



'Sub-human' beyond citizenship. A review of Nasir Uddin's *The Rohingya*.

The Rohingya: An Ethnography of 'Subhuman' Life. *Nasir Uddin*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, India, 2020, pp. xviii + 250. ISBN 978-0-199-48935-0 (hbk).

The term 'sub-human' fills me with hesitation. Its genealogy is troubling of course, as it has been used as a justification to exterminate. Indeed the division of the world between humans and those of a lesser claim to humanity may be the defining contrivance of the European modernity that we've all had to deal with since at least the nineteenth century, if not long before. Nasir Uddin is brave to resurrect the term, demanding that we look squarely at the effects of legal, historical and cultural dehumanizing that the Rohingya in Burma and Bangladesh are subject to.

The distinction between humans and sub humans involves a savage sorting of winners and losers (Sassen, 2010) with multiple and durable violences. This 'savage sorting' is a process of dealing with historical problems—who are 'we', and 'them', whom should we live with, and by what code? Uddin rightly notes that many of these questions, and the process of savage sorting, become concealed, often by explanations that turn to the citizen/non-citizen dichotomy: citizens have the right to have rights, including the right to be recognized most fully as human, non-citizens do not. As Uddin suggests throughout his book, this explanation leaves little to no space to understand the nuances and multiplicities of the violences that first enable sub-humanity and then inflict still further devastations.

What might it look like to move beyond explanatory concepts and to recover the historical experiences from which these concepts were cast (Williams, 1977)? The 'citizenship/non-citizenship' dichotomy tends to explain away the complexity of the processes, antagonisms and experiences of the savage sorting of citizens and others. One consequence is a political blandness: a certain strand of scholarship inspired by liberal European political thought fixates on the 'agency' of people at the sharp end of this sorting. 'Agency' is a derivative notion that impresses further the citizen/non-citizen hegemony while not taking into account the multiplicities of violence that the hegemony of citizenship forgets and that impinge on the ability to exercise 'agency'.

When speaking of the enforced sub-humanity of the colonized, Frantz Fanon (1963) speaks of a twofold process: first the wielding of a daunting structural repertoire where the sub-humanity of the colonized became entrenched in how we see, what we think, how we live; second the tantalizing offer of a possibility of escape, of entry into the 'civilized' world through understanding and adapting to European modes of government and thinking, but ending in a sense of never quite being able to live up to or approximate to European norms. As I will suggest later, the norms that enable escape out of subhumanity, like agency, radiate outwards from its European core, notions of citizenship and so on are translated into local idioms in local spaces, but in so doing it creates new hierarchies, new senses of who approximates to citizenship, who approximates to humanity and who doesn't.

In what follows, I think with Nasir Uddin about the *problem* of sub-humanity, meaning understanding the processes and experiences of the 'savage sorting' which are concealed by the citizen/non-citizen dichotomy. Following Raymond Williams (1977), I suggest that what is important is breaking through the stultifying concepts—citizenship—that seek to account for subhumanity by understanding the historical experiences and processes of sorting

humans and sub-humans. I put forward here three historical experiences and processes integral to the sorting, and which remain as issues and problems when paths are imputed out of sub-humanity. I do not have the space to fully elaborate on these ideas so they remain a little cursory, but the idea is to think with Uddin and to offer a basis for thinking imaginative and disruptive politics, beyond the recourse to citizenship or notions of agency.

The three historical experiences and processes are: (1) the control of the social reproduction of others, (2) the delegitimation of other histories and (3) the control of local idioms that selectively translate the idioms of European modernity—democracy, development, citizenship—to local contexts.

The control of the social reproduction of others

The relegation of people to sub-humanity enables and makes commonplace many forms of violence, not least callous and neglectful disregard. To disregard is to fail to view some fellow humans as familiar, to not allow the consciousness that they may have a claim to you to intrude and become meaningful. Unlike cognitive approaches to disregard, an anthropological approach such as that of Uddin's work, pays attention to the rhetorical, legal and political *work* that must be put in to refuse the meaningfulness of some humans, to neglect the claims that they may have on you and on us. Disregarding others as subhuman enables the elevated humanity of some: the cheapening of the value and dignity and intrinsic meaningfulness of some lives enables the social reproduction of others. It is a tool that fosters and feeds on inequality and exploitation, evident in the European colonial project and in the labour-cheapening tactics of the small businesses that the Rohingya turn to for 'employment' (meaning the conditions of possibility for life, dignity and social reproduction).

Dominant groups need to manage the social reproduction of subalterned others to preserve and legitimize the economic, political and cultural narratives and structures that are the foundation of their domination. This control over the social reproduction of others, meant the production of a population surplus to the structures of meaning and value; allowing for the cheapening of their body power, meaning that they become available for unwaged or poorly waged labour, and invisibilized in the political sphere (Rajaram, 2018).

The delegitimation of other histories

Alongside the often intimate disregard that makes the social reproduction of others contingent on it being of service and value to the social reproduction of 'us', there is a historical disregard—a fragmenting and minimizing of history. Uddin speaks of the struggle that Rohingya have in articulating a history. Their histories are questioned, as are the legitimacy of their stories of who they are and how they have come to be, their attempts to render their mobilities political and meaningful, and their attempts to concretize their ethnicity. Walter Benjamin (1940) says that history is a history of progress; it is a history of the victorious where the defeated are, if not entirely invisible, then *structurally disconnected*. That is to say, the history of the victorious naturalizes the structures of identity, community, politics and ethics that embed and naturalize the primacy of their social reproduction. The structural disconnection of others is a condition that many of the world's people are subjected to, people termed as migrants or refugees perhaps in particular (Khosravi, 2010).

Uddin suggests, with Hannah Arendt, that this structural disconnection (he doesn't use the term) is marked by the confluence of life-nation/state-rights—which is to say that the right to have rights as a human is contingent on being birthed into a nation state that hasn't already rejected your humanity. The point can be stretched a little further, it is the extent of a group's disconnect from the structures that make life, community, ethics and politics that essays the likelihood that they will remain resonant in the way the political has been rendered (Ranciere, 2001), or remain in secure command of the capacity to access resources and translate these into a durable right to hold on to these.

The problem of access to rights

The third aspect of the human/sub human distinction is then the capacity to translate access to resources into a legitimate and durable right to these. The stories of progress that Benjamin (1940) speaks of are concretized through key idioms, where tangential and contingent ways of thinking identity, community, ethics and politics become idiomatic. The obvious and most resonant of these are the idioms of Western modernity. Concepts like 'democracy' and 'development' are taken to be universal idioms that generate a more or less successful disciplinary pattern, which is to say the strength of the ideology behind the universal idioms guide the local translation of these idioms.

If Benjamin's history is a history of the victorious that naturalizes the relations of rule and inequality that benefit the social reproduction of some while, at the extreme, dehumanizing others, then it may be said that the claim to universality and generality becomes translated into specific idioms. The question is who—in Burma, Bangladesh or wherever—has the prior right to guide the translation of universality into locally recognizable idioms? What can universalist notions of European modernity like democracy, citizenship and progress look like in Bangladesh or Burma, and what can it not—must it not— look like?

One further dimension of the human/sub-human distinction is then the capacity to wield knowledge that is legitimated by recourse to the triumphalist universalisms of western modernity. To give a stark example, Narendra Modi and the BJP's retranslation of the idiom of citizenship to a local setting has involved imprisonment and expulsion. The same may be said of the ways in which citizenship and politics have translated in the Bangladeshi and Burmese context with respect to the Rohingya. To take these further, we see then a difference in the relative capacity of people to translate access to resources—food, housing, public space—into a durable right that fits in and is resonant with local idioms of politics, democracy, citizenship or what have you. The capacity to translate access into right is tied fundamentally with the capacity to not be disregarded as a minor fragment of a failed history.

Conclusion

The sorting of humans and sub-humans is not encompassed by the citizen/non-citizen dichotomy. To explain it in this way is to ignore the struggle and processes that have led to the specific forms of distinction in different spaces. I have suggested that the control over the social reproduction of others, of their histories and of their capacity to translate access to resources to a durable political right over these resources is integral to the production of some groups as sub-human. Their entry into the political sphere—without recourse to their histories, their idioms and a sense of the value of their social

reproduction—can lead to new forms of marginalization, rather than emancipation. That is the gist of Fanon's critique of the decolonizing process: so long as the idioms and structures of rule remain (and are institutionalized in courts, education systems and political institutions) the result will be a secondary political emancipation, based on aping and never quite managing to approximate the European versions of these. Uddin's work adds another layer to this. The translation of 'universal' idioms of European modernity into the postcolony, in places like Bangladesh and Burma, involves then thinking exclusion and inclusion in the sorting of who can belong and who must not belong.

The three historical experiences and problems that I touch on here—the control of the social reproduction of some in the service of others, the fragmentation of histories, and the controlling nature of local idioms of European modernity—are I think central to understanding the political process of sorting humans from non-humans. Uddin's text is valuable in giving us insight into the production of sub-humans building on the citizenship/non-citizenship dichotomy but not being confined to it, and opening us up to the complex processes whose analysis is integral for a new politics.

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