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**Recovering the Subject(s)? Self and Others on Parade. A Review Essay of
"Wanting Something Completely Different: 111 Vignettes of Left-Wing Figures,
Themes, Films, and Writers."**

Abstract

Considered here is a collection of vignettes, consisting of snapshots covering a wide range of issues and individuals. A major difficulty, it is argued, stems from the politics informing this approach, in particular their relation to Marxist theory.

Banaji, Jairus, *Wanting Something Completely Different: 111 Vignettes of Left-Wing Figures, Themes, Films, and Writers*. Helsinki: Rab-Rab Press, 2023. Pp. 165. ISBN 9780201379624.

Surreptitiously, a discernible pattern is unfolding in the sphere of academic publishing. Approaching one's eighth decade, and consequently faced with intimations of mortality, a number of those in the social sciences are appending biographical details, or indeed mini-biographies, to what they write. The object is, transparently in most cases, a settling of accounts with regard to what has - or less frequently has not - been said, undertaken, or achieved throughout life, in an attempt possibly to construct what it is hoped will serve as an enduring narrative about the self.¹ Not the least important aspect of such an endeavour is to paint an image of the self-as-cultured, an identity extending beyond the record of what the individual concerned has actually published by delving into other intellectual areas and subjects, all of which are referenced with an air of authority.

Considered here is one such instance: the provision by Banaji of 111 vignettes covering a variety of different subjects from what is said to be a leftist political viewpoint. Many of them consist simply of long quotes from one or two sources, interspersed with brief comments by Banaji himself. All too often, therefore, what is a complex issue is reduced to a précis, giving rise to frequent observations of the following kind: 'so here's a quick summary of what is said there' (73), 'what follows is a rehash of these sources' (84), 'This entry is too long already so there's no room to say anything about how...' (89), 'Here is a highly condensed summary of it' (94), 'more on that elsewhere' (95), 'Here is a short summary of...' (98), and 'Here's a rapid summary of the plot' (122). Difficulties arising from such brevity are themselves compounded by the element of repetition, whereby the same information reappears across different vignettes: for example, on Sartre and Pasolini. Among the questions that the entries themselves invite are why them but not others, and just how politically leftist is the approach.²

Themes

An answer, in part, requires situating them with respect to arguments found in all that Banaji has published hitherto. The vignettes read like nothing so much as the kind of entries found on Wikipedia, lacking complexity, depth, and thus also a critical approach to the issue covered. At best, they can be regarded simply as enthusiasms (along the lines, uncomplicatedly, of 'I like what *x* or *y* says...'), at worst as attempts to justify arguments or positions advanced hitherto by Banaji himself ('*x* or *y* upholds or agrees with what I've said all along...').³ Of the latter tendency there is much evidence, which keeps on surfacing

¹ Recent examples include Breman (2023: 1-28) and Joyce (2024). Much rarer is the successful kind of self-critical and informative narrative found in the straightforwardly autobiographical account by Hart (2022).

² Inescapably, and perhaps even unfortunately, the title can be interpreted as an oblique reference to the 1971 film *And Now For Something Completely Different*, which featured humorous routines by Monty Python's Flying Circus. If so, the danger is that the reader may think the vignettes as being less serious politically than would otherwise be the case.

³ The approach is similar to another form of enthusiasm: the schoolboy collector who compiles an album composed of cards featuring sportsmen or film stars.

throughout, not least in the way issues to do with both domestic labour and the Nairn-Anderson theses are presented.

Banaji (90-92) endorses social reproduction theory, which argues for the production by unwaged and gender-specific domestic labour of value, contributing thereby to capital accumulation, from which process – it is claimed – it is in effect inseparable. Consequently, housewives are described by feminist theory as ‘indirectly waged’, and for this reason valorise capital, no less than does a male worker employed directly in the labour process. On this reckoning, the owner of a construction company or a corner shop can be deemed to be part of the same category, since by providing food/shelter for male workers they too contribute ‘indirectly’ to the reproduction of the commodity labour-power, and thus also to the valorisation of capital.

That Banaji supports this interpretation is unsurprising, since it is no different from his own argument that each and every relational variant throughout history is nothing other than a form of ‘disguised wage labour’, the view on which rests in turn his claim that capitalism has been present everywhere and at all times. These kinds of view dissolve not just the distinction between productive and unproductive labour, central to Marxist theory, but also between classes, together with their form of consciousness and struggle. This is because such interpretations, widely encountered in non- and anti-Marxist social sciences analyses, rope into the same category as the proletariat those elements Marxism is adamant are external – if not antagonistic – to it, like individual peasant proprietors, small traders, and the lumpenproletariat.

Two of the longer vignettes (94-95, 100-102) address the Nairn-Anderson theses, concerning the role of gentrified bourgeois culture in the economic retardation of British society. Against the view of Christopher Hill, who maintained that a bourgeois revolution was incomplete, Nairn argued that it has taken place, only under the aegis of a capitalist alliance with the existing landlord class. Unlike other places in continental Europe, therefore, no struggle between industrial bourgeoisie and rural aristocracy took place or, indeed, was necessary. Replaying the trope attributing the historical decline of English manufacturing to cultural attitudes, Banaji maintains that what is needed is a ‘rationalisation of the superstructures’, since the crisis is one of hegemony, or ‘the particular forms that bourgeois power has always assumed in England.’ On account of this, ‘England remained refractory to Marxism. The whole of this ideology (mystified deference-based notions of class, traditionalism, empiricism and provincialism) are [*sic*] easily discernible in England today.’

Objecting to the Nairn-Anderson theses, however, Banaji privileges a contentious interpretation of his own: namely, that it was English commercial and not industrial capital which survived and prospered, a view which fits in both with his analogous objection to the systemic decline of the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity, dismissed by him as ‘catastrophism’, and with his insistence on the historical ubiquity of capitalism. Significantly, perhaps, no mention is made by him of other causes of economic decline: external ones such as increasing competition for market share from other capitalist nations; or internal ones, like class struggle waged ‘from below’, offset by the deleterious role of media power in shaping and consolidating the ideology of conservatism.

All relational forms are reduced by him to what is termed ‘disguised wage labour’, an interpretation that in turn underpins his claim about the historical ubiquity of capitalism

across time and space. Consequently negative arguments about the decline of the Roman Empire, advanced by Marxists among others, are dismissed as ‘catastrophist’, and replaced with a sweetness-and-light version of the Principate as a flourishing economy, a positive view Banaji shares with Fergus Millar.⁴ Because the Greek East became Roman, asserts Banaji (36), ‘the empire achieved a sort of functional and ideological integration that the British were never able to establish in any of their imperial domains, least of all in India’. Not only does this replicate the problematic claim advanced by Mary Beard about Late Antiquity as an exemplar of multi-culturalism, in the modern/positive sense of a tension-free society, but it also overlooks the negative effects of labour market competition, then as now, as true of ancient Rome as of colonial/independent India and present-day UK.

In keeping with this approach, Banaji (67-69) questions the Marxist view that ‘capitalism is invariably seen [by Marxism] as essentially European in its origin and development’, promoting instead the idea of ‘an earlier capitalism in the Muslim world’. Indeed, the anti-Marxism informing some of the vignettes – anyway surprising to encounter in a self-declared leftist text – is difficult to avoid. This is evident from the very start, when Banaji (1) declares that the main purpose of his approach is ‘a need to break the mould of stereotypical and impoverished versions of the left’s imagination and of the memory of the left’ by recovering what in his view is ‘a modern left [devoid of] the sclerotic traditions bound up with the parties (and smaller groups aspiring to be parties)’, described by him as ‘stranded objects’ that were ‘simply doctrinaire and sect-like’. He accepts, however, that many of those recovered in this fashion were not actually ‘on the left’, but ‘whose work mounted a powerful challenge to prevailing state doctrines’. The trouble with the latter is that it opens the door to populism, the conservative underpinning of which Marxism has always opposed.

Anti-Marxist observations surface regularly throughout the text. The work of Arghiri Emmanuel (30-32) is commended because it dismissed Lenin’s theory about imperialism; support for the latter ‘hallowed text’ by ‘left-wing orthodoxies’ is similarly disparaged by Banaji as ‘this kind of intellectually lazy reverence’. Analogous references of a belittling sort include the following (67-69, 80): ‘crude base/superstructure models which were being rehashed at the time Tawney wrote [*Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*]’; Marxism in his opinion ‘has to be understood in a diffuse cultural sense’, in a way that ‘no rigid party line or narrow doctrinalism would have sanctioned’; and, finally, ‘Did Visconti make “Marxist” films?...Simply asking [this question] shows how nonsensical the issue becomes if framed in this way’. However, no explanation is provided by him as to why this question is nonsensical.

That the propensity of Banaji constantly to change his mind about questions of theory, and in effect reinvent himself, continues undiminished as before, is also in evidence. The vignette (96-97) about the views of Henryk Grossman considers two antithetical processes: on the one hand the link between capitalist crises, the fall in the profit rate, and systemic breakdown; on the other the presence of counteracting influences (‘modifying countertendencies’) off-setting just such a movement towards crisis. Among the latter is an expanding industrial reserve army taking the form of immigration, a process identified as restructuring, arguments endorsed by Banaji himself. The irony is unmissable, since earlier he questioned the

⁴ Acknowledging that it was Peter Brown, like Fergus Millar one of the revisionist historians of ancient Rome, who conceptualised the term Late Antiquity, Banaji (79-80) nevertheless omits to mention not just its influence on his own approach but also its theoretical and methodological affinity with postmodernism (on which see Brass, 2021: Chapters 5 and 6).

conceptual efficacy both of the industrial reserve ('a race to the bottom') and of restructuring, seen by him now as central to the accumulation process.⁵

Unknown unknowns?

Scattered throughout the text are self-aggrandizing asides, irksome and unwarranted inferences as to the lack of knowledge on the part of the reader. Hence the reference (1) to *Critique of Dialectical Reason* as 'Sartre's most difficult work', one with, according to Banaji, he himself has had a 'lifelong fascination', but is nevertheless a text the 'sheer inaccessibility' of which in his view means it is a closed book to everyone else ('least read text of contemporary social theory'). In keeping with this kind of approach is the unintentionally patronising comment (116) that 'Marker's *La Jetée* has attracted tons of analysis, some of it fairly subtle'. It is also the case that the slavery/capitalism link is well-known, and not as obscure or unresearched as Banaji (83-84) appears to think. Likewise, the case of David Abraham, a young historian denied academic employment on account of his Marxist politics, is not as isolated an example as Banaji (84-85) imagines.⁶

Despite commencing in the by now familiar self-referential manner – noting that the *Alexandria Quartet* was 'one of the earliest pieces of literature I read as a boy' – the vignette dealing with Durrell on Alexandria (76-78) is in a political sense more problematic. Banaji cites with approval the view that Durrell was a racist writer 'who did not know Alexandria', since he 'always had this "strange" aspect in his portrayal of [Alexandrians], with an eye to satisfying the desires of Western readers, who have a certain fascination with the sensational strangeness or exoticism of the East'. The difficulty with this is hard to avoid. Objecting to how 'the West' categorizes 'the East' does not prevent him from categorizing 'the West' – 'the desires of Western readers' – in a similar manner.

The tone of other asides convey – again, no doubt unintentionally – an egocentric air that on occasion involves name-dropping. Thus the vignette about Fergus Millar, Camden Professor of Ancient History at Oxford, is accompanied by a remark (35) that its subject 'would go out of his way to be welcoming to new graduates in the Classics Faculty, as I know from my vivid memory of a reception (in Michaelmas 1987) where Fergus appeared affably out of nowhere...' Being able to engage with what Perry Anderson writes about British history and Wittgenstein is made possible because, we are informed, Banaji (79) himself 'did philosophy at Oxford in the late sixties'. Similar in tone are observations (59, 74-75, 120, 133) that: 'I got to know K. Damodaran...who had been so important in the (undivided) Communist Party of India'; 'who knows if Pasolini walked past my building [in Bombay]'; that 'the film critic Bruno Fischli (with whom I showed this and other films about German fascism to student audiences in India in the early 1980s) wrote...'; and that 'I've met someone who knew Hedayat back in the late forties.'

⁵ On this earlier view, see Brass (2012: 715 note 15).

⁶ Much the same has happened to others who – against the grain – remained Marxists (among them Deutscher, Aston, Rudé, Carr, and Stauder), a fate that contrasts with those who abandoned Marxism so as to enter, remain in, or rise up the hierarchy that is academia. Of course, Banaji is not part of the latter category.

While it is certainly difficult to avoid regarding what is said by Banaji as a form of display, along the lines of 'eminent personages I have known', this approach is undermined by the triteness of some entries and/or references, either presenting information about their subject that in many instances is common knowledge, or alternatively declaring a familiarity for which no evidence is presented.⁷ For no discernible reason, therefore, Banaji (119) cites the Portuguese writer Miguel Torga, an early champion of whose work was my father, who first translated his poetry and short stories into English.⁸ One is left wondering what, if anything, of Torga's work Banaji has actually read.

The emphasis informing the section on Marxist themes in film is also odd, consisting for the most part of vignettes on European directors, among them Eisenstein, Tarkovsky, Ivens, Godard, Visconti, Pontecorvo, Marker, and Fassbinder. Although a film by Tarkovsky is commended as the epitome of anti-war cinema (114-15), this label applies more accurately to films like *Neighbours* (1952), directed by Norman McLaren, and *Night and Fog* (1956), directed by Resnais.⁹ Despite being told by Banaji that the films of Orson Welles (24-25) 'are allegories of fascism', no mention is made of what is his most successful cinematic depiction of the subject, *The Stranger* (1946), about how the Nazi responsible for planning the holocaust, now living under a false identity in small-town America is tracked down by a war crimes investigator. Also missing is the film *Chimes at Midnight* (1965), a nostalgic celebration by Welles of Falstaffian feudalism informed by the agrarian myth.¹⁰ In short, politically it is not what might be termed a Marxist film: great Shakespeare, but poor Marx.

In the end a compilation such as this boils down to a familiar combination: people I like, those I know, and/or individuals who think like me. An inevitable effect of the latter is the way the epistemology and politics are themselves positioned in the narrative. Given the general tendency on the part of Banaji to frequent changes of mind, constructing a persona both for himself and for those depicted through the medium of these vignettes is fraught with difficulty. Memorialising becomes a form of situating oneself on uncertain ground: a past that is itself constantly shifting in terms of interpretation, and consequently a process difficult to separate from myth-making. A crucial factor contributing to this problem is the contradiction between what are the two main aspects of his approach: on the one hand privileging his own interpretation of what Marxism really is, a theme that informs many of the vignettes; and on the other, then attaching the term leftism to the way the issues are presented, and the subject(s) recovered. The outcome is a Marxism that many Marxists – including this reviewer – would find unrecognizable as actually being Marxism.

⁷ That to dictators and tyrants 'appearances matter infinitely more than truth' is hardly news, as Banaji (87-89) seems to think it is. As difficult to avoid is error: for example, The Red Army Faction, a revolutionary leftist guerrilla organization active in West Germany during the 1970s is wrongly termed by Banaji (127) 'The Red Army Faction'.

⁸ On the work of and by this Portuguese writer, see Torga (1950). In a 1987 special issue of *Adam: International Review* (Nos. 481-486), devoted to the writings of this author, the editor Miron Grindea (p. 4) noted of Torga: 'His oeuvre is still to be discovered in this country. What little of his work has so far been published in English is due to Denis Brass, one of the best interpreters of both his poetry and prose.'

⁹ The latter film is referenced by Banaji (126) only elsewhere, and in passing.

¹⁰ As a film based on Shakespeare it stands alongside Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957) and Olivier's *Henry the Fifth* (1944) and *Richard III* (1955).

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