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"De-westernizing PolComm Theories and Research:
More Perspectives, New Directions"

Questioning "De-Westernization"[1]

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I.   POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF OUR "DE-WESTERNIZING" PRESENT

Academic inquiries usually lag behind real-world developments and offer their analysis belatedly. The invitation to contribute to this special section on "de-westernizing Political Communication" bucked this trend. When we received the invitation in the summer of 2023, talk of de-westernization and decolonization was thick in the air in India, the world's most populous democracy and the focus of much of our academic research. Calling for a decisive end to "the colonial mindset" that in their view had remained dominant more than seventy-five years after formal independence, Indian state agencies had launched a wide-ranging campaign of symbolic and material makeovers. Throughout the country, there was a rush to rebuild and rename buildings, streets, neighborhoods, cities, and federal states that traced their existence and nomenclature to "foreign" colonial rule. The renovation drive targeted the name of the nation-state itself. Days before the G-20 summit was scheduled to begin in the capital city of New Delhi in September 2023, the media reported that a change of the "Western" name of India to the "indigenous" Bharat was imminent. Photographs of invitation cards for an official G-20 dinner hosted by the "President of Bharat" subsequently confirmed these claims. De-westernization is the contemporary zeitgeist, it would seem. Our categories of analysis and categories of practice (Brubaker 2013) appear to be in perfect sync for once.

But far from being a cause for celebration of the arrival of the marginalized and exploited, this alignment reflects an unsettling political convergence. The real-world coordinates of the call for de-westernization and more significantly "decolonization" in the Americas and in Europe have somewhat seamlessly mapped onto the spaces of right-wing ethno-majoritarian or authoritarian populist politics in many parts of Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. In India, the main institutional actor calling for decolonization and de-westernization is a government that is run by a political coalition openly committed to a program that has undermined the autonomy of both the judiciary and the media. In power since 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party or BJP for short) is the political wing of the Hindu nationalist or Hindutva (Hinduness) movement that has advanced an elite/upper caste (Brahmanical) Hindu-first vision of India for close to a century, directly inspired by the examples of early 20th-century European fascisms. Hindutva organizations advocate for an ethnocratic order (Jaffrelot 2021). They push to change the postcolonial secular Indian republic into a Hindu state that privileges the demographic majority community of Hindus over the 100 million plus of its Muslim citizens. In the dreamworld of elite-caste Hindu India and across much of its diaspora, Muslims and other religious minorities deserve to be second-class citizens and subject to varying degrees of subordination and control, while mention of caste violence and humiliation is rebranded as a form of "Hinduphobia" (Sundaram 2022; Truschke 2022).

For much of the twentieth century, the Hindutva project materialized as an insurgent street politics of mass mobilization against the secular political establishment. Over the last decade, it has shape-shifted into a governmental project that enjoys state power, widespread public legitimacy, and considerable international recognition and acceptance (Hansen and Roy eds. 2021). This transition from movement to governmental Hindutva has been accompanied by a concerted mainstreaming or normalization of its politics. New normative themes such as civilization, development, and anti-corruption are layered onto the mediatized political repertoire of governmental Hindutva to help reorient its majoritarian rhetoric. The Hindu nationalist rebranding of decolonization and de-westernization plays a similar role. The call to challenge colonial legacies and Western hegemony takes center stage in the official rhetoric of the Indian state today, from the renovation/renaming projects described earlier to official speeches at the UN General Assembly, the G-20, and other prominent international forums.

Repositioned within the governmental Hindutva force-field, decolonization and de-westernization are terms that have a deep historical and affective resonance within the wider terrain of Indian democracy. They circulate and articulate globally as well: they are recognized as unobjectionable and in fact salutary terms among liberal and progressive intellectual circles worldwide. At the same time, they are densely invested with Hindutva ideological meanings. The righteous anger of the BJP and the Hindutva movement targets British colonialism and its imposition of Western secularism in the colony. The colonialism paradigm (and the call to decolonize) is also deployed against Muslims and Islam in India, with the so-called "Muslim invasion" of India 900 years ago contrasted with the authentic and indigenous Brahmanical Hindu culture of Bharat.

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The invitation to de-westernize Political Communication must contend with these ambivalent resonances and circulations. To respond to the discursive entanglements of illiberal Hindutva politics with progressive academic epistemologies, intellectual vigilance is the task at hand. We must accept the invitation to de-westernize keeping the political and ideological work that this term does firmly in our sights. This in turn means that we clarify the purpose and form of our epistemological choices—*why* and *how* we de-westernize—and steer away from the essentialist and exclusionary impulses, and the claims of absolute difference and authentic purity that drive the "right-wing anti-colonialisms" thriving in contemporary India and other parts of the world.

From this perspective, de-westernizing does not mean a quest for "non-Western" or "global South" theory. It does not mean we set up the non-West/the South as a new and alternative theoretical center, that we replace one locational certitude with another. Rather, de-westernizing means that we change our questions and frameworks and not our answers. Through empirical and historical relocations—studying media from India and not only from the United States, for example—we can expand and historicize the terrain of our inquiry and ask differently.

Here are three examples of what de-westernizing as a commitment to new questions, to a way of asking rather than a way of thinking, looks like. In the following section we ask again, *from* India, about some of the main concerns of Political Communication.

II. ASKING AGAIN: NEW FRAMES FOR POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

1. *Media and Democracy: Beyond methodological nationalism*

The intellectual foundations of Communications are located firmly in Cold War U.S. social sciences with some late-20th-century critical interventions, mostly from British cultural studies and continental social theory (Chakravartty and Jackson 2020). This has translated into a field that has long been peculiarly impervious to addressing colonial histories including the U.S. legacy of settler colonialism and imperialism, despite the global proliferation of the field corresponding to the two decades of U.S.-led "War on Terror" in Iraq and Afghanistan/Pakistan (Aouragh and Chakravartty 2016). Meaningfully "de-westernizing" means we critically revisit these Cold War normative framings of media theory and expand the frame of analysis beyond national borders. This means paying attention to arenas of global governance from the World Bank and IMF to the ITU, that have since the 1980s aggressively pushed for privatization, deregulation, and commercialization of postcolonial media and information infrastructures. For example, from the vantage point of India we see that the Hindu right has successfully co-opted the discourse of decolonization with Islamophobic populist support often mobilized through

Facebook and Whatsapp. Hence, we might trace the global push towards liberalization and deregulation over the last three decades that have led to the unchecked reach of platforms like Meta in India alongside the concentration of private ownership of news media with ties to the right-wing ethnonationalist ruling parties. These global neoliberal regulatory reforms that birthed the rise of Big Tech and transformed the role of news media in societies like India must also be seen as attempts to counter anti-colonial anti-capitalist worldmaking attempts of various United Nations bodies and of Afro-Asian, Pan-African and Intercontinental formations from an earlier time (Elsava et. al. 2017; Getachew 2019; Mahler 2018).

Liberal democratic paradigms downplay these transnational anti-colonial institutional histories and continue to privilege the role of the national state and (narrowly) electoral politics in producing and sustaining democratic and free media. As a result, they fail to offer meaningful insights on many of the pressing concerns of our time, the rise of disinformation, for example. Political Communication and Media Studies whether from India or most anywhere that has been shaped by histories of European colonialism and racial capitalism, must reckon with the entanglements and conjoint interests of the state and capital that extend well beyond national borders. To put this very simply, an Indian media studies cannot be limited to the space and agency of the Indian nation-state alone.

2. Media and Society: the institutional legacies of colonial/racial power and capitalist modulations

De-westernizing Political Communication enters messy if not counter-productive conceptual territory without substantive engagement with the institutional legacies of colonial/racial power and the ongoing production of difference under capitalism. This is not something unique to India or to the non-West per se, but rather, speaks to critiques offered by theorists such as Olúfẹ́mi O Táíwò who worry about the "elite capture" of contemporary identity politics within the U.S. context (Táíwò 2022). The common concern here is the political emptying out of the more radical projects of "decolonial" movements based on indigenous and feminist struggles in the Americas (Lugones 2010) or the 20th-century race-conscious anti-colonial internationalism, to simply advocate the pursuit of pluralistic difference.

Across most deeply divided and unequal societies that are also formal political democracies, there are wide divergences between political, economic, and social equality. In India, where the top 10 percent of the nation's economic elites own 73.4 % of its wealth (Chancel and Picketty 2019; Himanshu 2019), starkly unequal social realities reaffirm the persistence of inequalities of class, caste, and religious community. Media are embedded in these uneven social worlds, and their social constitution and effects must be understood through these refractions. For instance, in the last decade, India, along with its South Asian neighbors, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, has been home to some of the worst incidents of social media-fueled violence against minorities. These run along fault lines of caste, ethnicity, and sectarian and

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religious difference that were encoded in colonial institutions of rule, and are embedded as well in modern market relations (Mosse 2020). The reproduction of these institutional legacies of colonialism and the ongoing production of difference under capitalism, render unequal and fissured social worlds that must inform any analysis of media's social ecologies and imprints (Chakravartty and Roy 2013, 2017; Roy 2021). Even when our main analytical attention is on the world-altering effects of new media technologies, the historically patterned pathways and colonial/racial institutional legacies of contemporary social and media worlds should remain in focus.

3. Media and the Populist Problem: From media affordances to the people's shadows

Media's "populist problem"—how contemporary media have enabled and extended the hold of populist politics across the globe—is an abiding concern of contemporary scholarship and public discussion. As the "problem" frame makes clear, populism is mostly seen as a deviant departure from liberal democratic politics-as-usual, and its rise is related to the deficits and breakdowns of liberal democratic order (for exceptions, see Laclau 2007; Mouffe 2018; Riofrancos 2017). Demand-side explanations hold that democratic disappointments and failures fuel public support for a populist politics (Roy forthcoming). Supply-side explanations of populism shift emphasis to the distinctive agents and institutions that craft and animate populist political styles and affects. The techno-social "affordances" of new, social and digital media are prominently featured in these accounts (Gerbaudo 2018; Treem and Leonardi 2012), and the study of mediatized populism is mainly framed in presentist terms.

These discussions also advance a common thesis of media mystification. Reviving older (and discredited) "hypodermic needle" accounts of media effects, many explanations for the rise of populism reference the powers of media (particularly digital and social media) to persuade and ultimately distract or delude the voter from their "real" concerns. Contemporary theorists of digital media and democracy bemoan what they see as a recent scourge of disinformation and polarization resulting from algorithmic aberration of our "shared values" (Benkler et. al. 2018; Howard 2022; Persily and Tucker 2020). Most of these scholars account for the rupture to a bleak "post-truth era," as resulting from a mix of "institutional decline, public sphere disruptions, and the growing attacks on journalism and enlightenment values" (Bennett and Livingston 2018: 134). This scholarship uniformly harks back to a presumed golden age of U.S. or Western journalistic objectivity and professionalism of the mid-20th century, defined implicitly against the pernicious model of Soviet state control and censorship. Setting this aside, we can build instead on critical scholars of political communication (Davis et. al. 2020; Kreiss and McGregor 2023; Kuo and Marwick 2021) who help us move beyond this race-neutral and Cold War framing of 20th-century media theory which remains a default universal normative model of liberal media theory and praxis.

Specifically, when we study media and populism in India, other non-presentist and non-exceptionalist frames become relevant. Populism cannot be explained through Facebook and WhatsApp alone, nor does it necessarily entail a rupture with normal political styles and presumptions. Populism cannot be seen as a result of the failures of liberal democracy given that many world regions where populist politics flourishes at present were not liberal democratic to begin with. There are lineages of populist politics that stretch before and beyond the present moment. Populism is always and necessarily about something "more than populism" (Wilde 2017).

Presentist analyses as well as those that describe new/social media as the prime agent of populist politics obscure how populations have long been politically "prepared" for the mediatized populism that exists today; how older political forms and imaginaries help us explain why the populism of today has found such fertile ground. Thus, if populism is a "thin-centred ideology" or world-view of political and social life as a Manichean moral combat between a pure people and a corrupt elite (Arditi 2007; Laclau 2007; Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Müller 2016), then we need to understand how it both converges and conflicts with other, existing and older, ideas of the people: the central subject of modern political thought and practice. Expanding beyond techno-deterministic accounts of media affordances, we should ask about the varied and contending "shadows of the people" that haunt the political field of mediatized populism. What ideas of the people, and of who counts as "human," influenced and shaped 20th-century projects of democratization, nation-building, citizenship, and modernization (Chakravartty and Da Silva 2012; Roy 2007)? How have they shaped contemporary political norms of democracy and freedom, or the boundaries of citizenship in drawing the mediatized line between "worthy" and "unworthy" victims of state violence?

Approaching the "populist problem" from vantage points outside Europe and North America,, leads us toward such contextual and genealogical pathways carved out by the compressed political histories of democracy and nation-state formation in the second half of the twentieth century in much of the world. Layered and dense political fields have resulted, in which there is no singular and exceptional populism (or any other political formation, for that matter), that can stand apart as altogether new, regardless of the novelty of enabling media technologies. Belying their dissonant and disruptive effects, political interventions such as populism are better grasped as dialogic, ongoing, sedimented processes that are knotted with and refracted through other, older as well as current, political ideas and formations. Their analysis requires an appropriately wide-angle frame that zooms out beyond the immediate thematic time-space (e.g., "Media and populism in millennial India") to look clearly at these entanglements.

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