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CULTURAL FRAMES FOR SOCIAL INTERVENTION: A PERSONAL CREDO

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I

Amilcar Cabral, the African freedom fighter, spoke of the 'permanent, organized repression of the cultural life of the people' as the very core of colonialism. 'To take up arms to dominate a people is', he said, 'to take arms to destroy, or at least to neutralize .. its cultural life'. Cabral also seemingly recognised the corollary of such an understanding, namely that the reaffirmation of cultural traditions could not but be the heart of all authentic anti-colonialism.

In some ways, however, Cabral borrowed heavily from nineteenth century Europe's world image. He could not be fully sensitive to the other reason why a theory of culture has to be the core of any theory of oppression at our times, namely that a stress on culture reinstates the categories used by the victims; that a stress on cultural tradition is a defiance of the modern idea of expertise, an idea which demands that even resistance be uncontaminated by the 'inferior' cognition or 'unripe' revolutionary consciousness of the oppressed. A stress on culture is the antonym of the post-Renaissance European faith that only that dissent is true which is rational, sane, scientific, adult,

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This paper has grown out of a presentation made at the Seminar on Gandhi and Social Theory, held at the Gandhi Bhavan, University of Delhi in March, 1983. Later on, some of the ideas were also discussed at the Seminar on The Perception and Understanding of Social Reality at the Department of Psychology, Allahabad University, April 1983, and at the Symposium on the Cultural Context of Scientific and Economic Development in the Third World, organised by the Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Science and the Deutsches Kulturinstitut at Colombo in May 1983.

and expert – according to Europe's concepts of rationality, sanity, science, adulthood, and expertise.

Viewed thus, the link between culture, critical consciousness, and social change in India become, not a unique experience, but a general response of societies which have been the victims of history and are now trying to rediscover their own visions of a desirable society, less burdened by the post-Enlightenment hope of 'one world' and by the post-colonial idea of cultural relativism.

II

Cultural survival is increasingly a potent political slogan in India. When the religious reformers of nineteenth century India spoke of protecting cultures, it seemed an obscurantist ploy. Today, when the juggernaut of modernity threatens every nonwestern culture, the slogan no longer seems a revivalist conspiracy. It has become a plea for minimum cultural plurality in an increasingly uniform world.

The plea has been accompanied by a growing concern with native resources and ideas, even though only to the extent they serve causes such as development, growth, national integration, security, and, even, revolution. As if culture was only an instrument. Perhaps the time has come to pose the issue in a different way. I shall do so here in terms of the binary choice which underlies most responses to modernity in complex nonwestern societies.

Unmixed modernism is no longer fashionable, not even in the modern world. Even the ultra-positivists and the Marxists, once so proudly anti-traditional, have begun to produce schools which criticise, if not the modernist vision on its entirety, at least crucial parts of it. Lionel Trilling and Peter Gay have gone so far as to call such criticisms – and the modernist dislike for modernity – a unique feature and a mark of modernity. One can offhand think of examples like the 'solar plexus' of D. H. Lawrence, the 'primitivism' of Pablo Picasso, and the defiance of science and rationality in the surrealist manifestos of André Breton *et al* as indicators of how modernity at its most creative cannot do without its opposite: anti-modernity.

However, to the extent most of these criticisms try to abide by or use as their reference the values of European Enlightenment, and to the extent modernisation is an attempt to realise these values, such criticisms are internal to modernity. Let us call them forms of critical modernism. Examples of such critical modernism are those models of scientific growth or technological transfer in the third world which do not challenge the content of modern science; critiques of the existing world order which take for granted the modern nation-state system; and the kind of critical modernism which believes that if you displace the elites or classes who control the global political economy, you could live happily with the modern urban-industrial vision ever after.

On the other hand are the criticisms of modernity from outside. These criticisms reject the Enlightenment values and, thus, seem insane or bizarre to the modern man. Blake, Carlyle, Emerson, Thoreau, Ruskin, and Tolstoy have been some of the better-known external critics of modernity in the West. In our times, Gandhi has been by far the most consistent and savage critic of modernity and its best-known cultural product: the modern West. Gandhi called the modern culture satanic and, though he changed his mind about many things, on this point he remained firm. Many Gandhians cannot gulp this part of him. Either they read him as a nation-builder who, beneath his spiritual façade, was a hard-headed modernist wedded to the nation-state system. Or they say that he was a great man pursuing crazy civilisational goals, the way Issac Newton, when not working on proper mathematical physics, worked on alchemy and on the science of trinity. They divide Gandhi into the normal and the abnormal, and reject the latter either as an aberration or as an embarrassment. 'Bapu, you are far greater than your little books', Nehru once charmingly said.

Gandhi however was willing to take his 'insanity' to its logical conclusion. He rejected the modern innovations like the nation-state system, modern science and technology, urban-industrialism, and evolutionism (without rejecting the traditional ideas of the state, science and technology, civic living, and social transformation). Not being a Gandhian, I am forced

to applaud from a distance the contortionist acts many modernists put up to fit Gandhi and his strange views into the modern paradigm. They can neither disown the Mahatma nor digest him.

Yet, Gandhi was no Ananda Coomaraswamy. Both hated modernity but they parted company when it came to traditions. Coomaraswamy theoretically kept open the possibility of assessing or altering traditions from the point of view of traditions. But perhaps because he was single-handedly trying to do for past times what the anthropologists as a community were trying to do for distant cultures, there was no criticism, or at least no significant criticism, of traditions in his works. The attitude was, if you examine for instance his comments on the concept and practice of sati, unashamedly defensive.

Gandhi never eulogised the Indian village nor called for a return to the past. He supported the ideas of the village and traditions but not the extant Indian villages or traditions. Coomaraswamy, too, at one plane made this distinction but the tone was different. This would be obvious to anyone who reads Coomaraswamy and Gandhi on caste. The former defended the premodern caste system because he found it more humane than the modern class system; the latter also did so but went further. He sought to reorder the hierarchy of skills — to relegitimise the manual and the unclean and delegitimise the Brahmanic and the clean. Such examples can be multiplied. Compare Coomaraswamy's appraisal of the Indian village — or Nehru's — with Gandhi's account of Indian villages as 'dung-heaps'; compare Dhanagopal Mukherji's passionate defence of India against the attack of Catherine Mayo in her *Mother India* with Gandhi's advice to every Indian to read what he called Mayo's 'drain-inspector's report'.

Unlike Coomaraswamy, Gandhi did not really want to defend traditions; he lived with them. Nor did he, like Nehru, want to 'museumise' cultures within a modern frame. His frame was traditional and he was willing to criticise it violently. He was even willing to include in it elements of modernity as critical vectors. He found no dispute between his rejection of modern

technology and his advocacy of the bicycle, the lathe, and the sewing machine. Gandhi defied the modern world by opting for an alternative frame; the specifics in his frame were frequently modern. (The modernists find this hypocritical but they do not object to similar electicism when the framework is modern. Witness their attitude to the inclusion of Sarpagandha in modern pharmacology as reserpine, even though the drug has been traditionally a part of Ayurveda.)

Today, the battle of minds rarely involves a choice between modernity and traditions in their pure forms. The ravages of the former are known and, if the past cannot be resurrected but only owned up, pure traditions too are a choice not given to us. Ultimately, the choice *is* between critical modernism and critical traditionalism — it is a choice between two frames of reference and two worldviews.

III

Some scholars object to such a formulation. They find the concept of critical traditionalism soft on obscurantism and internally inconsistent. And T. G. Vaidyanathan has recently suggested that I use the expression 'critical insider' instead of 'critical traditionalist'.

Frankly, I have little attachment to the words I use. If by changing them some processes can be described better, I have no objection. I recognise that my descriptive categories are partly the ashes of my long romance with some versions of the critical theory, especially the early influence on me of scholars such as Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm. They are not always adequate for nonwestern realities. However, my categories are also partly a response to the argument of some scholars — Pratima Bowes being the last in the series — that traditional Indian thought never really developed a true critical component. I am arguing that (1) Indian thought, including many of its folk elements, can be and has been used as a critical base, because critical rationality is neither the monopoly of modern times nor that of the Graeco-Roman tradition, and (2) some aspects of some exogenous traditions of criticism

can be accommodated in nonwestern terms within the nonwestern civilisations.

Let me further clarify my position by restating it differently. Critical traditionalism refers to the living traditions which include a theory of oppression, overt and/or covert. No tradition is valid or useful for our times unless it has or can be made to have an awareness of the nature of evil in modern times. This is the obverse of the point that no theory of oppression makes sense unless it is cast in native terms or categories, that is, in terms and categories used by the victims of our times. This is not an odd restatement of the ideology of instrumentalism which dominates most modern, secular theories of oppression. I am not speaking here of a strategy of mass-mobilisation which includes certain compromises with the so-called false consciousness of the historical societies; I am speaking of the more wholistic or comprehensive cognition of those at the receiving end of the present world system. I am speaking of the primacy which should be given to the political consciousness of those who have been forced to develop categories or understand their own suffering and who reject the pseudo-nativism of modern theories of oppression using — merely using — the idiom of nativism to conscientise, brainwash, educate, indoctrinate, or museumise the cultures of the oppressed. The resistance to modern oppression has to involve in our part of the world some resistance to modernity and to important aspects of the modern theories of oppression. Particularly, the resistance must deny the connotative meanings of concepts such as development, growth, history, and science and technology. These concepts have become not only new 'reasons of the State' but mystifications for new forms of violence and injustice. The resistance must also simultaneously include — and here pure traditionalism fails to meet our needs — a sensitivity to the links between cultural survival and global structures of oppression in our times. The critical traditionalism I have in mind is akin to Rollo May's concept of authentic innocence, as opposed to what he calls pseudo-innocence. Authentic innocence includes an updated sense of evil; pseudo-innocence does not. Pseudo-innocence thrives on what psychoanalysis calls secondary gains from the oppressive system.

This also means that the living traditions of the nonwestern civilisations must include a theory of the west. This is not to make the glib point that the west is a demon but to recognise that the west and its relationship with the nonwest has become deeply intertwined with the problem of evil in our times — both according to the west and to the nonwest. Contrary to what the modern world believes, this nonwestern construction of the west is not that morally naive either. It does draw a line between the western mainstream and the cultural underground of the west, between the masculine west and the feminine — exactly as the way it draws a line between the authenticity and pseudo-innocence of the nonwest.

All said, it is for the culturally rooted nonwestern understanding of civilisational encounters of our times for which I am trying to create a space in public discourse, not to provide a new theory of oppression from within the social sciences.

IV

Is there an Indian tradition with a built-in theory of oppression? The question is not relevant. The real issue is: can we construe such a tradition so as to have a native theory of oppression? The issue is the political will to read traditions as an open-ended text rather than as a closed book.

The civilisation has survived not only because of the 'valid', 'true', or 'proper' exegesis of the traditional texts (though a sophisticated hermeneutic tradition has always existed in India) but because of the 'improper', 'far-fetched', and 'deviant' reinterpretations of the sacred and the canonical. If Chaitanya's dualist concept of bhakti (evolved partly as a response to the pure monism of Advaita, which had till then dominated the Indian scene) seems too far in the past, there is the instance of the *smarta* text Gita acquiring the canonical status of a *shruti* text in the nineteenth and early twentieth century India. And of course there is the instance of the first great social and religious reformer of modern India, Rammohun Roy (1772-1833), 'legitimately' interpreting Shankara's monism as monotheism, and the instance of Gandhi, as 'legitimately' borrowing his concept of *ahimsa* or non-violence from the Sermon on the

Mount and claiming it to be the core concept of orthodox Hinduism. Howsoever odd such 'distortions' may seem to the westernised Indian or to the scholastic, Brahmanic traditionalist, they are the means the Indian civilisation has repeatedly used to update its theories of evil and to ensure cultural survival while allowing largescale social interventions.

To appreciate such reinterpretations, we must learn to acknowledge or decode three languages which often hide the implicit native theories of oppression in many nonwestern traditions. These are the language of continuity, the language of spiritualism, and the language of self. They may look like aspects of a primitive false consciousness to the moderns but they continue to be the means of indirectly articulating the problems of survival for the nonmodern victims of history.

The language of continuity (which accounts for the image of the savage as change-resisting and stagnant) assumes that all changes can be seen, discussed or analysed as aspects of deeper continuities. In other words, the language assumes that every change, howsoever enormous, is only a special case of continuity. The perennial problems of human living and perennial questions about human self-definition are common to all ages and cultures and all disjunctions are a part of a continuous effort to grapple with these problems and questions. This position is radically different from the modern western concept of continuity as only a special case of change or as only a transient period of time which is only overtly continuous or which, if it is truly continuous, is for that reason less valuable. In the dominant Indic tradition, each change is just another form of the unchanging and another reprioritisation or revaluation of the existent.

At one plane the difference between the languages is exactly that: a difference in language. Yet the fact remains that the language of continuity is mostly spoken by the victims of the present global system; the language of disjunction by the powerful and the rich and by those dominating the discourse on cultures. The fact also remains that the language of disjunction today has been successfully, though not wholly, coopted by those who are for the status quo. The Shah of Iran spoke of moderni-

sation and social change; his opponents spoke of cultural survival and conservation; the military juntas in South America speak of changing their societies into powerful nation-state systems; their opponents speak of protection of Indian rights and of the traditions of nonwhite cultures; Ronald Reagan and Indira Gandhi speak of scientific and technological growth; their critics speak of ecological issues, traditional sciences and rural technologies. For a long time the weights were differently distributed: the language of continuity was mainly used by those who ran the older oppressive systems. Now, development, maturity, scientific temper, revolutionary consciousness — these are keywords in the vocabulary of those who see themselves as either deservedly ruling the world or as its future rulers.

The language of spirit, including both its 'respectable' versions and the versions which the spiritually-minded themselves reject as confidence tricks, can serve a number of this-worldly purposes of the oppressed. It often expresses, when decoded, an analysis of oppression which rejects the analytic categories popular with the oppressors and with the modern sectors from which the oppressors come. Such analysis in the language of spirit is seen by us as a camouflaged statement of hard self-interest and *simultaneously* — and here lies a fundamental contradiction in the modern concept of the politics of cultures — as woolly sentimentalism and a subjectivist hoax. Obviously, if it is only woolly sentimentalism it cannot at the same time be a camouflaged statement of self-interest, and if it is an indirect statement of self-interest it is not that subjectivist after all. Marx recognised this when he spoke of religion as expressing the pain of the oppressed. But he was mired too deeply in Eurocentric nineteenth century scientism and evolutionism. He did not go so far as to take seriously the cognitive frame which went with the 'pain'. Nor did he notice that (1) the frame often used the language of spirit to articulate a set of values which criticised or defied the society as it existed; and (2) it rejected the conventional concepts of science and rationality as irrational, inhuman, sectarian, and collaborationist.

A subcategory of the language of spirit in societies like ours is the language of anti-history which rejects the idea of history,

specially the idea of historical laws, as a new tool of oppression. The language seeks to reinstate the mythopoetic language which is closer to the victims of history. The understanding of oppression expressed in myths and other forms of shared fantasies — or expressed through alterations in existing myths and shared fantasies — transcends the barriers of regions and subcultures in a complex civilisation. For most savages, myths communicate life experiences and cultural roots; history hides them. That is why the theory of oppression expressed in the mythopoetic language does not come as a special module prepared by outsiders (to which the oppressed must learn to adapt); it comes as an analytic statement of the emic kind which may or may not be translatable into the language used by the dominant theories of manmade suffering.

Finally, the language of self in which the oppressed often package their story. This language includes, as does the language of spiritualism, the so-called fatalism of the savage and the primitive against which conscientisation and other similar processes seem such good medicines. The language of self emphasises variables such as self-realisation, self-actualisation or self-enrichment and apparently underplays changes in the not-self or the outer world. This has been for instance the emphasis of the humanistic psychologists and others who have tried to base their theories of consciousness, psychological health, and human creativity on insights into self processes, rather than on insights into psychopathologies of social life. I am however drawing attention to the language from another vantage ground. The language of self, I want to stress, also has an implicit theory of the not-self — of oppression and social transformation. To borrow words from modern psychology, autoplasticity does in this case include alloplasticity. In many of the nonwestern traditions the self is not only included in 'external' laws of nature and society but nature and society in turn are subsumed in the self. Self-correction and self-realisation include the principle of intervention in the outside world as we have come to understand the world in post-Galilean and post-Cartesian cosmologies.

V

Modern theories of oppression, whether they help the oppressed or not, help the theorists a lot. To the extent they speak the languages of discontinuity, ultra-materialism, or impersonality, they become a part, often a fashionable part, of the modern world and valued streams of dissent within that world. To the extent they presume to represent the sanity of the oppressed, these theories also sometimes become the mark of a new elite — the revolutionary vanguard, the expert demystifier, the trained psychotherapist, the scientist trying to break down the prescientific temper of the masses. Perhaps we have reached the point where one must learn to take more seriously other kinds of categories used by those victimised by the modern oppressive systems. These systems oppress not only the way older oppressive systems did — by openly legitimising violence, greed, and dominance. These systems successfully tap the human ingenuity (1) to produce systems that are unjust, expropriatory, and violent in the name of liberation or freedom; and (2) to develop a public consciousness which includes an explicit model of proper dissent. In such a world, dissent, unless it seeks to subvert the rules of the game and the language in which the rules are framed, becomes another form of conformity. George Orwell realised this. He felt that the oppressed, when faced with the problem of survival, had no obligation to follow any model or any rule of the game. It goes without saying that only way to contain the oppressive possibilities of such 'methodological anarchism' is to continue to work with a perspective which (1) retains the sense of immediacy and directness of the experience or perception of manmade suffering and (2) which keeps open the scope for criticism of every criticism.

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