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The Importance of International Exchange in a Time of Worldwide Economic and Political Crisis and Change

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Abstract

This paper argues that international scholarly and cultural exchange has become especially vital in the context of intensifying global economic, political, ecological, and social crises. Drawing on Marxist theory, contemporary political realities in the United States and South Asia, and examples from world literature, the article examines how global capitalism both deepens human suffering and creates new possibilities for solidarity and resistance. Through reflections on immigration, political violence, ecological collapse, and the marginalization of the humanities, the paper highlights the role of international dialogue- facilitated by digital technologies and cross-cultural engagement- as a necessary counterforce to dehumanization and fragmentation. Literary works from South Asia, particularly those by Rabindranath Tagore and Bhabani Bhattacharya, are presented as models of humanistic insight that affirm dignity, unity, and hope amid crisis.

Keywords: International exchange, Global crisis, Marxism, Humanities, World literature.

Introduction

We are living through what I, and more and more people, consider a worldwide crisis, or rather several worldwide crises. I believe this ultimately comes from a worldwide decline in rates of profit, which creates multiple attacks and squeezes on the majority of people worldwide. Therefore, much can be gained by bringing together scholars in a multi-disciplinary fashion, from around the world, to discuss and share ideas, and take advantage of the new forms of technology as a positive form of what people used to call "globalization." It is ironic that the rise of international conferences held by Zoom or other social media developed during the last

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major crisis that struck the entire world at the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic. Out of that period of death, suffering, uncertainty, and crisis, it is good that one positive change took place,

which is that international exchanges like this have increased and become more normalized. Out of crisis, new opportunities emerge.

For those who don't know me, my name is David Anshen and I am an Associate Professor of Literature and Cultural Studies from McAllen, Texas, in the Rio-Grande Valley, which borders Mexico. I taught and served as a visiting scholar in Bhubaneswar, India, in the Orissa province, at the Kalinga Institute for Industrial Technology. This was my first, but hopefully not my last, time visiting India, since I loved your country. Its unbelievably vibrant culture, history, politics, and ways of life both enchanted me and were really life-changing. And I found many of the issues and concerns present in the US extremely relevant to the issues and concerns of India, both in India's modern history and up to the present.

One of the crises we are experiencing in the US is the so-called "immigration crisis," or crisis of borders, which hits particularly hard in the region I live in, on the border with Mexico. I recently married a woman from Mexico who attained her green card, which represents her permission to live in the US legally, only after months of forms and bureaucratic pressure. This took place while my town was almost in a kind of lockdown due to the aggressive actions by the US government and the current administration, which are determined to deport, intimidate, and terrorize the millions of immigrants who live in the US. In my wife's case, she immigrated legally for love and marriage, but others did so for much more grave reasons, including fleeing dictatorial governments or dangerous criminal gangs. Others migrated due to their national economies largely failing, which created their desperate need for a job. Literally anyone in the Rio Grande Valley, which is approximately 92% Hispanic or of Mexican ancestry, is/was considered a suspect and faces interrogation at any time, particularly those with darker skin. So, when discussing crises on a world scale, we should not forget that even in the US, which boasts of its commitment to democracy and pluralism, people in South Texas, but also many places across the nation, have lived under virtual police state conditions. Police and immigration officers often have recently blocked entire parts of the cities near where I live and teach. They stop and detain people and demand proof of legal residence, and those who cannot provide it are seized and sent to prison facilities. This has included some cases of US citizens, or others, like my wife, with legal residence. One of the most egregious cases that has attained national prominence concerns a US citizen and, coincidentally or not, an active unionist, Kilmar Abrego, who was born in El Salvador, became a legal resident, and was completely illegally deported to a torture prison in El Salvador. Eventually, enough outcry, including by his union, got him returned to the US, with the US President Trump continuing to attempt to detain him and export him to some other nation's prison, based on unproven claims that he was a member of a criminal gang. The struggle for his right to live in the US, free from government harassment, remains a continuing issue.

So, when we talk about growing crises on a world scale, the experiences in the US, the supposed world leader and major world economic force in the international capitalist division of labor, are certainly relevant and important, as they are everywhere on the globe. It should be noted that these cruel and inhumane policies and the rightist nationalist rhetoric that accompanies them have intensified since the US economy and the world economy seem to be mired in worldwide economic depression. These economic challenges are intensified by global conflicts or cases of political struggle from Europe to Israel, and includes the US and South Asia, including Bangladesh, Nepal, and parts of India.

As a Marxist, I believe that the growing interconnections and crisis worldwide are both a function of the drive of capital to maximize profits, which functions as an insatiable need that cannot be stopped. Additionally, the growing interconnection of conditions and communication is facilitated by the technological advances and profit drive of capital to constantly renovate. Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, as early as the *Communist Manifesto*, argue that these

processes both intensify suffering and misery, leading to growing stratification of wealth, but at the same time produce new opportunities, new forms of struggle, and ultimately the hope for change. Indeed, the unity of working people, the oppressed worldwide, is proclaimed as the program of the first communist party in history, and that aspiration, in my view, becomes more necessary and also more potentially possible. As Marx and Engels put it:

> Modern bourgeois society, with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells. For many a decade past the history of industry and commerce is but the history of the revolt of modern productive forces against modern conditions of production, against the property relations that are the conditions for the existence of the bourgeois and of its rule. It is enough to mention the commercial crises that by their periodical return put the existence of the entire bourgeois society on its trial, each time more threateningly. In these crises, a great part not only of the existing products, but also of the previously created productive forces, are periodically destroyed. (Marx & Engels, 1848/2002, pp. 37-38)

This description by Marx from 1844 seems to explain the world we live in and tie together the plethora of crises we are living through.

I earlier mentioned the supposed "immigration crisis," but there are many crises facing humanity. Several speakers here at this conference referenced the ecological crisis and its massive impact. Just yesterday, a UN climate conference offered the view that man-made climate change based on emissions is believed to be "overshooting" the levels predicted. I know from my time in India that there are acute natural crises that concern the environment. I was also in India when my students got passionate about the violent killing of a female medical student in Bengal, protesting in the streets. This reminded me of the George Floyd protests we went through in the US during the heart of the pandemic. In both cases, extreme violence and oppression, rather than discouraging and intimidating people, led to protests and actions. Whether successful or temporary, such struggles point to the future and what we need.

In the US, another crisis, or another aspect of the general economic crisis, takes the form of increased violence. Recently, as probably many of you have heard, the conservative YouTube celebrity and right-wing activist, Charlie Kirk, was shot or assassinated, and the repercussions continue to unfold. Some liberals and ultra-leftists have responded by stressing on public media that they in some sense approve of this shooting or that somehow, he had caused a climate of violence in which his killing must be contextualized, which comes disturbingly close to defending the killing, in my view. Others from the right-wing have worked to get TV pundits, other public figures on social media or celebrities "cancelled" or removed, for expressing any critical views of Mr. Kirk and his actions or statements before his murder. And there have been threats of further violence by both sides based on which capitalist party, the Democrats or Republicans, are favored. This follows an increasing upsurge in both political violence, racist violence, and just random acts of madness. When speaking of racist violence, I already mentioned the George Floyd protests during the pandemic. More recently there has been a spate of attacks on Jewish people, their businesses and synagogues, up to and including murder. These attacks, like the Charlie King murder, are, and should be considered, anathema to efforts to create positive change. Jew haters justify their antisemitic attacks by feigning sympathy for the Palestinian people. In the US, there has been a growing rise and even normalization of mass shootings in public schools, including schools for very young children, all the way through high schools and universities. As a literature professor, many of my students go on to be primary or secondary school teachers, and I know through them that in

addition to the actual school shootings, there are commonly false threats that negatively affect the school system, providing stress and causing fear for both teachers and students.

All of this points to major alienation and dehumanization. It is obviously very disconcerting. As a professor of literature, when I was at KIIT, I taught and learned about the horrifying history of communal violence that accompanied the early birth of India's independence. The Partition of India and the formation of Pakistan obviously offer some analogies and examples of the extreme dehumanization of the "others." But discovering and reading great works of Indian literature, such as *Azadi* by Chaman Nahal, helped me to understand that in periods of great turmoil, when revolutionary hopes are being blocked, or like in the violence in the US currently, before real progress is visible, ugly actions and deep dehumanization of the "other" can result. But, at the same time, Nahal's *Azadi*, which describes incredible atrocities and inhumanity, also points towards understanding. This novel dramatizes how humans can still maintain dignity, solidarity, and compassion even under truly evil conditions.

This brings me to another point I want to stress. In today's world, where in the US, and probably most places, there is a concerted attack on the humanities and liberal sciences--perhaps not India, which is having a growth in higher education, I understand. In the US, many literature or English departments are closing or receiving considerably less funding, certainly less priority than the STEM programs (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). It appears the historic value placed on critical thinking and reading literature or culture to widen one's horizons or develop a new understanding of the world is not valued much as budgetary priorities. The days of liberal education may be ending.

My exposure to Indian literature and culture has strengthened my confidence in the capacity of change and progress despite intense suffering and horrors. I recently wrote an article about two novels by the Bengali writer Bhabani Bhattarcharya about the Bengali famine of 1943. His novels, *So Many Hungers* and *He Who Rides a Tiger,* were profoundly moving and inspirational for me. They, I believe, maintain sophisticated literary form, while providing real knowledge about this horrible, man-made, imperialist-made famine, that I first learned about in a graduate class 20 or so years before, taught by the late Mike Davis, who was working on his wonderful book, *Victorian Holocausts*, which covers this famine as well as others. What moved me so profoundly about these novels is the way they connected this tragedy to multiple classes and strata of society, from the British to local hoarders, and illustrated the true impact of the famine on the peasants and workers. From this crisis, Bhattarcharya's characters and the events they encounter interrogate and deconstruct race, class, gender, religious, and other hierarchies and reveal their fraudulent and destructive nature. His characters suffer immensely but ultimately affirm the human potential of the oppressed.

But my favorite Indian novel, and one of my favorite novels of all time, is Rabindranath Tagore's masterpiece, *Gora.* I am sure most, if not all of you, are familiar with this novel, but I found it truly inspiring, and now it is becoming part of the set of novels that I regularly teach. As you probably know, it is truly a masterpiece where ideas and their inherent contradictions form much of the drama. As Michael Sprinker, another of my professors and mentors wrote,

> The titular heroes strict observance of traditional Hindu customs throughout the novel is directly linked to his patriotism. Extremism is not yet on the horizon in the novel itself, which is set in the late 1870's or early 1880's, but Tagore composed it after the demise of swadeshi during the moderate-extremist Congress split. Interpreting the narrative in the light of its contemporary context is surely justified. (Sprinker, 1983, p. 12)

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But as much as Sprinker's point persuades, and the book was definitely a product of its specific context, I think the novel and its ending serve a salutary lesson for the present moment, with our tensions, crises, violence, dangers, and other seemingly intractable problems. I found the ending incredibly moving and surprising, as Gora, who begins as an arch defender of traditional Hinduism, including caste divisions, upon discovering his actual Irish heritage, rather than feeling disappointed or ashamed, actually discovers true hope and possibility for himself and India. To quote *Gora* at the very end:

> Today I have become an Indian. In me there is no hostility to any community, Hindu, Muslim, or Christian. I accept everyone's food as mine…. All these days I went about carrying an invisible gap, which I could never bridge. Hence there was a great void in my heart…you are the one with the mantra for freedom. Make me your disciple. Initiate me today into the mantra of that deity who belongs to everyone, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, or Brahmo, whose temple doors are never closed to any community or any individual… (Tagore, 1910/1997, pp. 455–456)

With these words from a novel about a religious fanatic who realizes the artificiality of all the divisions between humans, we get a note of hope, change, and a way out of the interminable horrors and crises of capitalism. To me, this is a vision worth living for and dying for.

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Bio-note

Dr. David Anshen is an Associate Professor of Literature and Cultural Studies at University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. He writes and teaches on Marxist literary theory, South Asian Studies, film and cultural studies. He recently was a visiting scholar in residence at the Kalinga Institute of Industrial Arts in Bhubaneswar in the Orisha province. He wrote a book for Orient Black Swan Press on Marxist Literary and Cultural Theory and is working on a project to do an introduction to film studies and film history. He also has a chapter on a book on Indian Famines for Routledge South Asia that is scheduled to come out soon, which treats the writer Bhabani Bhattarcharya and his novels that cover the Bengal famine of 1943. He hopes to promote greater cross-cultural exchange and dialogue between scholars in the US and in India.

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