

Reflections on Government in Most of the World



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The View from Elsewhere

In 2004, writing about popular struggles in West Bengal, the political scientist Partha Chatterjee made an arresting claim: that in much of what was then called the 'Global South' the traditional categories in which western political thought tended to frame the encounters between subaltern populations and the states that sought to rule them were simply inadequate. At the time, commentators, whether in the conference rooms of the United Nations (UN) and the World Bank, or in the campaign offices of pro-poor non-governmental organisations, tended to portray such confrontations through the language of civil society. The movements of the poor were seen as processes in which

citizens should use justiciable rights to press home their democratic claims against 'duty holders'.

Chatterjee argued that this framing missed most of what was really going on. The normative ideas that animated the liberalism (such as it was) of the post-Cold War moment had their historical origins in political conditions very different from those in the shantytowns of Kolkata. The sweeping narratives of a universalist politics, grounded on democratic rights, that legitimated the new transnational order, had emanated from the specific social context of the European enlightenment, in which the confrontations between rights-bearing citizens and powerful sovereigns had indeed been centre-stage. They had little relevance in political contexts where vulnerable, fragmented, and unruly populations confronted governments that sought to manage them as objects of administration.

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Neither were such populations, as Mahmood Mamdani famously argued, simply the subjects of 'despotism'. Instead, they inhabited what Chatterjee called "political society", which was the terrain of a complex, closely fought and informal realpolitik, in which the apparatus of government confronted the political claims and moral arguments of community organisations, political brokers, warlords, and social entrepreneurs. This ambiguous and shifting contest, Chatterjee proposed, was the terrain of what he called "the politics of the governed", a phrase he used as the title of a groundbreaking book. The book's subtitle (*Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*) drove home his broader argument: far from being exceptional phenomena,

which could be understood in terms of their failure to conform to the preferred pathway for “getting to Denmark”, these struggles were the norm, defining the parameters of everyday politics for the majority of people. They had to be understood in their own terms.

Surveying the state of discourse on democratic government and its discontents 22 years later, one might be forgiven for thinking that the realms outside the North Atlantic have once again been made marginal. The late-liberal ‘global order’ that Chatterjee had interrogated is now undergoing a process of rapid and disorienting decomposition, and the main architect of its dismantling is the global hegemon itself. Much political debate and analysis are tightly focused on this spectacular unravelling in its various theatres: principally, on the complex parting of ways between the USA and its former European allies; the USA’s abandonment of the multilateral institutions it once helped to establish; and the rise of forces (China and Russia) that are not only exposing the hypocrisies of the existing order, but also putting forward alternative visions of how the world should be organised. If one reads the debates on the pages of Substack and elsewhere, it seems that those of us not located in the cultural and intellectual centres of the metropolitan world are once again watching from the sidelines as the battle unfolds, mere bystanders in a History being made elsewhere. As President Nyerere of Tanzania reportedly told the UN in a very different context, when elephants fight, it is the grass that gets trampled.

Understanding the New South

Alternatively, we could take Chatterjee’s inversion further. We could insist that the current conversation about democracy and the crisis of institutions does not benefit from being so exclusively centred on the North Atlantic world. Indeed, we could argue that some of the most revealing and instructive experiences, both of what can go wrong and of what must be built, can be found in the post-colonial and post-socialist worlds, as they navigate complex and often uncertain processes of (never-ending?) transition.

These post-colonial and post-socialist societies constitute what we in this Substack will dub the 'New South'. They have long served as both laboratories for experimentation and sites for the application of solutions developed elsewhere, primarily by the West. The non-West has often been treated, as John and Jean Comaroff put it "as a place of parochial wisdom, of antiquarian traditions, of exotic ways and means; above all, of unprocessed data. These other worlds, in short, are treated less as sources of refined knowledge than as reservoirs of facts". The underlying assumption has been that solutions to the problems of these crisis-prone societies must come from outside. Yet this approach has done little to resolve, and may, in many cases, have amplified, the crises confronting the 'South'.

For the peripheries of the world, therefore, the present moment requires battling through the fog of distorted histories and contemporary complexity, to forge clearer responses to the question asked by John Saul: "What kind of society are we striving for?". Such clarity does not require denying the complexity of truth by taking sides, nor does it require replacing one orthodoxy with another. Rather, it calls for the re-creation of intellectual and political spaces in which complexity can be taken seriously, nuance is possible, and societies can be understood on their own terms. Creating such spaces will not, in itself, resolve the multiple crises confronting the world. It may, however, help us navigate them differently, and create room for imagining futures beyond the narrow choices offered by the prevailing order.

This is the intellectual and political project to which this Substack seeks to contribute: to treat the experiences of the peripheries as sources of knowledge, political imagination, and alternative possibilities, rather than simply as reservoirs of facts or laboratories for imported solutions. This publication is a project of Histories of Government, a research programme located at the School of Government at the University of the Western Cape, in partnership with the New South Institute. The New South Institute is a transnational think tank that uses research and

policy engagement to strengthen democratic institutions in societies shaped by the legacies of Western developmentalism and actually existing socialism. This Substack extends that work into a broader intellectual conversation: one that takes seriously the experiences of the peripheries, challenges inherited hierarchies of knowledge, and asks what we might learn from histories that have too often been treated as peripheral to the making of the modern world.

Machineries of government

Among the most consequential contests of this moment are the intensifying and converging assaults on the institutional and administrative apparatus of modern democratic government. The most obvious example is the mobilisation of popular resentment against the 'deep state', which seeks to sweep away bureaucratic institutions and replace them with a politics built around personal loyalty, private enrichment and the weaponisation of state power. One of the more arresting features of this form of anti-political mobilisation is that it often cuts across the divides that have traditionally distinguished 'right' from 'left' politics. While Trump and his allies rely on white nativism and xenophobia as a legitimating ideology, populists like South Africa's Jacob Zuma and Hungary's Victor Orbán equally readily cast themselves as decolonial enemies of Western elitism in their attempts to undermine the core institutions of good government.

But populist assault is not the only source of attacks on the administrative apparatus of democratic life. Alongside (and sometimes in alliance with) this assault, there is also a technocratic fantasy that Artificial Intelligence-driven algorithmic systems or e-government can dissolve the frictions of administrative judgement, replacing them with optimised delivery systems that promise to fulfil social needs without the messiness of human discretion. And while significant parts of 'the left' still seek to defend the institutional infrastructure of public and social goods, there are also powerful strands of a kind of reflexive anti-bureaucratic anarchism. Consider the popularity of critiques of modern

life that focus on the mindlessness of 'stupid rules' and 'bullshit' jobs. This is a line of argument that ultimately evokes the comforting fantasies of Gemeinschaft, imagining that if only we could abolish neoliberalism, capitalism, or large corporations, we would be able to find each other in the authentic solidarity of unmediated face-to-face community.

The proponents of 'decolonial government' do not offer much help either. Colonial administrative forms were indeed deeply complicit with racist politics and undemocratic power. But the attempt to locate the source of these pathologies in their complicity with "Eurocentric knowledge systems" and ontologies often seems to replicate the reductionist and totalising habits that characterise the most unreflective strands of European essentialism. All too often such arguments fall back on a romanticised representations of 'indigenous knowledge' that cannot be readily operationalised in governing complex modern states. And at the practical level, when such critiques actually have to answer the question of what the machinery of government should look like in a decolonised postcolonial democracy, they reach for a pre-colonial communal past that is historically unavailable, or, worse yet, serves as the legitimating discourse for elite capture.

Each of these political impulses, in its own way, can be seen as a form of utopian politics, animated by a wish to dissolve the "ugly incongruities" that are an irreducible aspect of the reality of modern nation-states, either through the aestheticised politics of fascism, the technocratic fantasy of frictionless needs-fulfilment, or an idealised notion of unmediated community. None of them offers a viable way forward for democratic practice in complex, culturally diverse, and politically fragmented societies in the context of polycrisis and escalating conflict.

Anti-utopia

The Histories of Government programme interrogates and resists this flight from the real terrain of everyday politics. It is informed by a desire for social critique and scholarship to be connected to a pragmatic engagement with the actual conditions of political life. For this reason, our interventions will eschew the predominantly ideological mode of much modern critique, and the all too prevalent tendency to use critical analysis as part of an enterprise intended to validate prior political commitments or resuscitate sacred narratives. Instead, we follow Stuart Hall's 1988 call for a "conjunctural political analysis" that is willing to "break new ground and tell us things we did not already know".

We do this by investigating in detail, and with attention to nuance, the stakes and the challenges of the field of government in the post-colonial and post-socialist worlds. While our work is informed by a lively interest in questions of policy and the formation of political will, our attention will be largely on the institutional infrastructure and practical deliberative processes that underpin everyday political and social life. In our view, the task of analysis is to understand the spaces and contexts of political contestation on their own terms, rather than interpreting them primarily through externally imposed frameworks.

In the posts that we will share in the coming months, our focus will be on showing how attention to the detailed working of the machineries of government in the landscapes of the New South can illuminate questions of broader significance. One strand of discussion will illuminate the research of the Histories of Government programme itself, exploring what can be learned from the detailed investigation of processes of state-building and bureaucratic innovation in post-apartheid South Africa. Another strand will consider the politics of migration governance in Africa, examining how states and supranational bodies manage the movement of people across the continent, the gap between the African Union's free movement protocols and their implementation on the ground, and what the governance of borders and

mobility reveals about the capabilities and limits of postcolonial state institutions.

Further strands will consider the politics of public service reform in South Africa and comparable societies. We will focus in particular on the contested effort to build a professional, politically insulated civil service in conditions where patronage networks and factional interests continuously press against the boundaries of bureaucratic autonomy, as well as the evolving anatomy of state capture and corruption, demonstrating how organised networks of private interest systematically penetrate and redirect public institutions, and what it takes to interrupt and reverse such capture once it has become entrenched.

A final thread of argument will engage with the transnational order itself, particularly with the possibilities and limits of South-South cooperation as an alternative framework for thinking about governance, development, and sovereignty in a world where the liberal international order is decomposing, and the countries of the New South are navigating the competing demands of old and new great powers.

All these analyses will attend closely to the detail, nuance, and complexity of political phenomena in each of these contexts. Equally, each of these strands of inquiry will, we believe, illuminate questions of broader significance for the future of democratic governance in a world whose multiple crises are more interconnected than any single national or regional analytic tradition can adequately grasp.

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