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# What about Whataboutism?
## Viral Loads and Hyperactive Immune Responses in the China Debate

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'If people actually cared about slavery they would be holding demonstrations out the front of their local Chinese Embassy demanding that the Falun Gong and Uyghurs be set free.'
Tweet by an Australian journalist, 15 June 2020

'Forget about #StandWithHK. It's time to stand with #Minneapolis.'
Tweet by a Chinese journalist, 29 May 2020

Tweets like these are symptoms of a severe disease that has infected the public discourse surrounding Chinese and US politics: whataboutism. In recent weeks, as protests against police brutality and racism erupted in American cities, social media platforms have been awash with voices pointing out the hypocrisy of the US government in condemning the actions of the Chinese authorities in Hong Kong—unable to

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control social unrest at home, what right do US politicians have to comment on what is going on in the former British colony? Similarly, in stigmatising the mass incarcerations of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, how could they ignore their own moral bankruptcy, made evident by the grim situation of their prison system, the mass detention on the American border, and the disasters unleashed by the US-led War on Terror? Conversely, how can anyone connected to the Chinese state (even loosely) dare to comment on the protests in the United States or the plight of immigrants in detention centres on the US border, considering the situations in Hong Kong and Xinjiang?

Certainly, whataboutism is not limited to discussion of China and the United States—it can be applied to almost everything these days. Also, we are not the first to highlight its viral load. In a recent op-ed, US-based Chinese human rights lawyer Teng Biao (2020) has argued that constant comparisons between China and the United States have become a 'virus' (病毒). Taking as an example the exchanges of blows between the US and Chinese governments regarding the activities of each other's media in early 2020, Teng makes a compelling argument for how meaningless comparisons have contributed to poisoning the debate. In particular, he highlights two types of questionable comparison: the first one is shallow congruencies that do not extend beyond the surface level; the second is 'whataboutism' (比烂主义) proper. As Teng puts it, 'you say that corruption in China is serious, they say that the United States is the same; you say that China is culturally annihilating Uyghurs and Tibetans, they say that the United States also massacred the Indians and enslaved black people; you say China carries out extraterritorial kidnappings, they say that the United States attacked Iraq.'

While nothing prevents these criticisms levelled at China and the United States from being concurrently accurate—indeed, both are true but one does not excuse the other—Teng is correct in his grim assessment that the current China debate is mired in superficial comparisons, false equivalencies, and whataboutist argumentation. The virus of whataboutism produces at least two symptoms. On the one hand, it fosters apathy: if any form of criticism is just seen as hypocrisy, then what is the point of having endless discussions? When does one become qualified to criticise? On the other hand, it blinds by obscuring basic similarities, muddying the water and making it difficult to identify actual commonalities that extend beyond national borders and are inherent to the organisation of the global economy in our current stage of late capitalism. Whether whataboutism finds fertile ground simply due to

the helpless narrow-mindedness of the infected subject or is an act of purposeful contagion by voices that have a stake in misrepresenting certain truths, the result is the same: the victim becomes passive and myopic, focussing on the detail and losing sight of the broader picture, making meaningful discussion difficult.

However, this is not the end of the story. The pervasiveness of the whataboutist virus also produces a powerful hyperactive immune response in the China debate that manifests itself as the very opposite of whataboutism—i.e. a complete dismissal of any attempt to find similarities between dynamics in China and elsewhere. This is a form of argumentation that can be defined as 'essentialism', in that it tends to emphasise the set of attributes specific to a certain context as its defining elements, a line of reasoning eerily reminiscent of the debates over China's 'national character' (国民性) that raged in China and the West a century ago. While in the past similar discussions revolved around issues of race, today's essentialist arguments mostly centre around the idea that authoritarian China cannot be compared with liberal democratic countries because they represent fundamentally different political systems—and any suggestion that there may be commonalities is immediately and vociferously denounced as whataboutism and moral relativism.

Essentialism also produces a myopic outlook, and often manifests as self-righteous outrage at any suggestion that there might be more to the picture than what immediately meets the eye. From this perspective, there can be no linkages, seepages, or parallels between liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes. China must be analysed in isolation, and any analysis must identify the authoritarianism of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as the only constant underpinning all problems. If outside actors are involved, such as foreign governments, multinational companies, universities, etc., their participation is perceived as the result of their corruption at the hands of the CCP rather than a reflection of wider systemic issues—hence, for instance, the widespread surprise when it was revealed that the sitting president of the United States expressed support for reeducation camps in Xinjiang. At their most extreme, these essentialising responses to whataboutism insinuate that those seeking to identify convergences between China and elsewhere are apologists, useful idiots who unwittingly reproduce authoritarian talking points, or active agents strengthening authoritarianism and undermining democracy. It goes without saying that this also has the effect of shutting down debate.

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### Finding Parallels in Social Credit

An illustrative example of how these two faces of the whataboutist discourse obscure and confuse our understanding of contemporary China is the discussion around 'social credit'. China's emerging social credit system—which is currently fragmented and made up of diverse models being trialled by different actors—is frequently depicted monolithically in the media as an all-encompassing, technologically sophisticated, big data–driven rating apparatus where people receive scores based on their social and economic activities (Carney 2018). When comparisons are made, it is often likened to an episode of the dystopian sci-fi show *Black Mirror* and/or is depicted as an extension of some traditional Chineseness—either a new manifestation of Confucian ethics or the realisation of the goals of Mao-era surveillance (Clover 2016; Palin 2018; Zeng 2018). This has resulted in widespread confusion about what social credit actually is, focussing attention on imagined fears and making it difficult to perceive its true repressive potentialities.

A number of researchers and journalists have expended considerable energy attempting to contextualise and nuance the public discussions surrounding social credit, and also illuminate the parallels and linkages with big data surveillance regimes emerging globally. However, their interventions are frequently subjected to accusations of whataboutism, with the result being that the essentialised depictions mentioned above have come to dominate. In these discourses, social credit is often constructed as a dark perversion of the supposed liberation technologies of our digital age, one that could only emerge from an authoritarian context like China. In the words of *The Economist* (2016a): 'In the West, too, the puffs of data that people leave behind them as they go about their lives are being vacuumed up by companies such as Google and Facebook. Those with access to these data will know more about people than people know about themselves. But you can be fairly sure that the West will have rules—especially where the state is involved. In China, by contrast, the monitoring could result in a digital dystopia.' This form of essentialist argumentation has the potential to be convincing because it contains a kernel of truth—i.e. that there are fewer impediments to the creation of a big data–driven mass surveillance regime in China than in the West. However, it also sets up a false binary between the West and China that can cause us to miss the crucial ways in which particular practices in China are shaped by, and contribute to shaping, global processes and tendencies that transcend states or political systems. In other words, it obscures the parallels

and linkages that are crucial for understanding the dynamics of Chinese social credit and its implications for people both inside and outside of China.

In order for us to gain this broader, more holistic perspective, it is necessary to examine the goals underpinning the development of social credit in China, and consider how they link to, or resonate with, wider global trends and discourses. So, what is Chinese social credit trying to achieve? For one, it aims to create a credit evaluation and rating system to facilitate risk assessment for financial institutions and increase inclusion in the formal economy (Daum 2017). In this sense, our starting point for understanding social credit should not be as an exoticised, novel, dystopian practice, but rather as a credit rating/scoring system. China lacks a widespread infrastructure for evaluating economic risk for organisations and individuals, which has proved difficult for financial institutions, and has resulted in high transaction costs and lending bottlenecks. The social credit system seeks to fix this problem by helping financial institutions assess risk, essentially greasing the wheels of Chinese capitalism. The difference between social credit and credit scoring systems elsewhere is that the Chinese version proposes to draw on a much larger amount of data from both the social and the economic spheres (although it is unclear exactly to what extent). However, this is a difference in degree, rather than of a fundamental nature. As such, we can gain important insights into the potential functioning of social credit in China by looking at the practices and outcomes of credit scoring in other contexts, and by examining Chinese social credit we can anticipate the ways in which Western credit scoring systems might expand their risk assessment criteria in the age of big data. Indeed, one does not need to look hard to find instances of lenders leveraging information from social media in the United States and elsewhere. For example, the San Francisco–based company Affirm, which was founded by PayPal's Max Levchin, scrutinises the digital footprints of potential customers to make lending decisions (Reisinger 2015). And more cases can be found among an emerging class of digital lenders across the Global South that are 'innovating' new methods for assessing risk, often using intrusive methods (Loubere and Brehm 2018; The Economist 2016c).

Secondly, social credit is envisioned as an administrative enforcement mechanism, which will utilise data analytics to ensure regulatory compliance. This is accomplished through rewards for companies that consistently comply with regulations, and various blacklists and other forms of punishment for violators (Daum 2019; Zhang 2020). As such, this component of social credit reflects the wider global expansion of data-driven algorithmic governance techniques,

and to fully understand the dynamics at play it is necessary to make comparisons between China's social credit system and emerging regulatory regimes around the world (Backer 2019).

Finally, the Chinese social credit system seeks to increase 'trustworthiness' (守信) and 'integrity' (诚信) through moral education as part of a wider civilisational imperative (Daum 2019). While this civilising component of social credit is rooted in longstanding state goals of creating a 'modern', 'rational' citizenry, it also draws on global discourses associated with good governance and socioeconomic development. In particular, the moral language of social credit parallels much of the discourse utilised by microcredit and financial inclusion programmes, which aim to transform 'underdeveloped' places and people into developed subjects through integration into the market. Chinese government microcredit programmes—drawing on the theories and practices of the global financial inclusion movement—seek to instil a modern credit consciousness in marginalised populations, which is explicitly linked to the concepts of honesty and trustworthiness (诚实守信) (Loubere 2018). For both microcredit and social credit, trustworthiness becomes conflated with creditworthiness. Social credit's civilising mission also resonates with the idea pushed by behavioural economists—and promoted by the World Bank (2015)—that good decision making and behaviour can be socially engineered through 'tweaks' and 'nudges' targeting individuals, ultimately resulting in broad social benefits. These ideas have been popularised in recent decades, culminating in the 2017 Nobel Prize in Economics being awarded to Richard Thaler for his work on 'nudge theory' and the 2019 Nobel Prize in Economics being awarded to three development economists who pioneered the randomised control trial (RCT) for socioeconomic development. Both of these approaches have been key to the expansion of social experiments on populations (mainly in the Global South) in an attempt to socially engineer different types of behaviour (Chelwa and Muller 2019). The comparisons with the goals of social credit are obvious and necessary.

Ultimately, as legal scholar Jeremy Daum (2019) points out: 'There can be great comparative value for democracies in watching China's integration of technology, governance, and society, but meaningful comparison requires accurate understanding.' In order to acquire this more accurate understanding, it is necessary to be able to identify crucial commonalities with what is happening in China and elsewhere, and how these things are connected. If we fail to do this, then we either ignore one of the most important developments in digital social control because we relativise through whataboutist arguments; or adopt an essentialist stance and

assume that social credit is something unique to China's brand of authoritarianism, thus failing to see how it is actually rooted in, and contributing to, a global trajectory of rapidly expanding algorithmic governance and surveillance. At the extreme end, this inability to identify parallels and linkages results in absurdities, such as *The Economist* running an article titled 'Test of Character' praising the use of 'psychometrics with social media and mobile-phone records' to assess financial risk in the Global South—allowing financial institutions to 'peer into their customers' souls'—while just two months later publishing another article on China's social credit system titled 'China Invents the Digital Totalitarian State' (The Economist 2016b and 2016c). Needless to say, the failure to perceive the shared rationalities, practices, and potential outcomes of intrusive private psychometric surveillance and China's social credit system impairs our ability to collectively militate against the rapid emergence of oppressive technologies around the world.

## Carceral Capitalism in Xinjiang and Beyond

A second example of dynamics in China that require us to identify global linkages can be found in the horrific 'reeducation' camps of Xinjiang. These camps—where an estimated one and a half million Uyghurs have been locked up since 2017—also do not exist in a void. While the current situation in Xinjiang has deep roots in longstanding Han suppression of Ugyhur identity, as well as in discourses of 'blood lineage' emerging in the Maoist era, this is not the whole story (Cliff 2016; Yi 2019). The Xinjiang camps can also be considered an extension of settler colonial logics and practices dating back to European colonialism, where native populations were brutally suppressed and concentrated on reservations (Nemser 2017). Indeed, the recent revelations that the Chinese government is engaging in the forced sterilisation of Uyghurs echo the eugenics campaigns targeting native populations in the United States and elsewhere in the twentieth century (Amy and Rowlands 2018; BBC 2020). The Xinjiang camps can also be seen as the culmination of a century-long global process in which concentration camps were first conceived by the Spanish in Cuba in the late 1890s, expanded by the British in South Africa during the Boer War, normalised by all warring factions during the First World War, and finally manifesting in the extreme variants of the Soviet Gulags and the Nazi lagers, before lapsing into the more familiar forms of 'black' detention sites that became common in Latin America in the 1970s.

Western liberal democracies have also repeatedly established concentration camps in recent history, from the British experience in Malaysia and Kenya in the 1950s—stories that

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the British government has consistently attempted to hide and manipulate (Monbiot 2020)—to the latest experiments of the US government with extrajudicial detentions in Guantanamo Bay and mass internment of undocumented immigrants. As journalist Andrea Pitzer (2018, 13) has argued, concentration camps are deeply rooted in modernity, particularly in advances in public health, census taking, and bureaucratic efficiency that took place in the late nineteenth century. They are also inextricably linked to inventions like barbed wire and automatic weapons. At the same time, 'only rarely have governments publicly acknowledged the use of camps as deliberate punishment, more often promoting them as part of a civilizing mission to uplift supposedly inferior cultures and races' (Pitzer 2018, 6). In this sense, the Chinese authorities are not only trailing this tradition by maximising the 'benefits' of the latest progress in surveillance technology to establish its twenty-first century version of concentration camps in Xinjiang, but they are also lifting heavily from established discourses to justify such an endeavour.

Concentration camps in Xinjiang are not monads even in the context of today's world. It is possible to identify both discursive and material linkages between the events unfolding in northwest China and global trends. On the discursive side, the Chinese authorities have widely appropriated international discourses of anti-terrorism related to the US-led War on Terror to justify their securitisation of Xinjiang. David Brophy (2019) has written about the 'war of words' over the Xinjiang question between Chinese authorities and foreign critics, pointing out how Chinese officials justify the camps by citing what they see as a worldwide consensus—which emerged in the wake of the global War on Terror—on the need to combat radicalisation through preemptive measures that identify, isolate, and rehabilitate potential extremists. According to the logic of the Chinese authorities, if the camps in Xinjiang go beyond any Western attempt at countering extremism, it is simply because counterextremism policing in the West, focussing only on select individuals, has not done enough to prevent acts of terrorism.

In the same vein, Darren Byler (2019b) has put on display the poignant similarities between the attempts to construct a 'human terrain system' through weaponised ethnography by the US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the way in which the Chinese authorities are acting in Xinjiang, while also unearthing how shifts in US military doctrine in the field of counterinsurgency since the late 2000s were first received and adapted in China, before being put into practice in Xinjiang. This link is also made in an influential recent paper by Sheena Greitens, Myunghee Lee, and Emir Yazici (2020), in which the authors argue that China's rhetoric about Central Asia's Uyghur

diaspora began to shift following the attacks of 11 September 2001, with the Party-state drawing connections between Uyghur organisations and jihadist groups, especially those in Afghanistan and Pakistan, instead of emphasising pan-Turkic separatism.

While the implications of this cooptation by the Chinese authorities of counterinsurgency discourses emanating from the War on Terror remain highly controversial (Robertson 2020), the material side of the global dimension of the camps is a more straightforward example of the 'complicities' existing between Western capitalism and the People's Republic of China (Dirlik 2017). There is no denying that Chinese and multinational corporations are deeply involved in the development of surveillance technologies that are used in Xinjiang. As Darren Byler (2020) has highlighted, local authorities in Xinjiang have recently started outsourcing their policing responsibilities to private and state-owned technology companies in order to enhance their surveillance capacities through private–public partnerships. These companies, especially those that are leading the way in the field of artificial intelligence, operate well beyond Chinese borders. In an uncanny instance that he cites, in April 2020 Amazon received a shipment of 1,500 heat-sensing camera systems to take the temperatures of its workers during the coronavirus pandemic. These units came from Dahua, a Chinese company that in 2017 received over 900 million USD to build comprehensive surveillance systems to support the expansion of extra-legal internment, checkpoints, and ideological training in Xinjiang (Hu and Dastin 2020).

The global mercenary business is also involved. For instance, in early 2019 the Frontier Services Group, a private security firm run by Blackwater founder Erik Prince, announced plans to open a 'training centre' in Xinjiang (Roche 2019). Although all the information about the company's involvement in the region was subsequently taken offline (Ordonez 2019), the announcement highlighted another problematic set of complicities between global capitalism and repressive practices of cultural suppression in China and beyond.

At the same time, foreign universities are actively taking part in developing the technology and techniques that the Chinese authorities are using to ramp up surveillance in Xinjiang. Leading international academic institutions, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, have come under scrutiny for having research partnerships with artificial intelligence companies that have business ties with state security organs in the region (Harney 2019). To cite just a few specific examples, in August 2018 Anil K. Jain, head of Michigan State University's Biometrics Research Group, travelled to Xinjiang's capital, Ürümqi, and gave a speech about facial recognition at

the Chinese Conference on Biometrics Recognition, for which he also sat on the advisory board (Rollet 2019). In 2019, the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) and Curtin University in Perth both had to review their links to Chinese companies and researchers over concerns that the partnerships could be helping China persecute Uyghurs (McNeill et al. 2019). UTS, in particular, was revealed to have a ten-million-AUD partnership with CETC, a Chinese state-owned military tech company that developed an app used by Chinese security forces to track and detain Uyghurs. Finally, also in 2019, it emerged that to bolster their DNA tracking capabilities, scientists affiliated with China's police force drew on material and expertise provided by Kenneth Kidd, a prominent Yale University geneticist, while using equipment made by Thermo Fisher, a Massachusetts company (Wee 2019).

In fact, there are many instances of Chinese companies approaching foreign universities either directly or through their shadow subsidiaries, and offering funds under the generic banner of 'supporting collaboration between academia and industry'. While fostering international partnerships and collaboration is undoubtedly part of the core mission of universities, as James Darrowby (2019) has pointed out, the key areas for proposed collaboration in the case of Chinese companies often focus on the development of the next generation of audiovisual tracking tools, which represent significant potential for military and domestic surveillance applications. With neoliberal universities often forced to seek and accept funds from any available source to justify their very existence in the eyes of the government, they frequently sidestep due-diligence procedures and end up abetting projects that contribute to ramped-up surveillance and repression in China and elsewhere. And this kind of complicity does not even touch upon matters such as the nature of research affiliations with foreign institutions, conflicts of interest, undisclosed double appointments, and the dissemination and application of sensitive project outputs. Essentialist depictions of this situation are widespread but again only provide us with a partial picture. While emphasis is frequently placed on the nefarious activities undertaken by Chinese state actors aimed at corrupting Western higher education institutions, there is much less attention paid to the ways in which the marketised and managerialised university has become eminently pliable to outside interests through funding and research partnerships.

It would be a mistake, however, to reduce corporate involvement in Xinjiang to high-tech actors involved in surveillance and carceral capitalism, as the camps also represent an opportunity for more 'traditional' business. As Darren Byler (2019a) has shown, since 2017 Chinese factories

have been flocking to Xinjiang to take advantage of the cheap labour and subsidies offered by the reeducation camp system, a move that can partly be explained by the rising labour costs in more developed parts of the country. Significantly, even before the beginning of the camps, the Chinese Party-state was already planning to move more than one million textile and garment industry jobs to the region (Patton 2016). While many of these companies are obviously linked to global supply chains, they are not the only ones benefiting from the ramped-up securitisation of the area. A recent report by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (Xu et al. 2020) has shown that more than 80,000 Uyghurs were transferred out of Xinjiang to work in factories across China between 2017 and 2019, with some of them sent directly from detention camps. Far from producing exclusively for domestic consumption, these Uyghurs are working in factories that are in the supply chains of at least 83 well-known global brands in the technology, clothing, and automotive sectors, including Apple, BMW, Gap, Huawei, Nike, Samsung, Sony, and Volkswagen.

In that 'the goal of the internment factories is to turn Kazakhs and Uyghurs into a docile yet productive lumpen class—one without the social welfare afforded the rights-bearing working class' (Byler 2019a), the camps in Xinjiang appear to be a manifestation of a capitalist system always hunting for new workers and markets to exploit in order to sustain itself. In other words, it could be argued that the camps are not really an anomaly or a sign of the capitalist system being corrupted by China, but simply a feature of the system itself. These systemic features can also be seen, for instance, in the policing and incarceration systems of the United States, where widespread racial profiling leads to the detention of a hugely disproportionate number of young black men—a demographic that is systematically maintained and reproduced as a low-wage labour supply (Benns 2015). In fact, if we consider the discursive and material linkages and parallels outlined above as a whole, the recent Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act as recently passed by the US government and the blacklisting of a few Chinese companies working on artificial intelligence and facial recognition, while highly symbolic and undoubtedly important, play little more than a cosmetic role rather than addressing the root causes of the abuses.

In such a context, both whataboutist and essentialist arguments, while constructed in opposition to each other, serve to obscure the situation in Xinjiang in similar ways—by fragmenting and atomising our analysis, and thus causing us to miss crucial parallels, linkages, and complicities. Whataboutism does this dismissively, resorting to moral relativism and claims of hypocrisy to rationalise away wrongdoing, while failing to

recognise that global practices are connected. Essentialism does it by attributing the horrifying situation in Xinjiang solely to the CCP, thus failing to identify the linkages emerging from a global system. As such, both whataboutism and essentialism serve as blinders, forcing us to focus on a single part of the picture—e.g. the fact that the United States is involved in abuses too or that the CCP has a long history of repression in Xinjiang—while ignoring the bigger story. These atomised and myopic perspectives fail to provide us with the analytical tools necessary to diagnose and organise against the horrors unfolding in Xinjiang and elsewhere.

## Casting Out the Beam

So, how should we deal with the virus of whataboutism and its essentialist hyperactive immune reaction? We definitely cannot succumb to the feelings of apathy and the blindingly myopic outlook that they produce. With regard to the accusations of hypocrisy so common in whataboutist arguments, it would be nice if we all heeded Jesus's injunction to 'first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye'—leaving aside the issue of who has a beam and who a mote in their eye—but if we were to wait for that to happen before we speak up, most likely there would not be much debate going around. On the other side, if we fall into essentialist reasoning, the only solution to any problem appears to be complete regime change in China. From this perspective the fall of the CCP serves as a deus ex machina for the world's problems, which paradoxically can produce both euphoric (but misguided) optimism for the future based on imagined signals that the regime is on the brink of collapse or, alternatively, a sense of dejected apathy at the hopelessness of the situation.

To inoculate ourselves against whataboutism while also preventing the pendulum swing into essentialism, we should strive to identify meaningful commonalities and underlying dynamics at both discursive and material levels. If nothing else, that is where we can still hope to find some power to act. While China's social credit system and mass incarceration in Xinjiang present us with two instances of global connections that are frequently obscured in current debates on Chinese politics, these examples are also part of an extremely grim broader picture. Around the world we are seeing some very disturbing trends—a general authoritarian shift, the development of repressive technologies, and the further normalisation of mass detention regimes. As easy as it is to lay the blame for all this on China—and undeniable as it is that the Chinese government

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is playing an important role in all this—these trends are not emanating solely from one country. Rather, what is happening in China is just one dramatic manifestation of global phenomena— phenomena that are, in turn, shaped by broader forces. For this reason, we need to go beyond essentialist and whataboutist approaches and carefully document (and denounce) what is happening in China, while also highlighting the ways in which Chinese developments link up with events elsewhere.

It is our belief that it is not whataboutism to condemn tyranny in different places and that authoritarianism in all its variations must be opposed everywhere. Indeed, finding parallels and linkages between the Islamophobic policies of the Trump administration, the anti-Muslim populism currently ravaging India, and the brutal situation in Xinjiang need not be an act of whataboutism, but rather a statement that these practices are unacceptable everywhere, and must be contested as a whole. Similarly, we cannot overlook the role of international actors, including multinational corporations and universities, in fostering the worst abuses we are witnessing all over the world today. Only by finding the critical parallels, linkages, and complicities can we develop immunity to the virus of whataboutism and avoid its essentialist hyperactive immune response, achieving the moral consistency and holistic perspective that we need in order to build up international solidarity and stop sleepwalking towards the abyss. ∎