

Traditions, Tyranny, and Utopias:  
Essays in the Politics of Awareness.  
Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1987

by

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Nandy dedicates this book to "those who dare to defy the given models of defiance." Given this beginning we should expect a treat of alternative perspectives, of pathways out of our constructions of the real, of epistemological and cultural escapes from the traditions, tyrannies and utopias that we create and that create the possibilities of "us." We are not disappointed. Traditions, Tyranny, and Utopias includes five essays by Nandy brought together for this book. The entire collection continues the project that Nandy began with such works as At the Edge of Psychology and The Intimate Enemy in finding ways to organically merge the richness of Indian thinking with critical theory, and Freudian and Depth psychology. But the root connector of his work is the construction of a postmodern future. His is a devastating critique of the moderns, of those who wish to judge past, present, and future from a viewpoint outside of time, whether the protagonists of the modernity/science/development project or the antagonists of the scientific socialist project. Nandy sees future alternatives coming from non-modern and pre-modern societies, just as modernity itself drew upon classical Hellenic traditions not medieval Christian metaphysics.

## UTOPIA CONVERSATIONS

He enters the discussion of the modern by examining the various utopias of modern world, implicitly, the liberal and the socialist. To do this, Nandy finds ways to evaluate utopias. For him a realized utopia can be another source of terror. "Rarely have utopians and visionaries built escape clauses into their charters for the future. One can enter their utopias; one cannot emigrate from them." (all quotes from Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias, p. 2) His question is, can we construct a set of criteria to assess the utopias of others without violently imposing our own utopian tendencies? For Nandy, the first criteria is that the utopia must be able to account for its legitimate and illegitimate brain-children. Once the utopia has gone astray, partisans attempt to reread the utopia with their version being somehow purer or they redefine the renegades as misusers of the utopia. The choice, for example, of locating Stalinism as intrinsic to the Marxist vision or as an aberration of it or placing caste as a necessary product of Hinduism instead of reification by brahmins is a metaphysical and political choice.

Generally, while no "utopia can give a guarantee against its misuse by over-zealous ideologues, utopias can build conceptual components which sanctify self-doubts, openness and dissent." (p. 7) A utopia must also be able to take criticisms from other utopias as if they were unbiased and it must be able to view its own criticisms of other utopias as if they were biased. In addition, a utopia must also be able to escape its own structure: it must have a built-in self-destructiveness, an openness to change. Utopias must be open to dialog between other utopias, but this is unlikely for most attempts at utopian thinking make knowledge claims in which those outside the grand theory cannot understand themselves for they exist in prehistory. For example, monotheists claim not only to understand their world better, but they claim to understand the world of the paganists more fully as well.

But this is not to say that utopias must be grounded in history, rather they must at some level be independent of history. They cannot be simply reacting to history, for

"yesterday's dissent is often today's establishment and, unless resisted, becomes tomorrow's terror." (p. 13)

To Nandy then, the past is a consensual fable, "waiting to be interpreted and reinterpreted as an alternative in the future." (p. 19) The task of the critical futurist, or the person who takes seriously the futures discourse, is to speak to this time and be spoken to it in return.

And yet theorists develop grand visions of history and future based on natural laws that are space/time and observer invariant. Without a utopian knowledge claim their theories would not be able to mobilize activism; their efforts would be merely intellectual discourse. The vision of the prophets, of Marx, or of the Enlightenment are significant because of their grandness. Without their unproblematic representations of the real, of the natural, of the belief that their movements are guided by destiny, they would not be able to sustain the "myth" needed for individual and social transformation. Thus the paradox: to change history, texts must stand outside of history; unfortunately, it is this very placement that can cause misuse and often over time and in time, terror.

### THIRD WORLD UTOPIAS

Nandy's subsequent essay moves toward a third world utopia. This essay begins with a quote from the Mahabharata: "Alas, having defeated the enemy, we have ourselves been defeated...the ...defeated have become victorious...Misery appears like prosperity, and prosperity looks like misery. Thus our victory is twined into defeat." (p. 20) The history of the world, the third world, begins in oppression and suffering. Any utopia must speak to historical attempt to survive in such a marginalized condition. The central theme of this is that "the only way the third world can transcend the sloganeering of its well wishers is, first, by becoming a collective representation of the victims of man-made suffering everywhere in the world and in all past times; second, by internalizing or owning up the outside forces of oppression and, third, by recognizing the

oppressed or marginalized selves of the first and the second worlds as civilizational allies in the battle against institutionalized suffering." (p. 21) It was Gandhi more than anyone who was sensitive to this, asserts Nandy, a point he continues to develop throughout his reading of modernity. Thus, utopia construction is about understanding the location of oppression externally and internally. Oppression and victimhood become internalized long after the official oppressor has gone home, for the self has been contaminated. The utopian effort is then the creation and construction of a future self.

#### CRITIQUING THE IDEOLOGY OF ADULTHOOD

His third essay, "Reconstructing Childhood: A Critique of the Ideology of Adulthood," uses the division of biological time to speak to history and future. It was the British in India who saw themselves as the elder with India as the immature child, thus justifying all types of despotism, for the child does not have equal rights. The child must be disciplined and taught the values of the utopia of scientific industrial capitalism. "Childhood has become a major dystopia for the modern world. The fear of being childish dogs the steps of every psychologically insecure adult and of every culture which uses the metaphor of childhood to define mental illness, primitivism, abnormality, underdevelopment, non-creativity and traditionalism. Perfect adulthood...has become the goal of most over-socialized human beings." (p. 65) Alternatively, one can see childhood as a lost utopia, a time of innocence and play. Indeed, a utopia construction must begin with the child and the ability for adults to live with their childhood and their children in mutuality. The reconstruction of childhood is then for Nandy a plea for the plurality of cultures and for visions themselves.

#### TECHNOLOGY AND THE CULTURE OF SCIENCE

Nandy's next two essays speak to the traditions of technology and the relationship between science, authoritarianism and culture. By titling his essay "The Traditions of

Technology," he immediately begins the process of denaturalizing technology (for technology claims to be outside traditions) and placing it within culture (for technology claims to be outside culture as well as independent variable, not a dependent one). He historicizes the myth that technology owes itself to science in an attempt to delegitimize the power of science. In this history, he writes: "The image of the scientist as a slightly seedy natural philosopher and practitioner of an esoteric discipline, and that of the technologist as a humble craftsman or artisan, gradually underwent a change. Both became partners in a new, high paying, heady enterprise called modern science." (p. 78) But the modern scientist did not stop there. "He was to see the idea that while each technological achievement marked the success of modern science, each technological perversity was the responsibility of either the technologist or his political and economic mentors, not that of the scientist." (p. 78) It is this splitting of the personality that fascinates Nandy. He plays with this using Gandhi as someone who countered not with anti-science polemic, but a move against the fetishism of science. In the European context, morality was removed from science finally leaving modern technology to the realm of the irrational. It is this modern context that has made "it possible for a film-maker like Jean-Luc Godard to think of a cinematic climax in which the world ends neither with a bang nor with a wimper, but with a traffic jam." (p. 85) Technology, thus, should be seen not as a pure product of human cognition, but as an expression of the total human personality. Among others, William Irwin Thompson has developed in his various cultural histories: Evil and World Order, The Time Falling Bodies Take to Fall and Pacific Shift.

But in the meantime, while the modern problem of isolation and alienation has been examined by the Freudians, humanists and Marxists and others, science has become consciously isolated from its discursive context--the social, political and economic. For Nandy, the main problem is not the danger of superstition in the classic epistemes but with the irrationality of modern science. "Modern science has ...built a structure of near total isolation where human beings themselves---including all their

suffering and moral experience--have been objectified as things and processes, to be vivisected, manipulated or corrected. Foucault especially has developed this theme in Discipline and Punish and Madness and Civilization. But while Foucault stays with European Man, Nandy takes us into both worlds, the rationality of M. N Roy and the alternative "irrationality" (from the perspective of modernity) of Gandhi. Nandy reminds us that in traditional cultures there was at least a play, a dialog, of false consciousness. There were a variety of gurus competing for allegiance. This was possible as traditional cultures were not driven by the principles of absolute internal consistency. They "did allow the individual to create a place for himself in a plural structure of authority." (p. 112)

To Nandy, modern science was once a movement of dissent against the tyranny of the Church brahmins. It pluralized the world of ideas. To him, science now is moving towards "acquiring the absolute narcissism of a new passionless Caligula." (p. 153) Thus, we should not be surprised that the critics of science are falling back on previous cultural constructions to house their critiques. Unfortunately, however, what results is the remystification of past traditions in the task of demystifying modernity. Thus, Ananda Coomaraswamy can brilliantly critique modern civilization and defend sati and write that traditional caste ridden Indians were better off than the proletariat of industrialism. But fortunately, writes Nandy, cultures are usually more open and self-critical than their interpreters. Unfortunately, we are all victims and oppressor of the various cultures that constitute our subjectivity and objectivity.

#### REREADING GANDHI

His last essay titled "From Outside the Imperium" develops an alternative reading of Gandhi. Gandhi to him is the critique of modernity par excellence. His search was for the creation of cultures where people were in a condition of right mind, of metanoia. Gandhi knew that the West legitimated itself by locating itself in a scientific secularism and other societies as non-secular. He knew that the West had created categories from

which, once accepted, all avenues to freedom, to alternatives forms of liberation were blocked. For Nandy, important in Gandhi's thinking is his attack of the industrial-urban worldview. Indeed it was this that led to his death. He was killed not because of his religious utterances, but because he was anti-modern; his future for India was one that searched for alternative pasts. Gandhi, unlike Marx, did not develop a vision of the future that privileged the rational subject in the context of an amoral science, rather, for Gandhi religious awareness and the unity of self, environment and culture was the key. Also unlike Marx he sought to use the religious as his method of activism, of his method of creating through process the desired future.

Gandhi's vision did not reject technology, but it rejected technicism. His aim was to use technologies that did not alienate "man" and that restored human dignity. Unfortunately, here Nandy does not speculate as to how Gandhi might react to the present new electronic technologies and their potential role of restoring a modicum of power to the individual. Possibly, while in agreement, Gandhi might look at their location and the use of even these new technologies to create a managed/disciplined bureaucratic society. Thus, Gandhi was disliked precisely because of his critique of modernity; a critique that today seems futuristic given the attack by Foucault and others of rational Enlightenment man and the developmentalist theory of linear masculine evolutionary progress. Gandhi for modernizers such as Nehru, among others, was to be respected for his modern project of nationhood, but not for his problematizing of normal Western behavior. It was Churchill, Nandy reminds us, that found Gandhi's dress nauseating and humiliating. But, his clothes can also be read as an attempt to speak from outside the imperium and as a critique of the model of West in which humans progressively become to look like Westerners once they develop into true humanness. This cloth'ing' (as a verb not a noun) is part of the secularization and modernization of the third world.

Nandy concludes his essay with the following assessment of the politics of Gandhi.

"Gandhi's was one of the few non-Westerners who had carefully read and digested the relevant Western experience and he was one of the very few among the third world's nationalist leaders to see the full implications of the West's Faustian compact with modernity." (p. 162)

#### REVIEWER END-NOTES

Nandy's work is a must reading for those raised in the West who seek to understand their culture and their culture's future. Critiques by those within the American/European project, while interesting, often reinscribe the problems they seek to solve. Westerners cannot see themselves especially as they have made the whole world but an image of an aspect of themselves, either as an extension of themselves or as an opposite as with Orientalism. But by turning to alternative cosmologies, by critically using Indian thinking with critical theory and psychoanalysis--with understandings of adult and child, masculine and feminine--Nandy presents a fascinating reading of modernity and the traditions, tyrannies, and utopias that constitute it. In addition, for those raised in non-Western milieu's the books will be of interest in aiding the seeing how the self of modern, pre-modern and non-modern has been constructed by the West. It will hopefully allow then a recreation of, among others projects, the reconstruction of the Indian self, as well as the realization that just as Orientalism reduces the East to either the irrational superstitious or the loyal opposition of mystical ascetic, Occidentalism reduces the West to either rational wealth accumulation or sensual materialism.

But while Nandy engages in a vast hermeneutic of utopian thinking thus bringing us intimately in contact with various utopian traditions, one wishes that in future incarnations a will from interpretation to alternative futures creation be part of his exegesis, thereby giving us intimacy but also distance from the present and past and thus making both remarkable.

Of course, if one is interested in the predictive dimension of futures research, and



not the critical and cultural discourse Nandy creates, then better to read Megatrends or other similar banalities. One will not get population forecasts or technological impact assessments in Nandy's book. Rather, one will commence and conclude with his dedication: "For those who dare to defy the given models of defiance."