but that, to me, at one moment becomes uninteresting, at another boring, and yet at another scary. Of course, there is that kind of rhythm, and much of it, in the Asia of today on the move. But the world, also, is bleeding. Wherever I look, and in Asia in particular. How to put this and the clicking together? I would like to know whether it is just me, who, reading papers such as Duara's, eagerly looks for fissures, for wheels that get loose, for history schlepping along "crooked lines," to use Geoffrey Eley's term. Presented

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with a world that appears like an "amazing apparatus," and Duara's image is close to it, I prick up my ears for, to say with Franz Kafka, a "sound of creaking."

*Redux* is a term around which one section of the paper and much of Duara's overall argument turns. It may be the problem of rhythm again. After the Enlightenment's up-and-up-and-forward-forever sense of time and history proved to be a not so truly correct idea, newness came forth as a trick. We have seen in Asia amazing masters of it—Suharto in Indonesia, to take a figure whom I know more about, a dictator who kept himself in power for thirty years through development as this kind of renewal. The theme of *redux* is one of the most serious of modern Asia, and Duara is doing a highly commendable job in being one of the few to touch on it. But again, I miss more "creaking"—perhaps in the vein of John Updike's presentation of the theme, in his uncertain, confused—bleeding, indeed—and quite Kierkegaardian *Rabbit Redux*.

There is no doubt, and Duara says it well, that the world, Asia, and each of its regions down to its tiniest part, is subject to globalization. Yet I would like much more of the mood in the paper of globalization, as Jean-Luc Nancy put it, as "an old animal that is globalizing." There are, emerging every moment anew and with speed equal to the speed of globalization, butt-ends of the world—"remote corners," as Raden Aju Kartini called them more than a century ago. Globalizing Asia excels in producing the remote corners of the region and the butt-ends of progress, in the rhythm of eternal renewal and, indeed, as redux. If greater concern were given to the matter in Duara's paper, hopefully, it might muddle its logic a little.

Duara's paper is built on consulting many various and different views and concepts of "what is a region," and it also opens a space for their interplay. When the paper approaches the crucial problem of the Asian past and present, and the problem of nation-states, however, it becomes assertive. No doubt, there is a good reason behind it, to make the line distinct and clear between what preceded and what now follows, between nation-states—also imperialist nation-states and postcolonial nation-states—and the globalization arena of our age. Yet I suggest that the otherness, contrast between the fortress-like, entrenched, enclosed, and intolerant on the side of the nation-states, and the fluidity, openness, interconnectedness on the other side, the side of the present globalism, is overdrawn.

However visible and impressive the nation-states' entrenchment qualities have been, as I understand it, they were always nothing but reactions to and reflections of the equally strong (however often much less visible) forces of fluidity and openness. One was born from the other, repeatedly. If this were accepted, analysis might become more fruitful—important qualities of entrenchment might be detected in the flow of globalism—not as mere residue of the nation-state past but often as newly born or born again, moving with the movement of globalization, and disturbing its rhythm a little, sometimes out of tardiness, other times as an act of resistance: the butt-ends, the dynamos of history.

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Duara's paper shows instructively that overdoing the dichotomy of then and now can make even the fluidity, interdependence, and floating of the present processes in Asia seem hard and mechanical and, for want of a better word, abstract. One should be inspired by the paper to inquire further into how the argument of entrenching versus interdependence and flow has existed and worked for a very long time before the term globalization came into use—since, say, 1770, in 1819, 1824, 1870, or 1930. As I write this, I can see the faces of past historians (of Indonesia, for example) who made the dichotomy (or tension, or fissure) an axis around which their concept of history turned—C. van Leur, John Smail, and Oliver Wolters, of course.

A bit in the mood of Kracauer's ragpicker, I find the paper at places a little too elegant. There is one particularly inelegant word that to me is loudly missing—*exploitation.* This is not to say that some worrisome matters of the current-Asia human conditions are omitted in the paper. Beginning on page fourteen of the typescript (after about a half of the paper), I noted several grave social problems facing the region listed—environmental degradation, water scarcity, public health—yet not exploitation. How far may this lead us to understanding the bleeding Asia beyond the problems' physiognomy? Does not the main question asked in the paper's title give us some opportunity to be, for once, a little less liberal? Too elegantly to my taste, the "grave problems" section of the paper *flows* into a story of a Chinese dam that threatens to divert the waters from where they are needed, and then to the case of Thailand and water problems of his own. At such a moment, the paper appears to me to be exclusively about the flow and the ways, how not to stand in its way.

With full justification, Duara describes migration as one of the most pressing problems of globalizing Asia today. He touches on the most flagrant aspects of it—elite migrants, immigrant gangs, migrant labor, and domestic workers. Knowledge, business, labor (and crime), again, flow through the time and space, across the borders—the networks are floating. These pages make for absorbing reading. Yet, does not this, again, suggest that the problems of migration are essentially difficulties on the way and, once more, residues of the past, of the fortresses, of entrenchment *still* in place—of outdated nation-states (and trade unions, of course, in this logic)? Fear and trembling come over me on the rare but most valuable occasions when, unexpectedly, I am confronted with some new fact about a particular case of a migrant worker, in Singapore, for instance, with some statistics on migrant workers that suddenly appear as if out of context and out of the blue, with each involuntary peep into a maid's living quarters, for example in Jakarta, not to speak about some of the *redux*-new new-Asia sweatshops.

Matters vaguely like those (not the particular cases) come up on page sixteen in my copy of the paper, with a suggestion of a desirable "new relationship between elite and working-class migration." What might in this context the "old relationship" mean? By raising the problem so late into the paper, and by

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dealing with it in such a fluid manner, I cannot help but feel that the matter of labor, of its structure and rhythm, appears a bit—quite a bit—as an afterthought.

There is a powerful attraction lately to one particular kind of argumentation. The argumentation aims, to put it bluntly, at an "NGO solution," or (if I let myself be carried away) an "ATM improvement." It suggests a globalizing and, at the same time, nonconfrontational way of dealing with it, as pragmatic and, indeed, possible. With this sort of reasoning—and there is a danger in Duara's paper of not resisting it—we can flow, labor can flow like that, too, in a calm and regular stream unless disturbed, made to squeeze into too narrow a riverbed, blocked by nation-states, postcolonial nation-states, imperialist nation-states, residues on the way of globalization. If the residues get excessive, in a disaster scenario, labor may get violent.

With the notion of exploitation missing, in Duara's paper, a progressive tone, a sense of a convincing possible opening, a link-like scenario of the future are allowed to work. Naturally, and Duara duly registers it, globalization also displaces the poor and deepens the gulf between the rich and the non-rich. But globalization, it is made categorical, is inevitable: by its very being, by its producing wealth, by its connecting people. As for that one particular kind of entrenchment—the entrenchment of the elites against the poor—NGOs are expected to take up the job, and to "guard the interests of the regions as a whole." The apparatus will work. The skeleton will be tickled.

* * *

The nineteenth and the great part of the twentieth centuries, the paper suggests, were not a time of growing Asian connections. What connections? What about the exploding and imploding of ideas of nationalism, progress, racism, liberalism, and socialism at the time? Not to address these connections, to me, is one of the paper's most unexciting absences.

The connections that are present in the paper and around which the paper's argument is built, are overwhelmingly commercial connections—financial integration, bilateral swap agreements, economic interdependence, coordination so that individual banks do not shoot each other in the foot, trade routes and the interlinked systems of trade routes, mobile merchant communities, traffic that crosses and bypasses economic autarkies, imperial preferences, financial zones and economic blocs. Too much of economics. Yet I am most disappointed when, in the paper, it comes to culture.

Certainly, what Duara highlights in this section has been a significant move of late modern Asian history—the efforts, beginning with the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to establish an "Asian art," the emergence of Japan as a museum-like sublime and nationalist beacon of Asiatic civilization, alternative Asian cosmopolitanism and pan-Asianism, all this aiming at a congruence between politics and culture, in short, new political homogenization of culture.

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I understand this, but I have difficulty getting from the paper what might be the internal dynamics (speeding, halting, exploiting) of it, of this new "greater cultural interest of Asians in Asia."

Duara moves deeper into the culture argument of his paper by getting into greater detail. He lists examples, exhibitions, and showings of Asian art, and, as the years and tastes pass by, the circulation of (East) Asian cinema festivals, manga, anime, television shows, Asian eateries—all this is there, and runs through time, speeding and breathing regularly like a well-trained athlete. This is registered. But nothing is there, in the paper, about movements, artists, art consumers, art targets, or art victims such as the contemporary Indonesian painter and dancer Arahmaiani, also a consciousness of the new and globalizing Asia, I am sure, who wanders around the world, anxious about where her home is. She tests the globe for points of shallowness and depth, wealth and poverty, exploitation, possibility of home as well as of interconnectedness.

The phenomenon of Arahmaiani makes me ask troubling questions about Duara's paper. How closely related are "institutions" and "identities"? How derived are they one from the other? How easily can one say of us in this globalizing age of the past few decades, "actual interdependence has increased dramatically and so has cultural contact"? What the dickens may "cultural" mean in this sentence? What may it mean to say that in globalizing Asia, there is "a move away from an essentialist identity formation"?

I believe that it is simply wrong to see the globalization we are currently experiencing as some kind of coming forth of Gayatri Spivak's idea of a liberating and non-Romantic combating "the desire for an origin." Duara argues that consuming Korean television serials by the Vietnamese, for instance, "does not end up transforming an identity from say Vietnamese or Taiwanese to Korean." First, what might "Vietnamese or Taiwanese identity" in this case mean? Second, consumption, voracious or otherwise, of any stuff like the Korean television serials has to affect the eater, a man, a woman, and a community. The serials, like the globalism that produces them, to use Marx's expression, "reduce being into having." Or, to quote Heidegger, to the same effect, they reduce the peoples and the world into a "reserve." This, in any case, *is* a new identity.

History, and the hope in it, this is my concluding thought, moves by flowing, linking, and abstracting, but as much as this, also by kicking and resisting the flow, the linking and the abstracting. In some of their best moments, history and the hope in it moves by hesitating about the next step. Presenting modern Asia as being unsure is what I miss most in this brilliant and exquisitely crafted paper.

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