

Book Reviews

DEMOGRAPHY AND DEMOCRACY: ESSAYS ON NATIONALISM, GENDER AND IDEOLOGY

Himani Bannerji
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REVIEWED BY
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How we know, what we can know, in fact what we call knowing and knowledge, all involve and build on conceptual practices, premises, and assumptions, as all kinds of production rely on earlier modes of production (Bannerji 24).

In *Demography and Democracy: Essays on Nationalism, Gender and Ideology*, Himani Bannerji begins by telling her reader of the initial apprehensions that she had in bringing together this collection of essays. She feared that these essays, as a published volume, would appear to have a 'miscellaneous' character. While she states that her rereading with an "eye to anthologizing" proved to her otherwise, Bannerji recognizes that these essays powerfully play out the critical epistemological approach she arrived at through a lifelong learning process. This framework, a critical historical method informed by Marxist-feminist and anti-racist theories, requires that one constantly negotiate, unravel, and open-up the boundaries that come to define 'knowledge' and 'knowing' at particular historical moments and in a variety of social contexts.

First and foremost, Bannerji's work must be taken up as a central text for thinkers who are committed to critical decolonizing methodologies.

I have chosen to emphasize Bannerji's use of 'decolonizing' not only because her discussions of nationalism take place in India and other contexts that are connected to European colonialism(s), and other modes of domination in complicated ways, but also to highlight her central use of the work of Rabindranath Tagore. Rabindranath's refusal of nationalism in general caused him to create a "pedagogy of decolonization" that, at its core, is situated in the potentiality of constitutive relationships, such as those that exist between reason, nature, and imagination. "Painful learning" goes beyond our reactive selves and reimagines the relationship between self-other that has come to define ways of relating within colonial worldviews. Ultimately, as Bannerji discusses in "Projects of hegemony," if "decolonizing" is only taken up as a repudiation of anything that represents "the colonial" and "the west," as it is in certain Subaltern Studies groups and anti-colonial national liberation projects, it risks foreclosing certain social and political possibilities. For example, "for women to become 'subaltern' political subjects and agents in the scheme of *Subaltern Studies*, the theorists would have to embrace an egalitarian view of gender relations, which would be modernist." A contradiction arises, as to be anti-colonialist and hold an egalitarian view of gender relations (read: modernist) becomes epistemologically impossible within Patriarchal ethnic nationalisms that employ notions of 'tradition'.

As a critical mode that has at its root an ontology of relationality, the reader is urged to delve into what exists between the general and the particular. Once again, Bannerji turns to the mode of consciousness produced through Marx's critical epistemology wherein the "procedures and products of knowing" are brought face to face with historical and social realities through analysis

and explanation. What "this means [is] moving from the theoretical text, a body of congealed thought, and breaking it open to reveal what is congealed and concentrated in both theories and social existence." Each of her essays becomes a literal working through, which allows her to move beyond the boundaries of her theoretical framework in order to re-centre lived social and political realities. While she situates many of these analyses in the particular contextual space of India, she also speaks to the ways in which other geo-political spaces and social places manifest these phenomena in their own unique ways.

Bannerji's exploration of nationalisms reminds her reader of the violent potentialities that are housed within the multiple forms that nationalism can undertake. In her essay "Making India Hindu and Male," she foregrounds her discussion of cultural nationalisms in India by demonstrating how hegemony functions, in part, through working with common sense and ideologies found in civil society. Bannerji weaves together Marx's viewpoint on the inseparability and interconstitutive nature of class, culture and politics with Gramscian notions of hegemony and "common sense," in its active form, as social and political subjectivity, to examine the workings of the *Sangh Parivar*, the Hindu right. By "removing content from context," she describes how the Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP] and Hindu right effectively transformed Hindus into the "authentic citizens" of the Indian nation. Within this context, the "ideology of the patriarchal family" is a vital component in which *hindutva* masculinity and civil society is practiced and reified into hegemonic common sense. Bannerji reminds us that the act of emptying out content from context is not unique to the case of Indian nationalism; this mode of ahistorical epistemological rewriting continually

reappears in battles for social power, whether falling within the dialectics of anti-colonial against western colonialism or outside of these particular power relations.

Bannerji's second essay turns to the events that unfolded on the 28th of February, 2002, wherein Hindu fundamentalists in political and social power in the Indian state of Gujarat committed genocide and ethnic cleansing against Muslims living in the state. It is here that she turns to the ways that women, upon whose bodies the capacity to physically reproduce the nation state has literally been inscribed, remain the central targets in projects of nation building and national 'preservation'. The "demographic thrust" of ethnic nationalisms relies on the physical presence of bodies, actively reconstituting the language of 'majority' and 'minority' in corporeal terms. The project of population control, located in the bodies of women and children, is a fundamental component of ethnic nationalisms; from the struggles in Israel and Palestine, to Nazi Germany, and settlement projects in the United States and Canada, "the general and particular nature of the phenomenon of genocide [demonstrates] how in different cultural and historical environments genocide/ethnocide or ethnic cleansing takes on a particular ideological and symbolic constitution."

In "Cultural Nationalism and Woman as the Subject of the Nation," Bannerji asks "who is entitled by social relations and location to accord ... recognition," and as significantly, what is being recognized within this framing? It is here that Bannerji explores the dynamic creative processes of building hegemony whereby the plurality of categories, modalities of knowing and experiences are reduced to the singular. For example, she discusses the manufacturing of symbols within colonial and liberationist projects that reproduce 'tradition' and 'modernity' in the singular as distinct homogenized entities. In fact, these categories are multifaceted, plural, and contradictory. It is

this understanding of the plurality of all categories and the potential multiplicity of all linguistic concepts which saturate the rest of her essays.

While concepts become ideological in the very processes of articulation, it is important to recognize how concepts and categories are epistemologically deployed in order to uncover their potentially inherent ideological underpinnings. Bannerji eloquently explains:

Common nouns which are marked by the possibility of their boundless generality tend to lend themselves to ideological usage, and more readily so than others which signal plurality and specificity. Notions such as "nation," "tradition," "modernity," "mother tongue," and religions interpreted in terms of essences, provide us with ideologies. The politics of *hindutva* (hinduness), Zionism, Islam or Christianity could readily help us to perform ideology and typically help to accomplish the praxis of power. They can do so because they can be rendered into singular notions based on generality that can occlude lived spaces, times and practices of living subjects and agents. Similarly generalities such as "civilization," "culture," "science," "freedom," or "democracy" can do the same.

As she explores in her final chapter, there has been an overwhelming tendency within western European thought to anchor scholarly work in generalizations characterized by 'essences'. Locating her discussion in the tradition of sociology, Bannerji demonstrates how the making of the 'scholar' depends on an intimate relationship between the administrative structure of the colonial governments and various everyday social contexts. Throughout her collection, Bannerji presents her reader with a central concern that must be attended to: what disappears in the processes of making and writing categories? Practices of employing universal

categories distort lived social history as they are more committed to preserving power hierarchies and common sense ideologies rather than delving into the substance of everyday living conditions. As Bannerji reminds us, "the project of hegemony always remains incomplete and in an ever annexing mode, [seeks] to incorporate and neutralize the constantly emergent imaginaries of the nation's 'others'." For this reason, and in recognizing the "colonizing modalities of knowledge," she urges her reader to take the first step in a decolonizing pedagogy and praxis by interrogating their own place within systems of knowledge and knowing. In such a way, the reader must never forget to "read between the lines."

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BABIES WITHOUT BORDERS: ADOPTION AND MIGRATION ACROSS THE AMERICAS

Karen Dubinsky
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REVIEWED BY JENNIFER MUSIAL

Long before interracial and transnational adoptions became a popular culture phenomenon, my white parents fostered and later adopted my black sister. Like Dubinsky, a queer white woman with a Guatemalan child, I feel simultaneously blessed to have a wonderful sister and critical of the conditions of child removal and state-sponsored adoption that led to her placement with my family.