INTRODUCTION

Against False Binaries

> What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or
> the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end
> of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological
> evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy
> as the final form of human government.
>
> <div align="right">Francis Fukuyama, 1989</div>

> People with a culture of poverty have very little sense of history.
> They are a marginal people who know only their own troubles,
> their own local conditions, their own neighborhood, their own
> way of life. Usually, they have neither the knowledge, the vision
> nor the ideology to see the similarities between their problems
> and those of others like themselves elsewhere in the world.
>
> <div align="right">Oscar Lewis, 1971</div>

The problem

The world is richer today than it has been at any time in recorded history. 1 per cent of its richest people own over half its wealth, while 80 per cent of the global population shares less than 5 per cent of this wealth.[1] Such inequalities and the poverty they underpin[2] sit awkwardly with the fact that more people inhabit democracies than ever before, where they elect their governments and are a promised a share in political participation.[3] Indeed, of the over 1.6 billion people estimated to be living in poverty,[4] close to a billion inhabit democracies.[5] Their very existence challenges a long-dominant assumption in academia and beyond that poor people are incapable of, and therefore unsuited for, democracy.[6] The scepticism about democracy surviving in a socio-economic environment marked by poverty and inequality was particularly challenged at the turn of the century, when scholars gushed that democracy was on the ascendance.[7] Since then, however, fears that democracy is 'in recession'[8] have steadily gained ground. Geopolitical events from around the world, economic recession in capitalist democracies, and widening

inequalities[9] across the globe have sobered the enthusiasm for democracy on display at the turn of the century.[10] The gnawing realization that processes labelled as democratization have been concomitant with widening inequalities of wealth and income has led observers to worry whether democracy is a luxury that people facing deprivations and disparities can afford.

The research question

That poverty and inequality cohabit with democracy provides the starting point for the themes explored in this monograph. What does living in a democracy mean for the world's billion-plus poor, people who simultaneously confront deprivations and disparities? This is the central question that motivates this monograph. One response to this question has been that poor people absorb the ideas and identities encompassed in notions associated with democracy, of citizenship, rights, improvement, and modernity. Seen from this perspective, the poor consent to democracy. Scholars who hold this view suggest that poor people seek *assimilation* into the 'universalistic' ideals associated with democracy?[11] Another response to this question is that the poor are so overwhelmed by the precariousness of their livelihoods that they remain immune to the charmed promises of democracy. Their everyday vulnerabilities compel them to seek recourse to clientelistic practices, communitarian vocabularies, preservation of the lifestyles with which they are familiar, and the comfort of their traditions. This point of view suggests that poor people are in conflict with democracy. Scholars who propound this view hold that poor people's 'particularistic' ideas and identities, which stem from their insecure lives, lead to the perpetuation of their *difference* vis-à-vis democracy.[12]

This way of approaching the problem maps on to what some social scientists have called the 'universalism/particularism conundrum' (Beiner, 1995, 12). This conundrum refers to the alleged dichotomy between universalistic and particularistic approaches to conceptualizing political life. Scholars who endorse the importance of universalistic relationships assume that the march of democracy connects ever-greater numbers of people with each other by engaging them in common practice through institutionalized elections and government by discussion. They expect the establishment of democracy to expedite the withering away of particularistic relationships. In their hopeful narratives, the poor seek assimilation into the universalism promised by democracy. They vote,

make appeals, form associations, and adhere to the rule of law. Such scholars assume that, like others in society, poor people's political horizons would eventually be shaped by liberal ideas of individual autonomy and freedom unencumbered by primordialist collectives.[13] By contrast, scholars who endorse the importance of particularistic relationships lament the march of universalized ideas and celebrate the limits to their advancement. These authors document the ways in which the poor draw on their cultural traditions and communal networks to stake claims. In their accounts, people in poverty fall back on ethnic solidarities and traditional idioms to press their demands. Their very real constraints restrict their political horizons to making particularistic demands.[14]

Critical political theorists interrogate the binary between the universal and the particular. Ernesto Laclau (1992), for instance, is emphatic that the mutual exclusion between universalistic and particularistic approaches does not hold either conceptually or empirically. The issue at stake for him is to identify the struggle over the principles upon which the universal is constituted, rather than to pit a false binary between the universal and the particular. Likewise, Iris Marion Young (1989) tells us that the particularistic demands by oppressed social groups are not intended to shatter the political community as such but to facilitate their inclusion *as equals* in it. Historical sociologists reveal the ways in which the values that are today commonly associated with European universalism were actually built on a variety of quite particular achievements, such as the initiatives of the Black slave rebels in eighteenth century Haiti (Truillot, 1995) or the popular associations of thirteenth century England's pastoral regions (Somers, 1993). These insights render the putative divide between the universal and the particular unsustainable. In fact, universalist ideals appear to be forged on the crucible of quite particularistic practices. Entanglements, rather than neat dichotomies, characterize the relationship between the universal and the particular. The political practices readers will encounter in this book illustrate these entanglements. This book contributes to challenging the binary that often drawn between the universal and the particular, a binary which – as the title of this introductory chapter suggests – is false.

The arguments

In this monograph, I contribute to the growing body of literature which demonstrates that poor people neither seek assimilation into the universalistic

premises of democracy nor aim to perpetuate their difference. Rather, I propose an alternative perspective.[15] By focussing on the manifold practices of people in poverty, as well as the ambivalent ideas and heterogeneous identities that impinge on such practices, I direct attention to their multifaceted *negotiations* in and with democracy. Such negotiations refer to provisional transactions between transient collectives of poor people with politicians, bureaucrats, employers and with one another. A key argument I make in this book is that these heterogeneous negotiations comprise a crucial repertoire in poor people's politics. These negotiations combine cooperation with conflict. They are not necessarily conducted within formal or official institutions. Nor are they always convened by organizations of the poor on the basis of their shared class or communal identities. They outlast electoral cycles, indicating that poor people do not quietly adapt themselves to the authority of elected representatives. They, thus, reflect neither assimilation into nor difference vis-à-vis democracy. Rather, they approximate what political theorists have referred to as an 'agonistic' approach to democracy.[16] That poor people's politics is a politics of agonistic negotiations is another key argument of this monograph.

Although poor people everywhere are subjected to quite specific oppressive social relationships, democracies offer unique opportunity structures for them to participate in the life of the political community. In this monograph, I depart from analysts who privilege either the opportunity structures offered by democracy[17] or the social relationships of power that prevail in society[18] as analytic units for studying the politics of the poor. Rather, I draw attention to the political spaces generated by the interaction between institutional opportunity structures and social relations of power. Thus, the third key argument of this book is that such political spaces shape poor people's politics and are shaped by them.[19]

Poor people's agonistic negotiations provide a clue to the familiar paradox of democracy: how are universalistic ideals to be forged by people if not from the standpoint of particularistic positions? While much of the literature on democracy produced by political scientists[20] continues to elucidate its macro-structural and institutional political-economic aspects, sociologists and anthropologists have begun to ethnographically study democracy and locate it in its social and cultural settings. One strand of this scholarship investigates the impact of democracy on social and cultural and settings.[21] Another strand

examines the impact of social and cultural settings on democracy.[22] In this monograph, I draw on the perspectives offered by all three bodies of scholarship to contribute to an understanding of the entanglements between democracy, its socio-cultural contexts and structural-institutional dimensions.

The study setting

India provides a paradigmatic case to illustrate poor people's political negotiations with democracy. It is, on one hand and famously, the world's largest democracy. On the other hand, and notoriously, it is also home to nearly a third of the world's population living in extreme poverty and to 40 per cent of the world's bottom billion poor.[23] It is in World Bank parlance a 'middle income country'.[24] As a member of the G20 group of nations, India is widely referred to and recognised as a Rising Power, an Emerging Market and a member of such potentially influential groupings as the BRICS, an acronym for the group of potentially high-growth economies such as Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. The rural setting of my study is justified by the fact that between 70 and 85 per cent of the world's poor – howsoever defined – lived in rural areas as of 2010.[25] India's rural poor alone constitute nearly a quarter of the world's poor.[26]

The people whose political practices are discussed in this book live in eastern India, find employment in manual work and are largely drawn from the region's culturally-subordinated communities. They share much in common with poor people elsewhere. Internally differentiated on grounds of ethnicity and caste, religion, region and gender, deprivations among the poor often vary considerably,[27] making it difficult for them to engage in sustained collective action. Their livelihoods are far from assured and their lives fraught with uncertainty.[28] Their access to governments, even elected governments, is inherently uneven and variegated.[29] A large number of the people readers will meet in this book are agricultural labourers and peasants owning and cultivating small plots of arable land. Others are casual workers who migrate temporarily to work in wealthier regions of the country as construction workers, brick kiln workers, agricultural labourers, hawkers and vendors, rickshaw pullers, plumbers, masons, and domestic helps. They contribute to producing the country's food and manufactures and to subsidize the lifestyle of its burgeoning middle class by providing them with cheap labour.

It is worthwhile delineating what this book is about from what it is not. The book does not try to explore the reasons for India's poverty amidst plenty. It is not a commentary on the outcomes of the numerous anti-poverty schemes that successive governments in India and her States have promulgated from time to time. And, finally, it is not an investigation of the provenance of 'pro-poor' policy in India. These questions have been fruitfully answered by other political scientists, economists and anthropologists. My concern in this monograph is different. I want to understand the heterogeneous ways in which poor people negotiate with democracy and make meanings of it. I aim to examine the ways in which the constitution of political spaces shapes these negotiations. And, last but certainly not the least, I seek to contribute to the theorization of the entanglements between the universal and the particular while considering poor people's political practices. Readers hoping to gather heart-rending details of poverty or intimate narratives of the destitution, squalor and want that characterize poor people's daily lives will be disappointed. While people in poverty are certainly subjected to oppressive social relations, what readers will find in this book, rather, is an account of poor people's agonistic relationships with their oppressors as well as allies.

The book draws on diverse sorts of data. Much of the evidence presented in it is ethnographic,[30] but I complement this material with data from primary surveys and official data. I also mobilize the wealth of debates on social and political change in India over the last two centuries, trends in poverty and inequality, and ways of conceptualizing social stratification.

The plan of the book

In chapter 1, I introduce the conceptual, analytical and empirical themes of this study. I first outline the ways in which the terms 'poverty', 'politics' and 'the poor' are understood in this book. Next, I elaborate the agonistic approach to studying democracy that forms this book's mainstay. Following these conceptual clarifications, I engage critically with the theoretical literature that illuminates poor people's negotiations with governments and dominant classes. I then propose the analytical framework of 'political space' as co-constituted by the intersection of institutional opportunity structures and social relations of power to understand and contextualise poor people's politics. I conclude

the chapter by outlining the ethnographic approach on which much of the data presented in this book draws.

Chapters 2 and 3 allow me to elaborate the political spaces that shape the politics of the poor in India. In chapter 2, I discuss the institutional opportunity structures in the context of which poor people in rural eastern India negotiate democracy. In the first part of the chapter, I direct attention to the formal, participatory and social dimension of India's democracy, based on a synthesis of the literature pertaining to its postcolonial institutional developments. I also introduce eastern India to the reader with a particular focus on political changes in postcolonial West Bengal and Bihar in the second part of the chapter. In chapter 3, I explain the social relations of power within which people in the four fieldwork localities were embedded. In doing so, I highlight the collaborations and conflicts between members of different social classes, thereby introducing the readers to some of the people whose practices make up the politics of the poor discussed in this book. The analysis of the political spaces for poor people's negotiations with democracy in Chapters 2 and 3 will set the stage for the discussions in the subsequent chapters.

In chapter 4, I analyse poor people's 'supplications' to be enumerated as living 'below the poverty line' (BPL) by the Indian government. Being enumerated as BPL entitles people to a variety of subsidies and social protection measures. The allocation of BPL cards is thus the subject of much manipulation. The negotiations over cards speak to ongoing scholarly debates over clientelism and citizenship. I steer clear from portrayals of poor people's politics as either clientelistic or of citizenship. Rather, I suggest that the supplications reveal an entanglement between the categories of clientelism and citizenship. Such supplications are, nonetheless, internally fragmented. They vary considerably across the four localities, being assertive in some localities and meek in others. In my analysis, I take care not to formulate these variations as different stages in an inexorable transition from clientelism to citizenship.

I examine my interlocutors' 'demands' for employment in a public works scheme in chapter 5. The state in India operates such works under the aegis of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), providing an above-market rate wage to impoverished workers in the vicinity of their homes as a constitutional right. The works provided are valued by the poor, but couched by the state as a favour being bestowed

upon the population. The negotiations over employment under the program resonate with academic debates over the persistence of moral vocabularies, hinging on idioms of care and protection on the one hand, and the emergence of juridical vocabularies concomitant on the expansion of governmental interventions on the other. However, these demands vary across localities, being more combative in some and deferential in others. As an empirical category, therefore, the 'demand' is internally disjointed, being more confident in some and reticent in others. Notwithstanding such variations, I am mindful not to slot these demands as reflective of different stages in the transition from moral vocabularies to rights-based languages of stateness.

The discussion in chapter 6 pertains to people's 'disputations' over the installation of electric poles in their locality. The installations are undertaken as part of an electrification programme undertaken by the Indian government in West Bengal under the Rajiv Gandhi Vidyutikaran Yojana. The negotiations spawned by the installations of electric poles bring to mind debates among researchers on improvement and its discontents. Even as their elected representatives exhort them to embrace the installations as an improvement in their lives, the poor insist on scrutinizing the installations in the light of their own longer-term plans. While the elected representatives accuse them on preserving their 'backward' ways of life, the poor dispute their claims to know what was good for their neighbourhood. Their disputations signal an entanglement between preserving their long-term plans and subscribing to a view of improvement espoused by the state. As with the other chapters, I am careful not to subsume their disputations under narratives of a transition from preservation to improvement.

Similarly, in chapter 7 my analysis relates to poor people's 'imaginations' of the public space as reflected in popular contentions over a temple in Bihar. An Indian government legislation declares the temple to be public property, a declaration to which the temple's trustees, privileged, and wealthy landowners of the locality turn a blind eye and a deaf ear. However, the trustees' interpretations are hotly contested by the poor who invoke the legal apparatus of the Indian government as well as draw upon myths and legends that celebrated egalitarian struggles. Their imaginations resonate with intellectual debates on tradition and modernity. However, they also defy dichotomous categorizations as reflecting either tradition or modernity, leading to my

wariness towards categorizing poor people's imaginations as reflecting a stage in the transition from one to another.

The chapters in this book are assembled with a view to foreground the heterogeneities of poor people's politics. Collectively, they elaborate the manner in which variations in poor people's political practices are shaped by political spaces, the dynamic terrain constituted by the interaction of institutional opportunity structures and social relations of power. In doing so, each of the four chapters underscores the myriad ways in which poor people negotiate democracy. These negotiations exemplify the entanglements between the universal and the particular, thereby, enabling social scientists to develop an enriched account of poor people's political practices.

Each of the four chapters does four things. Each begins by contextualising the governmental intervention and public policy, which spawns the negotiations discussed therein. Empirically, they each illustrate poor people's negotiations with the politicians and political mediators who populate democratic institutions. Analytically, they each attend to the heterogeneities in their negotiations by emphasizing the variable political spaces available to the poor in the four fieldwork places. Theoretically, they each engage critically with the scholarly approaches to narrating, conceptualizing and theorizing such negotiations as reflecting either particularistic or universalistic conceptions of political life. Each chapter deploys this critical engagement to elaborate an agonistic understanding of democracy.

In the concluding chapter, I distill the key findings from the book for the meanings with which poor people imbue democracy. I first remind readers that although Liberal democracy has emerged as the hegemonic model of democratic in the closing decades of the twentieth century, liberalism and democracy are conceptually disjunctive. Thereafter, I reiterate the agonistics of poor people's negotiations as they navigate the universal and the particular. I then summarize the role of political space in shaping variations in their negotiations. I conclude by highlighting the enduring relevance of the questions raised in this book, occasioned by the widening inequalities within some of the world's emerging market economies as well as the possibilities of democratic renewal outside the confines imposed by liberalism.

Endnotes

1   Credit Suisse (2016,148) offers a succinct overview of inequalities not only across but also within countries: top 1 per cent wealth shares in the United States, China, India and Russia hovered at 42.1 per cent, 43.5 per cent, 58.4 per cent and 74.5 per cent respectively. These figures are higher than reported in 2010 (Credit Suisse, 2010, 120) when 1 per cent of the world's top 1 per cent wealthiest people owned 43.6 per cent of its wealth: the figures for China, India and the United States were, respectively, 31.7 per cent, 40.3 per cent and 34.6 per cent.

2   Poverty and inequality have a complex interface with one another. Poverty, if measured in terms of absolute deprivations, may decline even as inequalities widen. Alternatively, high incidence of poverty may well coincide with very little inequality. Of the vast literature that exists on this subject, readers may be interested in Grusky and Kanbur (2006), Birdsall and Londono (1997), Fields (2000), White and Anderson (2001) and Pikkety (2015).

3   For a useful discussion with helpful visual aids, see Roser (2016).

4   See Alkire *et al.* (2014). This figure is based on the global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) developed by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

5   My estimates, based on matching national MPI with Polity IV classifications. Polity IV data is publicly available online at http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4x. htm. Polity IV classifies many countries, such as Nigeria and Bangladesh, as anocracies, or countries whose governments 'combine an, often, incoherent, mix of democratic and autocratic traits and practices' (Marshall and Cole, 2009, 9). It is instructive to note that although China is not classified as a democracy, the Chinese people are able to select local governments on the basis of elections (Tsai, 2007; O'Brien, 2010). As such, the number of poor people engaging with democracy in some form or the other is well over a billion.

6   Typical of this cynicism included such scholarship produced in the immediate aftermath of World War II as Almond (1954), Almond and Verba (1965), Lipset (1960 and 1963) and Shils (1965). These writers associated poor people's political participation with tendencies towards communism as well as fascism. This trend continued right through the Cold War years, as exemplified by works such as Huntington (1968) and Verba, Nie and Kim (1978). Even after the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), scholars such as Ingleheart and Baker (2000), Ingleheart and Welzel (2000), Przeworski and Limongi (1996), Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) and Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995), remained sceptical of poor people's suitability for democracy. Such cynicism was subjected to early criticism by Reuschmeyer (1992).

7   Examples of such exuberance can be found in the commentaries offered by Diamond *et al.* (1997) and Diamond (1992). This enthusiasm is shared for India by Dasgupta (1993), Krishna (2000), Yadav (1999) and the Lokniti (2008). For Africa, Bratton and van de Walle (2001) and Mattes and Bratton (2016) demonstrated similar enthusiasm. See Mainwaring (1999) for similar perspectives on Latin America. Rare examples of