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THE POLITICS OF CONTAMINATION

Review of: Pheng Cheah (2006) *Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 321 pp.

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Contemporary globalization, and its economic and political dimensions in particular, have crucial implications for how we conceive humanity, and the category of the 'human'. Pheng Cheah's *Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights* takes this argument as its central intervention in the theorization of globalization, and hones in on the fields of political theory and the social sciences. In a series of rigorously argued and systematically developed arguments, the book engages with globalization through a double perspective, of philosophy and materialist critique, by tracking the 'normative' deployment of the category of the human in two particular fields: cosmopolitanism and human rights. If cosmopolitanism could be described as something like the temporal and spatial dimensions of politics under globalization, human rights discourses function as exemplary of a certain content that fills in this particular global outlook.

Cheah tracks the spurious normativity and transcendent argumentation which undergirds the discourses of cosmopolitanism and human rights. Centrally, he questions the normative assumptions which assume the irrelevance of the nation in thinking politics in the wake of globalization. By revisiting the political potential of nationalism in the wake of capitalist globalization, he reconfigures the category of the 'human' by situating it within a materialist web of social relations which must pass through the nation. Further, he provides a strongly empirical and materialist critique of globalization and exposes the realities of economic and political inequality continually generated by global capital which no amount of talk of complexity, flux and 'difference' can finesse away. The necessity of going through the nation, and acknowledging the constraining, historically-specific circumstances which modulate human agency, require, Cheah argues, a fundamental critique of the discourse of postnational cosmopolitanism and human rights discourse. In this characteristically long formulation, Cheah suggests what is at stake in his intervention in globalization studies: 'if social-scientific solutions to the problems of globalization have always already pre-comprehended an idea of humanity as the bearer of dignity, freedom, sociability, culture, or political life, and therefore as an ideal project that needs to be actualized, the task and challenge of the humanities today in relation to globalization may be to question this pre-comprehension of the human, and somewhat perversely, even to give it up'(3). Quite clearly the task of *Inhuman Conditions* is to take to task these normative pre-comprehensions of humanity. At this point, the reader might be a bit puzzled to encounter a critique of such terms as dignity, freedom and culture, given that in our post-structuralist, post-humanist and deconstructivist Humanities universe one almost assumes that no one really believes in these hoary ideals anyway. Yet, despite this sense of *déjà vu*, Cheah's argument is far from *passé*. Precisely by focussing on the ubiquity of discourses of cosmopolitanism in particular (which is by far the best section of the book), Cheah convincingly shows that a critique of normative humanism is more than relevant, indeed is pressing, precisely in much of the culturalist and anti-humanist arguments around postnationalism.

Cheah is clearly quite at home in thinking through the complexities of the philosophical discourse of cosmopolitanism, which he had already begun in *Cosmopolitics*, edited with Bruce Robbins. The opening chapter, 'The Cosmopolitical –Today' provides an impressive genealogy of cosmopolitical thought that takes us (not surprisingly) to Kant (and Marx) in order to offer some useful complications to how we presently perceive cosmopolitanism. Through a reading of Kant, Cheah convincingly shows that the perceived opposition between a cosmopolitan outlook and nationalism is false. Given that Kant is often taken as the alibi for thinking cosmopolitanism *in* opposition to nationalism, Cheah's revisiting of Kant eloquently outlines that 'the relationship between cosmopolitanism and nationalism has fluctuated historically between varying degrees of alliance and opposition'(30). Cheah's reading rightly warns that it is 'precipitous to consider nationalism an outmoded form of consciousness' (ibid.). Hence, he rightly claims, in properly materialist fashion, that 'the ethico-political work that nationalism and cosmopolitanism can do at any given moment depends on how either formation emerges from or is inscribed within the shifting material linkages and interconnections created by global capitalism at a particular historical conjuncture'(ibid). This rigorously argued re-reading of Kant complicates the relationship between cosmopolitanism and nationalism, a point which will be crucial in his unfolding argument, given that much theorizing of globalization is predicated on a supercession of the nation in favour of the cosmopolitical. Cheah will go on to argue that popular postcolonial nationalism is precisely the mode through which an anti-capitalist politics under globalization can be undertaken without falling into the fallacies of uninterrogated humanism or idealist culturalism. The philosophical interrogation of Kant's cosmopolitan outlook then, has two functions; firstly, to expose and critique Kant's normative belief that world commerce will furnish the conditions for a cosmopolitan outlook; and secondly, that within Kant's formulations, a counter-intuitive possibility of a cosmopolitan nationalism was broached which can acquire a political effectivity depending on specific historical configurations of power.

The succeeding two chapters, engaging with Habermas, Saskia Sassen, Homi Bhabha and James Clifford, are by far the best in the book, precisely because in these theorists (except Habermas), an increasingly hegemonic consensus has taken hold in the Humanities. Cheah's chapter on Habermas is a welcome engagement with this form of cosmopolitan political thought, since Habermas' notion of 'postnational constellations' has the singular virtue of not ignoring the infrastructural modalities of globalization, and his sustained exploration of the kinds of postnational politics which might emerge through democratic accountability and political reasoning have been systematically ignored by most cultural theorists of globalization such as Clifford and Bhabha. After a careful reading of Habermas' postnational argument, Cheah critiques what he characterizes as 'the autonomy of the political' Habermas constructs, which ignores the fact that capitalist globalization systematically short-circuits the potential for political rationality based on trans-national mechanisms. Further, Cheah rightly argues that no transnational public sphere has emerged, and thus the institutional structures necessary for the supra-national legitimation of political claims are simply not in place for Habermas' cosmopolitical formulations to have weight. At this point, it becomes very clear that capitalism, and the centrality of exploitation and domination at a global scale evidenced in the new international division of labour, is for Cheah, the unsurpassable horizon for thinking the limits of both cosmopolitanism and human rights.

Taking issue with Saskia Sassen's nuanced reading of global cities, Cheah argues that 'the progressive implications of [...] cosmopolitan consciousness are dubious since it is essentially the cosmopolitanism of a new technocratic professional class' (34) that is furthered by globalization. The shifts generated by globalization are thus limited to a particular class fraction, Cheah argues, and this over-inflation of the changes produced in one limited sphere is discernible in other theorists of globalization in cultural studies. Appadurai's theorization of hybridity, 'imagination', rhizomatic movement, gaps and fissures is roundly critiqued for being unable to attend to the intensification of economic exploitation and

political repression under contemporary globalization. Just as the autonomy of the political grounds Habermas' normativity, Cheah convincingly shows how the autonomy of the 'cultural' underpins the normativity of the work of Clifford, Bhabha and Appadurai. Cheah's materialist analysis elaborates on the contamination of human agency in the realm of culture through dehumanization, which most of the rhapsodic theorizations of travelling cultures (Clifford), hybridity (Bhabha) and disjunctive globalization (Appadurai) fail to acknowledge. He frames this critique of their culturalism by emphasizing the relevance of Adorno and Horkheimer's unfolding of the dialectic of myth and reason in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

The 'predication of the culture as the human realm of flux and freedom from the bondage of being-in-nature' ultimately ends up in a 'cultural-reductionist argument' (89), Cheah argues, which needs to be deconstructed by contaminating nature with culture, and recognizing that human freedom can only operate according to the historically specific constraints that situate it in the new international division of labour.

Cheah takes to task cultural studies for simply ignoring the positive political potential of nationalism *within transnationalism/globalization* as a mobilizing force, even when the threat of it being compromised by the state always exists. This is where a politics of contamination, as I put it, is central to Cheah's own counter-formulation of thinking politics under globalization. For him, only a strategic, already contaminated anti-capitalist popular nationalism of the South, in its transnational operations, can furnish an adequate response to globalization. Cosmopolitical theories of hybridity fall back into the 'pre-comprehension' of an uninterrogated and simplified humanism, and 'obscure the material dynamics of nationalism in uneven globalization' (82). In a move echoing the Foucauldian figuration of *asujétissement* as both subjectification (agency) and subjection (domination), Cheah argues that the normativity of the humanism of cosmopolitan culturalism must be critiqued by thinking *together* the human and the non-human, the cultural and the economic (nature),

popular non-state politics and the institutionalization into the state of politics. He convincingly argues that 'cultural identity [...] is generated through a process of subject-formation that does not respect the distinction between rational form and inert matter, nature and culture, passivity and activity. It is a case of *given culture*, where cultural identity is not the product of critical self-understanding [simplistic humanism] but a second nature generated from material processes that are not even of the order of the ideational and visible, such as the tracings of the digestive tract by inequalities in food production and consumption or the weaving of the body through superexploitation under the new international division of labor' (113, emphasis added).

Under globalization then, Cheah argues, through a reading of the quandaries of postcolonial feminisms 'an interminable responsibility to given culture' (114) is the ground on which politics needs to be understood, within the very institutional mirings and complex dialectics of subjection and agency that structures like the nation-state provide. Postcolonial feminism and popular postcolonial nationalism, caught within yet also empowered by the contaminating logic of the nation-state emerge as Cheah's exemplars of a global politics that does not fall into the uninterrogated humanism of much postcolonial and cultural studies.¹ Cheah's materialist critique of humanist cosmopolitanisms' writing off of the nation as a mobilizing locus for anti-capitalist struggle is both convincing and eloquently argued, precisely because it does not fall into the dessicated debates around the local or global, but thinks the two together as the dimensions through which a materially-grounded politics of the contaminated human can emerge. In a cogently argued comparison of two forms of Chinese cosmopolitanism, Cheah exemplifies how cosmopolitanism can both buttress the ongoing exploitation of capitalism, *and* in a counter-intuitively nationalist cosmopolitan mode also further anti-capitalist political struggle.

The second, briefer section on Human Rights begins by underscoring the idealism of discourses of 'human dignity' among both North, Asian and

NGO human rights discourses. His critique here is not particularly novel, even though it is convincing, as he points out that the erasure of socio-economic and political realities ('given culture') will only undermine any effective anti-capitalist politics around the human. While his materialist critique of this normative idealism is satisfying if not exactly novel (it echoes Marx's critique of bourgeois individuality), the examples Cheah provides of how human rights politics can be articulated under globalization are extremely interesting and argumentatively substantial. It is here that the politics of contamination comes out most sharply, in his analysis of both postcolonial feminism and the struggle for and violation of the rights of foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in Singapore. It is here that the deployment of a popular postcolonial nationalism becomes a crucial resource in thinking the human within global capitalism. Tracking the 'perverse processes that lead to the constitutive marking of the inhuman within the human' (232), Cheah argues that the 'human' in human rights discourses around FDWs is necessarily contaminated by the inhuman web of exploitative capitalist social relations, and that nationalism becomes the necessary ground for struggling to defend them: 'We assume that FDWs innately possess human rights, and we appeal to them as trump cards to humanize global processes. But in fact, such rights are generated from the inhuman web of bio-power. Their protection depends on the same technologies of bio-power that facilitate *national development*' (ibid.). Analyzing the popular national outrage that emerged in the Philippines following the hanging in Singapore of Flor Contemplacion, Cheah shows how the 'period of public outrage and mourning in [...] the Filipino popular nation began to question the humanity of its state's policy of exporting labor' (233). He convincingly shows how political organising around the rights of FDWs are routed *through* the nation-state at a transnational level, and how the politics of human rights here is caught between a recognition of the crucial role of FDWs under global capitalism *and* the mobilizing force of grassroots democratic movements in forcing change against the dehumanization of FDWs. The gender and class politics of this national but global political struggle exemplify a politics of contamination where human agency and

subjection are both figured in the context of the openings and closures of predatory global capitalism. Popular Filipino nationalism exerts a pressure on the nation-state to protect FDWs even though it is the nation-state itself that is actively engaged in perpetuating the inhumanity of labour-exporting processes under global capitalism. This logic of contamination is inescapable, and necessary for any effective anti-capitalist defence of human rights, Cheah shows, and functions as the condition of possibility for 'the emergence of the human from the inhuman'(232). Cheah's convincing rendition of 'Humanity within the Field of Instrumentality', the title of Chapter 7, thus provides an effective counter-argument to both the autonomy of the political (Habermas) and the autonomy of the cultural, implicit in the work of Clifford and Bhabha. This contamination Cheah characterizes as aporetic: 'the aporia of a given culture: that the re-cathexis of the postcolonial state by popular nationalism must occur both with and against the state, through the cosmopolitical, which can always work in the service of global capitalism. It involves a risky self-inoculation in which the vaccine could also be poisonous' (115).

It is at this point that Cheah's convincing critique of humanism, and his equally convincing argument for an aporetic politics of the national through the cosmopolitical gets a layer of theoretical discourse added onto it that undermines the effectiveness of his argument. His materialist critique of humanism, and articulation of a contaminated national cosmopolitanism is framed in a deconstructive discourse of self-inoculation, the *pharmakon* as poison and cure, spectrality and hauntings. The precise status of *this* Derridean layering over of his materialist critique is unclear, since this deconstructive discourse does not emerge from any materialist analysis of specific historical conjunctures, but is *added on* as a layer above his analyses. While he convincingly makes the argument that 'an irreducible because systemic contamination occurs in the very court of claims in which the voice of the oppressed can be heard, although it is in this court alone that justice can be done, and we cannot not want this justice-in-violation', this Spivakian formulation of an aporetic politics is intensified by glossing a Derridean argument about 'Time': 'In Derrida's


view [...] justice is not so much a mode of time as the movement of temporalization or the giving of time itself' (173)². Cheah claims that the temporalities of both Kant's cosmopolitan federation and Hegel's presentist argument about the ideal state can be usefully critiqued from what I would argue is an ontological argument about time: 'I want to suggest', Cheah claims 'that his [Derrida's] idea of justice can help us arrive at a more adequate understanding of the contaminated normativity of human rights' (172) since 'the source of normativity – its condition of possibility – can only be the absolute surprise or chance of the event that reopens and keeps time and history going' (173). Now why exactly his impressive materialist understanding of the aporias of politics can *only* be understood through this quasi-religious messianism without the messiah, this routing of a politics of contamination through an ontological argument about 'Time' and the 'Event' is not argued but simply stated. This 'argument' functions literally as a *gloss*, a superficial finish layering over his materialist argument and bears no intrinsic relation at all to it. If Cheah would like his impressive critique of global capitalism to be seen as a continuation of the problematic and flimsy engagement with Marx that Derrida attempted in *Specters of Marx*, then this desire unfortunately undermines rather than furthers the substantiveness of his critique. Firstly, as already stated, this Derridean invocation of Justice does not add anything substantive to his materialist critique of normativity. More damagingly, by dragging into an excellent analysis the entire quasi-theological and ontological invocation of the 'Political' in the later Derrida's work, Cheah unnecessarily opens up the brilliance of his critique of globalisation to all the misgivings one might harbour against this deconstructive invocation of the political and the ethical. It sticks out, as an add-on, contributing nothing to the substance of Cheah's argument, while unnecessarily and ironically opening it to a materialist critique of the kind Cheah himself deployed so well against Kant and Hegel. For if unexamined idealism undermines the theorizations of the cosmopolitical in Kant, Hegel, Habermas and postcolonial culturalist studies, as Cheah brilliantly shows in his materialist critique, then his own superficial packaging of a theory of aporetic politics in the Derridean garb of

ontology is itself thoroughly idealist. Tellingly, he does not *require* this deconstructive messianism to develop his materialist critique; rather it emerges at the end of the book as an awkward add-on. *Inhuman Conditions* is a brilliant, well-argued and substantial intervention in the field of Globalization studies, with crucial implications for political theory and postcolonial and cultural studies. It is unfortunate that the thinly argued, pathos-filled discourse of the 'Event', and of a politics 'to come' currently fashionable in the Humanities is resorted to, to give the veneer of philosophical seriousness to an already impressive work.

Combining the *Dialectic of Enlightenment's* cogent philosophical critique of capitalism, with strongly argued empirical evidence of the depredations wrought by global capital, Cheah's argument brings into contact two very related, though intellectually separated fields in postcolonial studies (which Cheah does not mention): namely, what Simon During famously called 'reconciliatory postcolonialism', and the numerous Marxist and materialist critiques of it by writers such as Samir Amin, Arif Dirlik and Fernando Coronil.³ For some readers, this defence of nationalism from a materialist perspective might seem familiar, since it was precisely this argument that animated postcolonial studies in the 90s, particularly after the publication of Aijaz Ahmad's polemical *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. The value of Cheah's book though, is that it eschews some of the class reductionist Marxist polemics such as Ahmad's, by engaging substantially with *how* the class dynamics of contemporary global capitalism, the gender exploitation of the international division of labour, and the political potential of postcolonial nationalism configure the ground for anti-capitalist struggle. By integrating social scientific critiques of the highly culturalist, and ultimately celebratory invocations of the 'postcolonial', and a philosophical engagement (Kant, Marx, Habermas) with the humanism subtending cosmopolitan discourses, the book as a whole is to be commended for providing a substantial materialist, one might even say Marxist, critique of globalization. In this sense, some of the arguments in Cheah's book might look dated, but the value of his defence of a postcolonial popular nationalism is predicated on his in-depth,

articulate and wide-ranging staging of an encounter between materialism and culturalism within postcolonial studies that had not taken place.

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¹ See Bruce Robbins, 'Cosmopolitanism: New and Newer', *boundary 2*, 34:3 (2007) for a similar reformulation of cosmopolitanism which is thought through the nation-state.

² A summary of Derrida's argument around time is made in Pheng Cheah, 'Obscure Gifts: On Jacques Derrida', *differences* 16:3 (2005).

³ For one example of this debate, see the exchange between Simon During and Nart Moore Gilbert in During, 'Postcolonialism and globalisation: a dialectical relation after all?' and Bart Moore-Gilbert, 'Postcolonialism: between nationalitarianism and globalisation? A response to Simon During', both in *Postcolonial Studies: Culture, Politics, Economy* 1:1 (April 1998).