



The twelfth issue this year of “RJ – Standpoint of the Week” is devoted to a discussion that originated at the Yaroslavl Forum, “The modern state: standards of democracy and criteria of efficiency” (September 10-11, 2010). The issue of democracy and its determination and standards became the nucleus of that discussion. We return now to the topic and give the floor to Dipesh Chakrabarty, an outstanding theorist of post-colonialism and a professor at Chicago University.

## THE MULTI-COLORED AND MULTI-CULTURAL ELITE

Dipesh Chakrabarty

**RJ** *Is the West still passionate about giving diagnoses to other societies and prescribing coercive treatment? Is the “White Man’s Burden” a thing of the past or not? Has the international community become truly international, does it still harbor Western views of the world?*

Nobody speaks of the “White Man’s Burden” today, because such language sounds overly anachronistic. It reminds people too much of the days of European imperialism. Nevertheless, there are times when Western powers appear to act arrogantly, as with the war in Iraq, where mass-destruction was unleashed because Iraq was harboring “weapons of mass destruction” despite no such weapons ever being found. Moments such as these are reminiscent of talk about the “White Man’s Burden.” **But with the rise of China, Brazil, India, and Russia, the “International Community” has become fragmented and can no longer be equated to the West as such.** Remember that the second war in Iraq had to be conducted by a “coalition of the willing” and not under the auspices of any “international” organization such as the UN, because such “international” approval could no longer be obtained.

**RJ** *It is only during the past few decades that liberal democracy has come to be viewed as a paragon of the social political system. Many non-Western researchers, Samir Amin in particular, describe the spread of this form of political system around the world as the spread of a dangerous virus. Do you agree with this thesis?*

There are many kinds of democracies, even “liberal democracies.” And within “liberal democracies” there



have grown many illiberal tendencies over the last several decades (the decline of consumer sovereignty, for example, in the US). Democracy in India is very different from democracy in America, and they both have their different strengths and weaknesses, and one can never say that democracy is the panacea for all social ills. Sometimes, for political reasons, media in democracies underplay the legitimacy of regimes that are authoritarian but welfare-oriented. At the same time, however, it has to be said that freedom of speech is an inalienable part of popular sovereignty. Without that freedom, which is a hallmark of any democracy and without which there really cannot be human rights, modern societies can only suffer in the long run.

**RJ** *It is often said that we live in the post-American and the post-Western world. Can we expect the emergence of forces on the global arena that will take on the responsibility of giving diagnoses to other countries and prescribing treatment for them?*

In terms of shifts in economic power, there is no doubt that we now live increasingly in a post-Western world. The ruling elite of the world is increasingly multi-colored and multi-cultural. The dividing line between the haves and the have-nots of today’s world is no longer a simple color line. Rather, today’s exclusions are now mainly about borders, frontiers, illegal immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, both within and between nations. There is no doubt that China, India, and other non-Western powers will enjoy undeniable economic and military status in the world-system in the years to come. With that said, however, it is important to note that the ruling ideas of the world are still “Western/American” or “European” in origin. The reigning ideas about what might constitute a “civilized order” in the world are still ideas that we owe to the West – of liberalism, democracy, etc. There is some discussion in the Chinese press of the need to move from a “made in China” stage to the “created in China” phase of growth. But this has yet to happen. And if one takes universities as a set of institutions where research and investigation into new ideas take place and where new philosophies are born, the best universities in the world are still predominantly in the West and/or work within Western traditions. That says something, I think. **There is still a long way to go – intellectually speaking – before we can move beyond the visions of the just and good social order that Western thinkers of the last several hundred years have left us with. ■**

*Dipesh Chakrabarty was speaking with Yulia Netesova*

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