

Spring 5-31-1997

Response to Nandy

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Recommended Citation

Paul, Jeya (1997) "Response to Nandy," *Macalester International*: Vol. 4, Article 22.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol4/iss1/22>

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Response

Jeya Paul

In recent years, there has been an unprecedented acceleration in the pace of globalization. This increased speed is fueled in part by technological developments, as well as the push and pull of an overactive market and the sociopolitical structures associated with them. Two significant implications of this rapid pace, often referred to in the volumes of writing on globalization, are its integrative and divisive tendencies. The concerns of this Roundtable are the consequences of these possibly opposing pulls on identity—on their spawning of a divided self.

Dr. Nandy brings important insights to our discussion, as he paints a portrait of the Indian self as it encounters the thrust of globalization. He discusses the competing strains on identity in terms of the relationship between the “modern” and “traditional” in South Asia. Focusing on the modern political self in India, he describes it as having internalized the European colonialists’ paradigm, and also as possessing some repressed elements of its traditional heritage. In the same breath, he stresses the strong presence of traditional Indian selves. In describing the relationship between these different selves, he points out some of the great pressures that globalization—specifically, European colonization—exerted on South Asian identities.

I. Contributions

Dr. Nandy’s essay contains many instructive insights. The first one I want to highlight is the exposure of the nature of the changes in South Asian identities, wrought by their traumatic experience of colonization—an early strand of globalization. Of particular importance to the issues of self and identity is his discussion of the impact of European Enlightenment constructs, adopted from the colonizers, on native ways of remembering the past. If indeed memory establishes continuity of self, as philosophers like John Locke have argued,¹ then Dr. Nandy’s description of the way in which the historical project in India invalidated local ahistorical memories implies that the continu-

ity of self or of identity of South Asians was seriously disturbed by European colonization. However, he does suggest that the historical project primarily operated within the small modern sector and that a large portion of the population has continued to live with the old ahistorical memories. This suggests that colonial conquest did not greatly alter a significant proportion of South Asian cultural identities.

Second, Dr. Nandy's essay contains a notable critique of modernity. In the process of addressing the specific identity-related concerns of this Roundtable, he makes explicit some of the connections between the processes of modernization and globalization and the violence of our times. In establishing these links, his discussion of the causes of uprootedness and their psychological consequences plays a crucial role. Discussing the forms uprootedness takes, he points to the displacement associated with increased physical mobility, as well as the loss of traditional lifestyles, resulting from industrialization and urbanization. In addition to these, Dr. Nandy includes another critical but less noticed form of uprootedness, describing it as "a state of mind, a form of psychosocial displacement that has become endemic to modernizing societies."² He suggests that movements of ethnic-chauvinism and ultra-nationalism, along with the violence related to them, result in part from the psychosocial yearnings of the uprooted for community and continuity. From a psychologist's perspective, the critique of modernity he offers distinguishes itself from the more familiar ones that stress environmental and economic justice issues.

Third, with his discussion of the interaction between the modern and traditional selves in India, Dr. Nandy illuminates a possibility for conversation between cultures at the global level. The point is often made that "Western" and "non-Western" cultures differ so fundamentally that mutual coexistence will remain an impossibility. But my reading of this essay suggests otherwise. According to Dr. Nandy, in India the democratic political process necessitates an exchange between the modern and traditional, as the modern politicians must engage and appeal to the traditional majority of voters. Since the modern political self is primarily shaped by European influence, it could be seen as representing the West in India. Therefore, the dialogue (or polylogue) that Dr. Nandy indicates occurs in India implies the

potential of a similar interaction between the Western and non-Western cultures at the global level.

II. Questions

My first set of questions relates to Dr. Nandy's suggestion that there exist alternative visions of the universal. He holds up the example of India—where the modern self incorporates the non-modern as an alternative (and perhaps more sustainable) version of modernity to that which emerged from the European Enlightenment. Here, he challenges “the Enlightenment's implicit faith that while there can be many forms of relativism, there can be only one form of universalism.”³

While alternative universalism struck me as an important idea, the absence of additional discussion of it left me uncertain about its exact meaning and implications. I interpreted this point as claiming that the relation between the modern and traditional in India could apply to other cultures; that is, that within each cultural group an exchange between the modern and traditional elements could, or perhaps will, occur. In other words, the process of dialogue is universal, although each culture will generate its distinctive outcome given its unique tradition. I think this is what Dr. Nandy means in his reference to Satyajit Ray's understanding that “globalization [was] not the end of cultures, for as globalization made inroads into the interstices of cultures, so did the politics of cultural self-affirmation and self-exploration.”⁴

Out of this understanding, my main concern pertains to what exactly “engaging the traditional” entails. Here, one could ask the following: If traditions evolve and “the traditional” is not a fixed entity, what, specifically, is this traditional that must be engaged? Must the traditional be reclaimed in its entirety so that, for example, oppressive elements must be accommodated? If not, what criteria will be used to decide which aspects should be redeemed?

The second set of questions that arise for me are not directly pertinent to the theme of identity but seem unavoidable. Dr. Nandy identifies the major shortcoming of the European Enlightenment mode of thought: that it causes uprootedness, which has potentially violent consequences. He seems to be say-

ing that the hold this mode of thought has on South Asia is a result of psychological reactions to colonialism. However, another reason might be that, having come out of the Enlightenment, it underpins modern science and technology, and technological conveniences seem to have a near-universal appeal. This is not to deny that technology can lead to negative or undesirable consequences, but rather that in evaluating the European framework of thought, we must consider its relationship to technology. Is technological advancement possible without a complete adoption of its intellectual culture? If technology and its social matrix are inseparable, are we willing to compromise the promise of technological development in certain parts of the world in order to avoid the destructive elements of the Enlightenment-based framework? More important, is that a choice which those of us already living in a highly technological context can make for the others?

III. Other Thoughts

In his discussion of the nation-state and history projects in India, Dr. Nandy suggests that the conception of the nation as a single cultural unit belongs to a European framework that cannot be applied to the Indian cultural self. Similarly, Sudhir Kakar, another Indian psychoanalyst, points out that the very method of seeking to identify the self by tracing a narrative which connects the experiences of an individual is Western and alien to that which is traditionally Indian. Kakar claims that

the introspective element of Western civilization is ancient and can be traced back to later Greek thought, where the definitions of self and of identity became contingent upon an active process of examining, sorting out and scrutinizing the “events” and “adventures” of one’s own life. . . . This kind of introspection is simply not a feature of Indian culture and its literary traditions.⁵

Although not originally part of Indian tradition, the need to consciously arrive at a definition of self is, as Dr. Nandy suggests, a consequence of widespread uprootedness and the disruption of continuity and community it entails. Not only has globalization (of which colonization was a part) introduced

South Asians to this process of consciously deriving an identity, it has intensified the imperative in other parts of the world to become self-aware. One reason for this heightened need for a definition of self is modernity and its provision for what Dr. Nandy describes as “a wide range of choices for self-construction and self-expression.”⁶ Another reason is that globalization, by bringing immense differences into tighter encounters, undermines the assumed incontestability of a way of life previously taken for granted. Challenged by a significantly different alternative, an individual or culture seeks to examine the self and specifically identify the difference between the self and the confronted other or others, thereby consciously defining the self and the other.

This way of identifying the self seems to be closely related to the scientific method of making sense of the world. One of the first basic projects in any science is classification, i.e., to examine, sort out, and then categorize the subjects of investigation. In biology, this takes the form of the five-category classification system of living organisms and in chemistry the periodic table of elements. The issue of identity seems to follow that same scientific project of taxonomy, in which cultural selves are the subjects. Establishing one’s identity involves attempting to describe or name the self by reference to certain categories, such as gender, ethnicity, religion, or nationality. In both cases, the aim is to have a general descriptor that most accurately describes the phenomena in question. The critical difference, however, is that in the natural sciences, it is usually the descriptor that is refined to better match the object, whereas in the case of identity both the object and its descriptor can be adjusted so that they appear consistent. Therefore, consciously arriving at a description of the self or a statement of identity has implications for the very form the self assumes.

As I mentioned earlier, settling on a definition of self often occurs through, or perhaps requires, differentiation from the “other.” Although an image of the self might be decided upon, rarely are nations or individuals complete or absolute representations of that definition. They are likely to contain characteristics often specified as belonging to the other. This might result in an effort to readjust the self to make it fit the stated identity by attempting to eradicate aspects of the self often defined as char-

acteristics of the other. Such an effort might arise from a need for internal consistency between one's claimed and actual nature. This might be, to a large extent, related to the dualistic, either-or way of thinking which often denies the possibility of the simultaneous presence of opposites.

The striving to eliminate or suppress the other within might occur—and take on fervent dimensions—when the other is conceived negatively. For instance, in addressing the politics of identity, David Campbell makes the argument that U.S. foreign policy might be explained as an effort to forge national cohesiveness and identity by instilling fear of an enemy other. He claims that during the Cold War period, the Russian Communists were constituted as the enemy other and were depicted as representing all that was un-American. He describes the variety of activities aimed at tracking and purging the slightest traces of “communism” within the United States.⁷ This might be explained as a result of the tendency to eradicate the other within.

Other instances of this process include the “ethnic cleansing” that has often occurred in different parts of the world, suggesting that a definition of national identity in ethnically distinct terms leads to an effort to exterminate minority groups who do not conform to the definition. Similarly, this tendency to modify the self so as to place it within the confines of the stated identity might apply to formerly colonized peoples seeking to reassert an authentic heritage, or to those engaging in what Dr. Nandy calls “reactive affirmation of cultures.”⁸ He indicates that often these reactive affirmations dig up traditional elements tainted by domination and violence. Perhaps this can be explained in part as a result of people trying to fit the common characterizations of traditional systems while attempting to avoid features associated with modernity.

To be more specific, a common distinction made between traditional and modern is hierarchy versus equality. Equality is often held up as a primary value of the European Enlightenment, and as a characteristic that distinguishes that age from a past tainted by hierarchy and oppressive systems. So, for example, defenders of the Enlightenment culture or of modern values will assert the superiority of those values by contrasting them to the hierarchical and suffocating aspects of the caste system in

India or the practice of *purdah* in the Islamic world. This, in turn, leads to the caste system being seen as representative of that which is traditionally Indian and the *purdah* practice as a fundamental component of that which is traditionally Islamic. In other words, the traditional is essentialized by the modern as hierarchical or oppressive, and this definition is accepted both by advocates of modernity and those striving to reclaim their traditional heritage. Once these definitions have been established, those purposefully attempting to shun the modern base their identity-creating actions on these conceptions. In doing so, they are likely to exclude or avoid elements within the traditional that resemble the essentialized characteristics of the modern.

Thus, when identity becomes a consciously deliberated issue and the self is constructed through differentiation from an other or others, negative consequences can result from attempts to readjust the self. However, given the present thrust of globalization and the uprootedness it leaves in its wake, it is unlikely that identity and the need to categorize one's self will cease to be an issue. The question then is whether definitions of the self and other can be worked out in non-absolute terms so that legitimate space can be granted to the other within.

In closing, I want to point out that the preceding paragraphs and many of the other Roundtable discussions have focused on the negative and often violent methods employed in dealing with the identity crises spurred by globalization. However, it is important to note that such occurrences do not constitute the complete picture. As Dr. Nandy mentions, many have "reconciled [themselves] to living with a labile sense of self."⁹ This suggests that in numerous instances people deal with the identity-related challenges of globalization in nonviolent or neutral—and consequently less attention-catching—ways.

Notes

1. For a description of Locke's, Anthony Quinton's, and H. P. Grice's analyses of personal identity in terms of memory, see John Perry, ed., *Personal Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 33–73.
2. Ashis Nandy, "South Asian Politics: Modernity and the Landscape of Clandestine and Incommunicable Selves" in *Macalester International* 4 (Spring 1997): 232.
3. *Ibid.*, 239.

4. *Ibid.*, 243.
5. Sudhir Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics, and Doctors: A Psychological Inquiry into India and Its Healing Traditions* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 7.
6. Nandy, "South Asian Politics," 235.
7. David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 156–86.
8. Nandy, "South Asian Politics," 243.
9. *Ibid.*, 232.