**Antagonizing the Nation: Muhajir Ethno-Modernity in Contemporary Pakistan**
Tahir Naqvi

Formed in 1984, the Muhajir Qaumi Mahaz[1] (MQM) poses challenges to the ethnography and political theory of postcolonial subnationalisms. While the MQM changed its title from an ethnic 'muhajir' to a 'composite' ('mutahidda') subnationalist movement in 1996, it represents the economic and political interests of Pakistan's muhajirs -- the North Indian migrant Urdu-speaking community who migrated to urban Sindh province after the 1947 Partition of India. Although 'muhajir' (refugee) is a *post-independence* ethno-communal category, it marks the segment of Pakistan's population most acutely communalized as a 'Muslim-minority' under British rule.

'Post-foundationalist' scholarship on religious and ethnic subnationalisms in South Asia has brought deconstruction to bear on such movements. Pointing to the priority of essentialist conceptions of historical alterity in legitimizing ethnic conflict, this scholarship locates essentialism's discursive emergence, contingency, and organizing force within an colonial-orientalist genealogy of communal political subjection[2].

The proposed dissertation seeks to extend the post-foundationalist critique of Third World subnationalism through a historically informed integration of postcolonial criticism, radical democratic theory and interpretive ethnography. Specifically, I will investigate the counter-hegemonic rationality propelling muhajir subnationalism's arguably *non-essentializing* framework of nationalist selfhood. I contend that muhajir subnationalism's ambivalent and secularizing departure from a fixed representation of community, self, and history reflects broader transformations in the material and symbolic constitution of political modernity in the postcolony. This involves the emergence of identitarian political rationalities that negotiate the "contingency" of a hegemonically produced social, given the latter's formation in the weft of political antagonism[3]. Muhajir subnationalism's mode of ethno-political hegemony is posited to be both limited by (at the level of politicization and popular mobilization), and in excess of (in its actual

---

[1] trans. Refugee Nationalist Movement

[2] Daniels, V. 1996. *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropology Violence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Tambiah, S. 1996. *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Gupta, D. 1996. *The Context of Ethnicity: Sikh Identity in a Comparative Perspective*. Delhi: Oxford University Press; Van der Veer, P. 1993. *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Van der Veer, P. and C. Breckenridge (eds.). 1993. *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament. Philadelphia*: University of Pennsylvania Press. On post-foundationalism see: Prakash, G. 1992. Post-Colonial Criticism and Indian Historiography. In *Social Text*. v. 31/32; also, Homi Bhabha's (1995) *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.

representation of 'community'), the colonial logic of communal antagonism. This study seeks to outline this double-movement as an emergent 'post-national' aesthetic and enuciative practice. I argue that muhajir subnationalism's antagonistic production of social identity gestures beyond the representational fixity that has been central to nationalism's purchase as a hegemonic mode of historical consciousness. By recognizing muhajir subnationalism's *own* post-national meanings, my theoretical objective is to move beyond macrological definitions of post-nationalism. Such a perspective problematically privileges the nation-state by defining post-nationalism as an *effect* of subnationalist mobilization within declining (globalizing) conditions of state sovereignty[4].

Once only officially identifiable as 'Pakistanis' or 'urban Sindhis', muhajirs now claim political recognition as Pakistan's fifth nationality and demand an absolute increase in state resource-allocations. With roots in Karachi's Islamist student politics, the MQM arose out of the All Pakistan Muhajir Students Organization to claim subnationalist status in 1984. Despite its limitation to urban Sindh province, it is Pakistan's third largest political party, holding the majority of electoral votes in Karachi (51%), and a number of seats in both the provincial and federal senate.

Unlike Pakistan's other subnationalisms, muhajir identitarianism is aided and confounded by two factors: a) muhajirs' relatively 'exemplarist' official linguistic and religious competence, and b) their urbanite non-indigeneity. Not only is Urdu Pakistan's official language, muhajirs have had more prolonged exposure to the colonial-era discourses of modern Muslim religious reform and communal separatism which organize official and orthodox regimes of religious nationality in contemporary Pakistan. It is important to note that 'exemplarism' implies the mode of muhajirs' subjection to official nationalism, for while colonized-elite Urdu-speaking 'migrants' were key agents in Pakistan's official national discourse, most 'muhajirs' have historically been the lower middle-class/petit-bourgeois patients of that discourse.

This conflation of national cultural exemplarism and subnationalist counter-hegemony is quite unique to analysis. I suggest it allows for a more complex political theorization of how subnationalist political rationalities actually *radicalize* nationality's historic claim to social power, belonging, and subjectivity. The proposed dissertation will therefore approach how an *organic* muhajir political elite has re-constituted the elite-colonial and statist premises

---

[3] See E. Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.
[4] I.e.. Appadurai's (1996) *Modernity at Large: The Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

of Urdu, communal history, and rational-modernist Islam into pragmatic "discursive genres"[5]. This will involve a practice-based ethnography of muhajir subnationalism's cultural construction of state nationalism through organized techniques of divestiture, inversion and mimesis. According to the MQM's leader, Altaf Hussein, muhajirs have no need to maintain their "contract with either Urdu or Islam". And yet, it is precisely the MQM's de-authorization of Pakistan's national cosmology into a range of *immediate* discourses (i.e., of neighborhood discipline/militancy, communal separatism, rational self-improvement, suffering and entitlement) which I hope to examine for its counter-hegemonic address and narrative effects. This poses a radicalization, I argue, insofar as such techniques effect a *de-nationalizing self-subjection* to official nationalist cosmology by rendering it politicized, 'workable', and therefore, contingent.

The MQM leadership resembles what Sudipta Kaviraj (*Daedalus*, Winter 2000) calls India's "new elite", whose horizontal links to a lower-middle and middle class constituency, national (versus Anglicized) educational subjection, and rights-bearing citizenship has substantially revised the hegemonic premises of political antagonism. I wish to add to this important revision by examining how a recent nationalism like the MQM can bring the often competing representational demands of counter-hegemonic strategy and national 'community' into a more mutually constitutive relation. Towards this, I will analyze how the two-fold problematic of muhajir cultural hegemony and subnationalist counter-hegemony has engendered a *modernist* framework of ethnic difference. Here, I contend that the essentializing/substantivist trope of national 'origins' has been substituted with a progressivist temporality of muhajir difference. This has positioned rational secular-modernity and "middle-classness" as subaltern values against an imagined "feudal" Punjabi-dominant. A key ethnographic aim of the proposed dissertation is to understand how the political values of subordination and social alterity figure an antagonistic, discursive, and therefore, *specific* modern spatio-temporality at the level of popular muhajir narrative. Post-marxian political theorists have argued that the essentializing turn to mythical or originary idioms of collective identity is predicated upon the self's misrecognition of the 'lack' extending from its negative formulation in the contingent weft of political antagonism[6]. The proposed dissertation problematizes a much more ambivalent scenario of antagonism's relation to identity. It does so by assessing the implications of misrecognizing oneself as a national subject through arguably 'realist' and 'modernist' nationalist genres. I will analyze how these genres politicize the values of contemporaneity, progress and

---

[5] Bayart, F. 1993. *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*. London: Heinemman.

secularism as forms of *subaltern difference*. I therefore hope to illustrate how muhajir subnationalism is able to maintain a close articulation between the provisionality of *counter*-hegemonic antagonism and the production of nationalist subjects. Furthermore, this can reflect how subnationalist difference is not merely the prefigured *effect* of marginalizing state power, but also involves an active articulation between marginality, difference and rights at the constituent level. To put this together: what kind of contingency *and* normativity is ascribed to social difference when an organic leadership constructs 'modernity' as its site of misrecognition? What does it mean to recognize this modernity through antagonism?

By problematizing muhajir subnationalism's de-essentializing radicalization of nationality, the proposed ethnography will convey a complex inter-relationship between official subjection, subnationalist antagonism and the production of a 'modern' national self, all of which are guided at the structural level by the emergence of an *organic* nationalist hegemony. A broader scholarly aim of the proposed study is a more precise analysis of how the symbolic and material stakes of ethno-politics are understood differentiated and brought together by political subjects themselves. An interpretive approach to the interplay of the boundrial ('negative') and substantive practices of ethnic identity aligns this study with recent interrogations of the methodological limits of the primordialist-instrumentalist binary in the study of ethnic conflict[7].

---

[6] Žižek, Slavoj. 1992. "Eastern Europe's Republic of Gilead". In Chatal Mouffe (ed). Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community. New York: Verso; Laclau, E. 1990. *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*. London: Verso.
[7] Comaroff, J. Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Politics of Difference in an Age of Revolution. In John Comaroff and Paul Stern (eds.). 1995. *New Perspectives on Nationalism and War*. Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach Publishers; Hale, C. 1995. *Resistance and Contradiction: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State, 1894-1987*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.