

## subaltern man

## phalanx 7

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The 'postcolonial theorist' Homi K. Bhabha has long been a presence in the literary world, as a commentator who seems to set terms for the reception of what is called Indian English Literature. But of late Bhabha seems to command larger stretches of cultural terrain. He has become a considerable presence in the American artworld, for instance, and so a presence on what one may call its anglophone margins; and his appearance at the recent Documenta may well make Bhabha a personage in the artworld at large.<sup>1</sup>

The Documentas have come to be the artworld's great events, quinquennial gatherings of mind in which the practice of art tries to take its bearings in the larger world. The exhibition of artworks had been their principal business till now, but that was just the last of the five 'platforms' on which the work of the last Documenta was done. The large themes addressed there were a measure of its organizers' ambition: which was **to examine and analyze the predicaments and transformations that form part of the deeply inflected historical procedures and processes of our time.**<sup>2</sup>

Bhabha appeared on the first of these platforms. The theme there was **democracy unrealized**: but **in an affiliative spirit** he proposed **an alternative title: Democracy De-realized**. We shall soon consider what

1 This essay was published in the *The Frontline* in March 2003; but without the notes that are supplementing it here; and 'the recent Documenta' then was the one held in 2002.

2 All the text in **boldface**, here and in what follows, has been quoted verbatim; and putting quoted text so seems best, for a great deal has been quoted.

he went on to say: but as Bhabha spoke on his listeners may have imagined themselves witnesses to some annunciation. The 'de-realizing' of democracy appears to have brought forth a hero: whom we might baptise Subaltern Man. Though Bhabha does not introduce his marvel so, this sublimation of the political animal seems a lineal descendant of the 'subaltern' of the 19th century's colonial empires: the 'native' trained to do his European masters' work. The soul of Subaltern Man seems to have been enriched, however, through his long gestation, by the sufferings of all whom Empire wronged; and he is announced here as a moral exemplar to its inheritors, and a model citizen of the world to come.

That will seem a caricature: what gets said as we go on should excuse it. But before taking up with Bhabha one should record that the historian Immanuel Wallerstein had been stood, as well, on his annuncial platform; and though rehearsing what Wallerstein said there will delay us, his remarks on 'Democracy, Capitalism and Transformation' will provide us a useful foil here.<sup>3</sup> Wallerstein surveys **democracy and the World System up to now**. The phrase "world system" suggests a broad perspective on what would usually be called the global economy: which has come to be ruled by capital for capital seemingly. Now the evolution of the world system in the last 200 years or so has secured a nominal democracy, at least, to the polities of the First World; and if democracy is measured formally, by the extent of suffrage and the protection by law of civil liberties, then the nation states of North America and Western Europe would be models of democratic polity. But neither possessing the vote nor enjoying individual freedom has given their citizens an equal

3 The proceedings of Documenta's platform on **democracy unrealized** have been gathered into a volume bearing that title, published by the firm of Hatje Cantz.

say in the running of these states; and how capital might subvert suffrage seems plain to see. Enlarging **what one means by democracy** by **insisting on substantive results in addition to mere electoral process** has extracted from the powers of capital **a set of concessions** that one may **generically call the Welfare State** : which Wallerstein defines **loosely as all State action that supported and made possible increases in wage levels, plus the use of the State for a certain amount of redistribution of the global surplus.** <sup>4</sup>

This redistribution, however, has only benefited **the cadres of the system**: those **who are not at the the top but have skills** useful to those at the top. These 'cadres' are not uniformly spread across the across the globe: in the Third World **at most 5 per cent** of the population could be accounted their personnel, while **in the wealthiest states perhaps 40 to 60 per cent** might be accounted such. Wallerstein's cadres are **constantly being solicited and appeased** by the powers of capital, because **their assistance is needed to maintain the political equilibrium of the world system**: which they do by keeping **in their place the majority of the world's population**. That will sound harsh; and particularly so to anglophone Indian ears; but we must keep the circumstance very much in mind as we look at Bhabha. Democracy has meant little to the majority as **they have received very little of its presumed benefits** and extending **the redistributive effects of the welfare state** to more and more of the world's people does not seem feasible, because enlarging the cadre would slow down too much **the ceaseless accumulation of captial**. But **calling a halt to the democratization process is politically difficult** as well; and the increasing demand for substantive democracy will result,

4 Since **governments are crucial to their market success** in manifold ways, **no capitalist can afford to ignore them** Wallerstein maintains; and as acquiring or retaining office in representative democracies seems to require a good deal of money, **no serious capitalist can afford to ignore this obvious source of pressure on governments** without **losing out to competitors or hostile interests**. So the great **degree to which money buys access** to political power, and thus undermines suffrage, would be **absolutely normal and unexpungeable from the ongoing political life of the capitalist world economy**. The powers of capital could clear space for themselves in subtler ways of course: consider the institutions and discourses that orchestrate the transnational movement of money.

But I do not mean to suggest, by putting things as I have, that what money actually gets done is controlled to any great extent by human agency; considered *in toto* the operations of capital maybe as little concerted by human doings as the water cycle, for instance, is constrained by human arrangements for irrigation.

Wallerstein thinks, in **an intense political struggle over the next 25 to 50 years over the successor state to the capitalist world economy**. This will be a struggle between those who want that to be **a basically democratic system, and those who do not want that**. Actively *wanting* democracy is not a simple matter though. One has to **go back to the drawing board and say what the struggle is about**, and some broadly conceived equality must be its object, because **without equality in all areas of social life there is no possible equality in any area of social life, only the mirage of it**.<sup>5</sup>

The challenge to *imagine equality anew* would certainly tempt artists; but one really must ask if they have the wherewithal to do so; especially when the artworld receives the likes of Bhabha as wise men. Let us consider his 'de-realization' of democracy now. The coinage is meant to name an **alienation disclosed in the very formation of the democratic experience and its expressions of Equality** in the first instance; but Bhabha wants, as well, to use the word **in the surrealist sense of placing an object, idea or image in a context not of its making, in order to defamiliarize it, to frustrate its naturalistic and normative 'reference' and see what potential for translation that idea or insight has: a translation across genre and geopolitics, territory and temporality**. The exercise is recommended because **the power of democracy at its best**, Bhabha declares, **lies in its capacity for self-interrogation, and its translatability across traditions**. One may wonder whether if just that is what is best about any sort of democratic polity. Suppose, anyhow, that one's notion of democracy can indeed be 'placed' anew in some such

5 That will sound alarming; and not just to libertarians, since the organized pursuit of equality has produced peculiar horrors. But **the sorry showing of Leninist regimes** does not deter Wallerstein: **their practice was deeply inegalitarian, a mere variant on other regimes in peripheral and semiperipheral zones of the capitalist world economy**}, and so **their experience tells us absolutely nothing about the possibilities of an egalitarian social system**.

One wonders how the artworld at large would receive all this, considering just how practice has come to depend on the powers of capital. But the congregation at Documenta would have applauded, one thinks, and there would have been proper shows of feeling: some lamenting of the Constructivists' fate perhaps.

way; what concordance or congruence must be supposed to obtain, now, between social process on the one hand and the 'psychic automatism' that Surrealism prized on the other, for the 'frustration of naturalistic and normative reference' to reveal anything at all about an alienation 'disclosed in the very formation of democratic experience'? Bhabha does not let us in on the secret: or perhaps he does not posit any relation here: for his phrasing implies that any such 'placing' would be surrealist. But what could these different 'de-realizations' share, then, besides a name? All our 'placing' is set at naught, however, by what immediately follows. **If we attempt to De-Realize Democracy**, Bhabha now says, **we recognize not its failure, but its frailty, its fraying edges or limits that impose their will of inclusion and exclusion on those who are considered — on the grounds of their race, culture, gender or class — unworthy of the democratic process.** How the 'fraying limits' of an idea or a process might 'impose their will' we are not told; and one wonders what special purchase on the notion of democracy — and on *all* contexts 'not of its making' — tells Bhabha that its 'potential for translation' will *always* be actualized thus.

Reading on will tax charity; but let us persist. **The great British liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill**, Bhabha next avers, **realized that one of the major conundrums of his celebrated theory of democracy consisted in the fact that he was a democrat in his country and a despot in another country: in colonial India. What needed to be acknowledged — as Mill was not able to do in that great document of modern democracy, *On Liberty*, was the self-contradictoriness of liberal**

**democracy that raged like a war of values in its very soul.** As it happens, *On Liberty* is not quite a 'document of democracy'. For Mill's defense of individual freedoms is not a defense of democratic governance; and, far from being an 'expression of Equality', it is advanced on what moral philosophers would call consequentialist grounds. Individual freedoms are valuable precisely because they foster *individuals*: men and women who are able to think and act in defiance of custom and convention and received opinion.<sup>6</sup>

Mill's theory of democracy is detailed in a tract titled *Representative Government*; and his arguments for democracy are consequentialist as well. He distances himself from **the political theories of the last age: in which it was customary to claim representative government for England or France by arguments which would have equally proved it the only fit form of government for Bedouins or Malays.** Such arguments would have appealed to certain rights which men and women are supposed to naturally possess. But though rights matter to Mill — talk of rights is not 'nonsense on stilts' for him, as it was for Bentham — he does not premise democracy on natural rights. There is 'a war of values' between Mill and his 18th century predecessors certainly; but no 'self-contradictoriness rages in the very soul' of democracy therefore. For Mill representative democracy is **the ideally best form of government** not only when it ensures that **the rights and interests of every or any person are secure from being disregraded**; democratic governance must also ensure that **the general prosperity attains a greater height, and is more widely diffused, in proportion to the amount and variety of the personal energies enlisted**

<sup>6</sup> Regarding the England of his day Mill fears that **when the majority ... have learnt to feel the power of the Government their power then individual liberty will be as much exposed to invasion from the government, as it already is from public opinion.** In certain moods *On Liberty* seems to rue democracy: individuals of great talents or social position will no longer be powers unto themselves, Mill laments: and **today the only power deserving the name is that of masses, and of governments while they make themselves the organ of the tendencies and instincts of the masses.**

**in promoting it.** Where such desiderata are not realized democracy need not **promote a better and higher form of national character** than other forms of government might: and, importantly, that it improves or preserves 'national character' is what finally justifies a form of government to Mill.

The national character of a polity depends on the 'races' that compose it; and it turns out that very few of Mill's races have the virtues needed to make a success of democracy. The individual members of a polity must possess **an active and self-helping character**, he insists, if they are to govern themselves well; and they must be capable, besides, of an **unselfish sentiment of identification with the public.**<sup>7</sup> Having asked **under what social circumstances representative government is inapplicable**, Mill considers **a race who have been trained in energy and courage by struggle with Nature and their neighbours, but who have not yet settled down into permanent obedience to any superior:** democracy would yield them little, he thinks, because their assemblies **would simply reflect their own turbulent insubordination.**<sup>8</sup> But **extreme passiveness** and **ready submission**, on the other hand, would vitiate democracy just as much.<sup>9</sup>

Mill's ethnology seems a rough and ready thing, answering imperial purpose only perhaps: or so one is apt to think when he maintains, in his concluding chapter on **the government of dependencies by a free state**, that while those English colonies settled by **Anglosaxon stock** should be able to govern themselves well, colonies like India would only be tyrannised by representative assemblies composed of **natives**. That

7 Mill holds that the **Anglosaxon races** best exhibit such character and sentiment: which are **the foundation of the best hopes for the general improvement of mankind**. One wonders if he would have gone on thinking so had he seen what the Family of Bush, Father and Son, have managed to burn.

8 Mill thought the Bedouin such: who could be taught **the first lesson of civilisation, that of obedience**, only through **the despotic authority** of a military leader.

9 Because **a people thus prostrated by character and circumstance would inevitably choose tyrants as their representatives:** Mill must have taken his Malays for such.

would not be music, quite, to Indian ears; but nothing Mill says warrants Bhabha's pronouncement that **internal to democracy is a struggle between a sincerely held 'universalism' as a principle of cultural comparison and scholarly study, on the one hand, and ethnocentrism, even racism, as a condition of ethical practice and political prescription,** on the other; or the apparent corollary that **at the heart of democracy we witness this de-realizing dialectic between the epistemological and the ethical, between cultural description and political prescription, between principle and power.**

The confluences of category here are not easily sorted out; one wonders, for instance, what 'sincerely held universalism' could be serving Mill as a *principle*, rather than *term*, of comparison. Anyway, as he considers colonial India Mill seems to be doing just what Bhabha recommends: he puts his 'idea of democracy' in 'a context not of its making' — a proceeding which would already be surrealist if we take Bhabha's word for it — and finds very little 'potential for translation' there. The 'context' here is Mill's sense of Indian political reality: which his 'ethnocentrism' may very well distort.<sup>10</sup> But if Bhabha is right the outcome of the experiment would have been the same regardless. It seems truer to say, of course, that Mill simply sacrifices principle to power in concocting an India to justify imperial dominion; but on neither telling of what he does is Mill's understanding of democracy 'de-realized' in any way, by any 'dialectic between cultural description and political prescription.'<sup>11</sup>

Let us look now at how, when considering the government by free states of dependencies they possess **either by conquest or by**

10 How racial bias may have shaped Mill's diagnoses is a delicate question. His years with the East India Company would have given him a certain understanding of what was politically possible on the subcontinent. But *Representative Government* was written after the Mutiny — and, as Thomas Metcalf suggests in *Ideologies of the Raj*, 'native' behaviour that once might have been accounted for by adducing historical circumstances was then more likely to be explained by deductions from putative racial character.

11 But may be I am reading Bhabha wrong: the 'fraying limits' of democracy, after all, are what 'impose their will of inclusion and exclusion'. Perhaps he means, then, to discern in Mill's writing some symptom of an 'alienation disclosed in the very formation of democratic Experience'. The 'de-realizing dialectic between the epistemological and ethical' might be

**colonisation**, Mill handles the ‘conundrum’ with which Bhabha had saddled him. The phrase “a free state” may be glossed, to begin with, as “a polity where the people are ruled by representatives they choose”. Such rule need not be institutionalized, as governance properly speaking, in what we have come to call the State; but when it is, a free state for Mill would be a polity where the power exercised over citizens by the State, in the course of governance, is authorised by the citizens themselves, through the acts and decrees of a representative body. Whether this suffices for democracy is another matter: one might insist, for instance, that in a democratic polity the representatives of the people must both initiate and direct *all* action by the State. Democratic polities are best realized through nation states, Mill thinks, as free countries whose peoples are formed either from single races or from some mixture of ‘similar’ ones. But while **the government of a people by itself has a meaning and reality**, he says, **such a thing as the government of one people by another does not and cannot exist**. What is important to note here is that Mill's reasoning is all of a piece: the very considerations which make democracy ‘the ideally best’ form of government *also* make it likely that **a free country which attempts to govern a distant dependency, inhabited by a dissimilar people, by means of a branch of its own executive, will almost inevitably fail**.

One may smile at the political anthropology, so to call it, that leads Mill to think so. Mill seems to consider races as biological *materiel*, almost, for nations: which, when they are considered as polities — as social wholes which both organize and are organized by the exercise of power — seem

concomitant to, or something constitutive of, that alienation; and it would, as such, be a discursive process Mill is subject to, rather than one he initiates or subjects himself to. The words ‘epistemological’ and ‘ethical’ would not qualify conscious reflection on knowledge and moral action now, as they ordinarily do, and must point to shaping or disabling constraints on thinking rather. But a ‘dialectical’ relation between such constraints would be another thing, altogether, than any relation between description and prescription which could be called so: the latter could be only a symptom, again, of the former. Perhaps postcolonial theorists need not observe such categorial niceties: minding which might seem footling worry, merely, from the stage which serves Bhabha for a world. If there is no tension, however, between description and prescription in Mill's text, then one must ask what evidence Bhabha has for any ‘dialectic’ between whatever ‘epistemological’ and ‘ethical’ constraints Mill labours under.

to be complex historical entities, whose emergence and territorial consolidation have been materially conditioned by the exigencies of geography and climate. Nation states have to be incarnated as countries, one might say, for Mill: and he does not think that representative democracy will work in polities that extend over many nations.<sup>12</sup>

But it is not any 'ethnocentrism' which makes him curtail what may be thought democratic privilege, in a free nation that has acquired a dependency whose 'natives' cannot govern themselves, and insist that the only proceeding **which has any chance of tolerable success** now is for that nation **to govern through a delegated body of a comparatively permanent character: allowing only a right of inspection, and a negative voice, to the changeable Administration** of its own State. What makes Mill 'a democrat in his own country' almost requires him, one might now say, to be 'a despot in India'. I do not mean to defend Mill; there is a great difference, after all, between acquiring dependencies by conquest rather than colonisation; and perhaps Mill is being disingenuous when he neglects that. But his understanding of democracy is not 'de-realized' by any conundrum here.

Bhabha's divagations would not be worth notice, of course, but for his reputation as a theorist. That someone so plainly inept should have gained such repute will surprise: until one considers what has come, in artworlds at least, to pass for theory. Immediately following the dicta just quoted we find that **those who have been the victims of Democracy De-realized have their own lessons to teach. For they experience not only the injustice of colonization and slavery, but** — Bhabha now declares,

12 Mill's sense of democratic possibility is conditioned by specifically English experience, of course; but developments in Europe after what Hobsbawm calls the Age of Revolution seem to more than shade his view. He takes the happenings around him to have disclosed limitations inherent to democratic polity: rather than looking on them as historically contingent containments of democratic impulse. Even a cursory look through Hobsbawm's *The Age of Capital* would have acquainted Bhabha with the sorts of socioeconomic pressure that compromised democracy in Europe, around the time *Representative Government* appeared, as national polities were forming or consolidating themselves there.

astonishingly, for someone acquainted with India — such victims also **know in some profound way the ethical impossibility of perpetuating discrimination, segregation, or global injustice in the modern world.**

One cannot say whether this is mendacity or delusion: the man ministers, after all, to the American artworld. Bhabha seems to take himself for a 'victim' as well, standing where he does; and, and as his lesson draws on, the litany of names alone shows how very much he has to teach us: Gramsci, Auden, Wittgenstein, Derrida. What these seeming familiars might hear themselves saying, as Bhabha serves up their words, is anyone's guess.

One wonders what Bhabha and Wallerstein could have said to each other. Wallerstein does hold that equality **is the opposite of** the racism which seems to be **the pervasive sentiment of life in the capitalist world economy**; but the phrase 'sentiment of life' would not be understood in any congruent way by Bhabha, one thinks, because his talk of 'cultural justice' seems immune to the circumstance that the world system is a particular sort of economy. Re-imagining economic arrangements would be integral to re-imagining equality for Wallerstein; and the seeming compact between the powers of capital and the American state would surely loom large for him, if only for the distortion that induces, now that capital is so agile, between the State and the people in polities elsewhere.

Let us consider how Bhabha diagnoses the ensuing complication. **Yielding national sovereignty to the international regime leaves the compromised nation-state suffering from social schizophrenia**, he says,

as **its affiliative authority is now metonymically displaced onto the global city** in which one finds **the unbalanced playing field of the growth of global capital and the claims of marginalized people**. This 'international regime' is not specified; but we may suppose it constituted by the American state acting in concert with the powers of capital, with the states of Western European polities as junior partners. The first claim is attributed to Manuel Castells; and the actions of the State in India under the current government might be thought to illustrate it nicely. The phrase last quoted serves to air a commonplace; but Bhabha pays no heed to how capital might unbalance 'the playing field' or compromise national polities. The second claim seems to be Bhabha's own: let us unpack it. The 'affiliative authority' possessed by the international regime in 'the global city' is being compared, presumably, to the authority possessed by the State in national polities: and the suggestion is that the first authority is a displaced *form* of the second. One may well wonder if that is so: the international regime has simply usurped the authority of the State in many national polities. But grant, for the moment, that the 'affiliations' which underwrote the authority of the national State have been 'displaced onto the global city' somehow or other: one will now ask what features of this displacement the word "metonymic" particularly illuminates or clarifies. But Bhabha does not, alas, enlarge at all on his 'theorising' here: and perhaps this mysterious metonymy is a matter of plain fact to him.<sup>13</sup>

The current international regime seems to incarnate what Bhabha pictures when he talks of the State in general terms; and the hegemony

13 Since 'social schizophrenia' is what 'the compromised nation-state suffers' as 'its affiliative authority is metonymically displaced onto the global city', one expects from a theorist some account of what metonymy has to do with schizophrenia particularly.

of the State is best contested, he avers, by 'subalterns' who do not **homogenize or demonize the State in formulating an opposition to it.** The subaltern is brought on stage as a political *type* here: of which the native faces of colonial empire seem poor examples: but why these may be thought ancestors to the chosen among Bhabha's subalterns should soon come clear. Bhabha seems to start with Gramsci's notion of the subaltern; but **those who are committed to cultural justice and the emancipatory work of the imagination** are the exemplary sorts of subaltern now, coming together in **a cultural front whose struggle for fairness and justice emphasizes the deep collaboration between aesthetics, ethics and activism** as they **intervene in state practices from a position that is contiguous or tangential to the 'authoritarian' institutions of the state.** Bhabha himself would sympathize with such a 'cultural front' surely; so let us see how his writing here itself emphasizes this 'deep collaboration'.

How its 'laws' are enforced by the international regime seems to have disclosed to Bhabha only that **today's world is marked by a denser sense of jurisdictional uncertainty and unsettlement, of a kind that earlier forms of globalization — colonization and imperialism — had not quite encountered.** The genocidal sanctions imposed on Iraq between the two Gulf Wars were, one must now suppose, the unfortunate consequences of some 'jurisdictional uncertainty' that the current 'form of globalization' just happened to encounter. One cannot tell if Bhabha would contest the legality of these sanctions; but beyond the legal reasoning which secured them there **rises another, contiguous and conflictual horizon of ethical and textual interpretation,** he says,

which, though it **may not be readily achievable or visible**, nonetheless **represents a profound commitment to fairness and justice**. This 'horizon' is not 'readily visible' principally because **the concept of [global or] world civilization is very sketchy and imperfect**. Bhabha is quoting Levi-Strauss here: but he appears to agree, and to concede that in using **categories like world civilization or global culture** we must guard against too carelessly **thinking of aims [or claims] to be pursued by existing societies**. How anyone could be contiguous to a remote horizon remains a mystery; anyway, the hope that the current form of globalization will lead to 'world civilization' can only be **a wager on the future** now. But though the lineaments of world civilization are not visible they **sustain a fragile faith in the making of a world of fairness**: even as this faith **is rendered all the more anxious by the practical impossibility of achieving global justice in any comprehensive sense**.

Faced with injustices legally perpetrated on existing societies by the international regime, Bhabha would, it appears, lay his wager on the dimly seen future which the doings of this regime will bring about: and the subaltern strategy of remaining **conflictual but contiguous** seems to consist, now, in conceding with no protest what Hegel had in chilling phrase called *the truth of power*. That will seem less than kind; and perhaps my redactions have imposed on Bhabha's argument — such as it is — an alien logic. Sympathetic readers may come to see, through the verbiage, how the concession to power here is informed by some vision of the 'ethical order' which Hegel thought the State should embody; one can only hope they are not hallucinating when they do so.

We were, anyhow, considering the prospect of some ‘deep collaboration between aesthetics, ethics and activism’; so let us look next at how Bhabha commandeers poetry for his purposes. He had begun his adventures with legality and justice by quoting from Auden's *Law like Love*. The stock figure of the judge there, whom Auden early on makes declare that Law is The Law, is taken for legality personified; and after laying his wager Bhabha quotes six lines from the long penultimate stanza of the poem, in which Auden is said to **capture with great insight the different kind of ethical and poetic justice which lies beyond the roundelay of ‘Law is The Law’**. Our theorist could, one supposes, provide examples of ‘unethical justice’ were he pressed; anyway, the entire stanza is reproduced across, and I must ask the reader to read it through before going on.

Lines 11 through 16 are what Bhabha quotes. By reciting just these he suppresses the assertorial relation between what gets said through lines 13 to 16, taken together, and what the lines 11 and 12 say: a relation the prior clauses following the three occurrences of “*If*” had established: and doing so masks how the second statement is uttered in despite of the first. Bhabha goes on to declare that **it is the first move of ethical and aesthetic attitudes to ‘slip out of our own position’ and identify with an-others condition**, and that **to be ethically or aesthetically ‘concerned’ requires us to identify with ‘otherness’ or alterity; to relate to what ‘un-concerns’ us and uncannily splits our sense of social sovereignty and moral certainty**. The ‘first move’ of ‘ethical and aesthetic attitudes’ may well be some such identifying: but Auden seems to neither say so, nor do so, in lines 17 through 20, after

1 *If we, dear, know we know no more  
Than they about the law,  
If I no more than you  
Know what we should and should not do*  
5 *Except that all agree  
Gladly or miserably  
That the law is  
And that all know this,  
If therefore thinking it absurd*  
11 *To identify Law with some other word,  
Unlike so many men  
I cannot say Law is again,  
No more than they can we suppress  
The universal wish to guess*  
15 *Or slip out of our own position  
Into an unconcerned condition.  
Although I can at least confine  
Your vanity and mine  
To stating timidly*  
20 *A timid similarity,  
We shall boast anyway:  
Like love I say.*

he slips into *an unconcerned condition*. Identifying with alterity may well underwrite **ethico-political claims to justice and fairness** which are **based upon a sense of symbolic efficacy and are central to the notion of rights**. But, again, in ‘boasting’ that law is like love Auden is not underwriting any claims ‘central to the notion of rights’; and to see why all one need do is read the following and last stanza, where law is

*Like love we don't know where or why  
Like love we can't compel or fly  
Like love we often weep  
Like love we cannot keep.*

Auden wrote this in 1939, while he was still a professed Communist, a few years before becoming a Catholic. But in neither avatar would he have confused loving human beings with respecting human rights; and it is anyone's guess whether a law that is like love in just these ways will respect, more than any other, claims to justice which are based on such rights.<sup>14</sup>

So much, anyway, for any collaboration our theorist might be able to discern between ‘aesthetics, ethics and activism’. Bhabha next enlists Claude Lefort to explain **how the aspiration and agency of rights makes State power confront its authority and autonomy** by appealing to justice over mere legality; **claims to human rights**, Bhabha quotes Lefort saying, **do not attack state power head-on but obliquely**, sidestepping that power as it were, as they **touch the centre from where the State draws the justification of its own right to demand the allegiance and obedience of all**. Perhaps so; but why Bhabha supposes that this **follows**

14 The last stanza of *Law like Love* seems to recover from seeming absurdity some, at least, of the prior confluences of “law” with “other words”. If law is like love in just these ways, then it may be that *law is neither wrong nor right*, though in another way than Auden makes his *law-abiding scholars* write; and it may be that *law is the senses of the young* as well, set out in *treble tongue* by *the grandchildren* even as their *impotent grandfathers shrilly scold* that *law is the wisdom of the old*. After slipping out of his *own position* into an *unconcerned condition* Auden makes us hear anew how law is for *the soft idiot softly Me*: and that subtle turning on itself seems to be what makes this stretch of verse a poem: however accomplished as verse it might otherwise be.

“Love” is an uncanny word, to be sure, in Auden's poetry. But it is never found in the neighbourhood of “justice” or its relatives, I shall hazard claiming, except in the last two stanzas of *September 1, 1939*: to which *Law like Love* is actually a companion piece. One has to wonder if Auden's contemporaries, Christian or not, read in the poem a challenge to the dogma of the absolute difference between Yahweh's law and God the Father's love: how Luther is talked of in *September 1, 1939* would have invited them to, one thinks. Taken so, the poem might be heard to announce an eschatology obverse, so to say, to Christian theodicy; and though Auden's verse will not easily lend itself to such experiments,

his **description of the subaltern strategy** is a mystery. Wherever human beings accommodate colliding wants without deserting or trying to destroy each other, their relations may properly be described as **conflictual but contiguous**. But as human beings rarely find themselves *out of* such situations, Bhabha's formula simply submerges, within the most general instance, those situations where claims to human rights might secure the repeal of unjust laws; and so cannot indicate any strategy to follow in just such situations.

Doing so seems a waste of words almost, but let me describe the logical vacuum Bhabha has produced. He seems to outline some particular mode of political agency with his talk of subalterns: who contest power not 'head-on' but 'obliquely', always **flying just below the level of the State**, and remaining 'contiguous' to it no matter how they come into conflict with it. But in 'theorising' that agency Bhabha makes almost all our doings samples of subaltern action: which makes entirely vacuous his notion of the subaltern. **I have long argued**, Bhabha had said as he began his sermon, **that when faced with the perils and trials of democracy, our lessons of equality and justice are best learned from the peoples of the colonized or enslaved worlds, and not from the Western imperial nations and sovereign states that claim to be the seed-beds of democratic thinking**: presumably because the 'colonized and enslaved' have **harvested the bitter fruits of liberal democracy**. Perhaps such lessons are best learnt so, whether or not such peoples know ethical possibilities in any profound way, and maybe the sort of subaltern Gramsci envisaged will emerge, in the world as we have it, from among

perhaps one could rescue Bhabha from himself by supposing Auden to use "love" somewhat as Hegel uses the word in *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate* — putting aside the complications 'cultural alterity' would introduce. Someone determined enough might then go on to take Bhabha's subaltern for a variant of Hegel's slave, standing to the international regime somewhat as slave does to master in the dialectical evolution of the just State. The 'de-realizing' of the notion of democracy by its 'surrealist' placings in alien contexts might even do duty, now, for the 'internal dialectic' of desire and reason that both conditions and is conditioned by the 'external dialectic' of master and slave in Hegel; and the evacuation of meaning from the term "subaltern" might be taken for the first step in the dialectical process Hegel outlines in his *Logic*. Such an exercise would have to begin by granting Bhabha some strength of mind: of which there is no hint in his addled writing. But perhaps some jobbing cultural theorist can be induced to overlook that difficulty.

them; perhaps this subaltern will even come, as Bhabha seems to suggest, from those descendants of 'the colonized and the enslaved' who, as champions of 'cultural alterity' in the First World itself, inhabit a **third space that is neither the Global as the Gigantic nor the local as smallness**. But nothing Bhabha goes on to say tells us why or how such preceptors will bear forth the brave new just: Subaltern Man as Bhabha draws him is a cipher, merely, and no political alternative — the pun is intended — to anything at all.

The 'cultural injustice' Mill seems to abet, when he pronounces Indians incapable of governing themselves democratically, seems the most bitter of democracy's 'fruits' for Bhabha. That sort of thing is what the 'de-realizing' of democracy amounts to, seemingly, for him; and from Bhabha's frequent invocations of the Black American poet and activist W.E Du Bois we gather that the search for 'cultural equality' will join the progeny of the colonized and the enslaved as the bearers and social nurses of Subaltern Man. One wonders how true that is in America even: most Indian expatriates there are willingly absorbed into the cadres of Wallerstein's world system even as they retain their cultural particularities. More seriously, one wonders if belonging to any 'cultural front' will give prospective subalterns the wherewithal to 'fly below the level of the State' at all. They would have to comprehend enough now, of how the international regime exercises power, to anticipate its moves now and again; and that would require some practical understanding of the world system as an economy.

Bhabha himself could be stood within Wallerstein's cadres, if one could say how his peculiar 'skills' are useful to those who administer the world system; but that would require some analysis of the many ways in which the study of the Third World in the American academy serves 'the international regime' he supposes himself to be flying below.<sup>15</sup> There is no room for that now, so we shall have to leave our 'theorist' with the last word on 'aesthetics and activism'. Looking at a **photographic essay on the lifeworld of containerized vessels**, which he takes for a **narrative about the survival and extension of public space as a political and cultural question**, Bhabha sees **in the oblique cropping or cutting of the frame as the prow ploughs the global seas, lying at an oblique angle and conflictually contiguous with the ship's forward movement, a horizon that disturbs and diverts the deadly direction of the global economy**. A 'conflictually contiguous horizon' that disturbs and diverts, no less, the way the world goes: what a wonder: and so readily sign.<sup>16</sup>

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15 Enough has by now got said, I trust, to suggest why Bhabha's subaltern is a 'lineal descendant' of the colonial one; but fleshing out the claim would take a deal of work.

16 One cannot but recall, now, Baudrillard's final verdict on the Occidental artworld: a *conjunction of imbeciles*.