

Elementary Aspects of the Political: Histories from the Global South

Prathama Banerjee

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Reviewed by Arnav Adhikari, Brown University

At a moment when the “politics of” has become a ubiquitous modifier to unsettle sedimented epistemological categories—literature, aesthetics, affect, etc.—Prathama Banerjee’s *Elementary Aspects of the Political* offers a timely provocation, asking: “What or how is the political?” (1). Bringing diverse traditions of thought across philosophy, religion, and aesthetics into dialogue, Banerjee is concerned with how our modern sense of the political comes to be constituted. Avoiding at the outset the ontological distinctions between “the political” and “politics” framed by thinkers from Lefort to Rancière, Banerjee argues that European philosophy’s disproportionate claim on the political is founded in its separation from the everyday life of politics. Her own claim is thus in the mould of an historian: to identify the contingent forms of the political as they emerge in encounters with so-called “nonpolitical” life: social, religious, economic, and aesthetic (11). These non and extrapolitical practices, witnessed vividly in the context of colonial India, allow Banerjee to shift the grounds of the political away from philosophy, and take seriously what it means to become political.

Elementary Aspects unfolds as a rigorous antigenealogy of the political through its apparent antinomies. The book, echoing Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* and Guha’s *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, is structured around four fundamental concepts or “elements” associated with the modern political: the self, action, idea, and people. Each is explored through coupled chapters that complicate the self-evidence of the political as it coheres around the element, highlighting a dialectical tension within the concept itself. Chapters one and two, grouped under “The Self,” contrast two archetypes of the modern “political man” through the seemingly opposed practices of renunciation (*sannyas*) and realpolitik (*artha/niti*). Embodied by the nineteenth-century spiritualist Swami Vivekananda and the ancient statesman Chanakya, these practices become limit concepts for the political and social as understood by European thought, refusing the participative impulse of either realm for a life of asceticism or a purely practical politics. The renunciate and realpolitik thus raise crucial questions for the modern political subject: “Is the subject ... always already political, irrespective of her action and/or inaction? Or is the act ... a priori political regardless of the agent of the act?” (41). This structuring distinction of *being* politic versus *doing* politics is Banerjee’s most significant point of inquiry.

The opening chapters establish the book's primary sources as well as its guiding methodological framework. Namely, Banerjee draws on Vivekananda's interpolation of the Indic philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, or nondualism, for her own orientation towards the work of theory (more on that later). Furthermore, her interest in performance and the "staging" of the contest between philosophy and politics, whether in Vivekananda's polyglossic public life or Chanakya's theatrical reimaginings, takes seriously the coimbrication of aesthetics in understanding the modern political in the colonial context.

Chapters three and four expand these questions under the element of "Action." If European political philosophy frames politics as a life of exemplary action—participation in public discourse, labor, activism—then Banerjee provides a counterhistory via *anushilan*, or "action meant for ordinary mortals," which finds political valence even in the "bad" affects of disinterestedness or surrender (73). *Anushilan* emphasizes a mode of everyday action liberated from the heroized political subject—a way of being politic versus doing politics. Citing figures like Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Aurobindo, Tagore, Muhammad Iqbal, Gandhi, and Ambedkar, Banerjee traces the battle over whether "the political is to be understood in terms of the subject of politics ... or in terms of the nature of actions, regardless of who performs it" (88). The insights into how labor comes to be politicized as action across economic (Marxists), moral (Gandhians), and anti-caste (Ambedkarites) movements are particularly valuable.

As evidenced in the labor question, Banerjee is at her sharpest when engaging Marxist intellectual history and its intricate adaptations in Bengali contexts. Chapters five and six, exploring the "Idea," tease out the conflict between Marxist and pan-spiritual notions of equality, considered a pillar of modern European thought alongside liberty and fraternity (120). Banerjee shows how equality is actually a highly malleable idea across Vedantic, Islamic, Buddhist, and Marxist traditions, which "had to borrow a certain spiritual orientation" in vernacular contexts and came to resemble the spiritual itself (125). The relationship between Islam's emphasis on everyday practice, Ambedkar's Buddhist commitments to "a religion without a God," and Marxism's own melding of the economic and spiritual in excess of political reason provides fertile ground for discussion (137). Banerjee demonstrates that equality is never simply a political idea, but is bound up in the dialectic of "extrapolitical forces that simultaneously drive and delimit the political" (162).

The concluding chapters build on this dialectic in the element of the "People," where Banerjee provides a close analysis of political formalism, rejecting the nationalist notion of the people as a coherent entity. Instead, she shows how people come to be staged in the forms of the political party and aesthetic production (166). A condensed history of the independent Indian nation via its principal modern

parties, the Indian National Congress and Communist Party of India, follows. Banerjee explains how, in the wake of Independence, the INC and CPI constructed the “masses” they sought to represent, thereby collapsing the people with the party form. This fabrication of the people enacts an aesthetic tension between political realism and fiction that Banerjee highlights by returning to the stage, arguing that the paradox of modern politics, “of naming a people into being while invoking people as prior guarantee—demands a certain aesthetic orientation” (190). As a scholar of literature, this reviewer was particularly struck by the close study of realist representation—recognizable to those familiar with the Frankfurt School debates—through modern Bengali prose, poetry, and drama. Banerjee therefore presents a narrative of the modern political that must be read through vernacular aesthetic forms.

For those interested in alternative political histories of India, *Elementary Aspects* is an ambitious and insightful project that gathers a vibrant, often unexpected, archive for its study. While the contested ground of political theory is at its heart, the book grapples with questions of equal relevance to literary and performance studies. What also feels pertinent is Banerjee’s careful framing of historical and religious figures mobilized by the dominant Hindu right in contemporary India, to advocate for a project of plurality in both thought and being. At a time when centering such an archive appears a precarious (though necessary) exercise for scholars of modern India, Banerjee maintains a firm, Ambedkarite commitment to treating with suspicion any self-evident claims to power. While this work will appeal to South Asianists most urgently, *Elementary Aspects* does honor its subtitle as a history from the global South, not for the transnational scope of its analysis—a notable absence from the text—but for the methodology it models. Resisting postcolonialism’s dual urge to critique Eurocentrism and celebrate non-European thinking, Banerjee insists on rethinking the task of theory itself (219). Rather than looking to replace European concepts with non-European ones, she argues that “the question is really about what kinds of conceptual insights and conceptual personae of global salience emerge from a faithful study of southern realities and materialities” (220). *Elementary Aspects* certainly offers such a study.