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Response to Nandy

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Response

Rubén Guillemí

At this moment in history, when differences between cultures and peoples around the world are being reduced, we do not often have the opportunity to listen those who, as a basis for their reasoning, have a non-Western starting point.

Dr. Ashis Nandy devoted a considerable part of his essay to an Indian notion of state, political authority, and history in a moment when, as he writes in one of his books, the Western notions of these issues are “everywhere, within the West and outside, in structures and in minds.”¹ He highlights the points of reference for those Indian concepts: the *Arthashastra*, or the Mughal Empire, as opposed to the imperial British-Indian state, and a concept of history that includes living myths, legends, epics, and folkways as opposed to the European Enlightenment ideas. Later, he addresses the problem of uprooting. In a world dominated by the psychology and culture of the exile, the case of India is particularly interesting, since it is a country that manifests numerous aspects of these phenomena. The great challenge for India and South Asia is to face this dialogue with the world while simultaneously maintaining a conversation with itself, its own roots.

I. Insights and Concerns

The distinction between history and myth, legend and epic is so clear to the Western mind that people of this hemisphere learn very early to distinguish one from the other and are usually anxious to confirm whether a story “really” happened or not. “History,” unlike “legend,” deserves serious consideration. In this context, it is a unique opportunity to read Dr. Nandy’s essay about a concept of history that includes “nonhistorical modes of constructing of the past,” and to acknowledge that for many Indian thinkers, their history was stolen and their country was forced to live on a “borrowed history.”

In his book *The Intimate Enemy*, Dr. Nandy openly identifies his work as an “alternative mythography of history, which denies and defies the values of history”² as it is conceived in the West. For Western readers, this is obviously a new starting point for understanding the past. In Dr. Nandy’s view, the preservation of an Indian identity also seems to be threatened by the fact that India’s traditional definitions of state, political authority, and political leadership are absent from contemporary politics in that country.

The idea that a second colonization took place in India after its independence is very important; it shows that even those who fought against the first colonialism often embraced the second.³ Dr. Nandy writes that “modern Indians have stabilized their modern self by internalizing the colonial ideology of the state they confronted in the nineteenth century.”⁴ It would be interesting to know if Dr. Nandy thinks this process of mutual influence among different cultures, particularly the Westernization of the rest of the world, is really avoidable.

Let us consider for a moment one very important cultural asset: language. Linguists like William Labov, for instance, consider that change and mutual influence among different languages is a continuous and unavoidable process, many times governed by the predominance of one culture over others. At other times, change seems chaotic, governed by its own rules. Might it not be the same for other cultural factors, such as history or the notion of state or nation? The great difference is that today the mass media are globalizing, multiplying, and magnifying a phenomenon as old as human history.

Dr. Nandy’s analysis of the phenomenon of uprooting is also particularly appealing in light of estimates that one-third of the entire tribal population of India has been displaced. Especially thought-provoking is his idea that not only a few countries but an entire world has been dominated by the psychology and culture of exile and uprootedness and that these created some of the “greatest creative achievements” and “the greatest pathologies” of our times.⁵

Nevertheless, I feel that for Dr. Nandy’s ideas to be more accessible to those who seldom have the opportunity to read about India, an explanation of his terminology would be useful. What, for example, was the traditional notion of “state” and

“government” in the *Arthashastra*? The essay is much more clear on Western ideas, subtly criticized, than in specifying the Indian concepts that preceded them. Since the primary audience of this essay consists of Western undergraduate students, it also would be useful to have some brief explanations of Indian names and words, such as Rana Pratap, Guru Govind Singh, Kautilya, nabobs, and Darbar.

For a better understanding of the process that is ongoing in India, it would be helpful, for instance, to have some examples to illustrate the “growing demands for the renegotiation of terms between culture and modern selfhood.”⁶ Here, a number of questions arise. For example, is Dr. Nandy talking about a philosophical movement among intellectuals or a political trend deeply rooted in Indian society?

II. Personal Notes

A. America: The Continent of the “Uprooted”

The condition of uprootedness and the identity crisis it creates is particularly interesting in the Americas, now populated by people who some centuries, decades, or only years ago were “uprooted.” Latin America, in particular, has been permanently influenced by foreign powers that at times seem to be forcing these countries to live on “borrowed” cultures. In Argentina, a national identity crisis is almost an obsession among its citizens. “We are in Latin America, but we are Europeans,” Argentines frequently confess. “What does it take to be a nation?” was the first question an Argentinean writer posed in a book funded by a special government commission some decades ago.⁷

With respect to language, in many countries such as Japan and Thailand, a common language is an important factor in their definition as a nation. But this is not so in other cases. Many will say that the Swiss form a nation even if they speak three or perhaps four different languages. And what about more universal languages such as English or Spanish? Do they belong to any particular nation? Portuguese and Brazilians, Spaniards and Argentines are also illustrations of the fact that a common language does not always define a nation.⁸ Nevertheless, Brazil and Argentina, the two most important countries in South America,

are two good examples of nations living on a “borrowed” language and culture.

B. Argentina

Most Argentines today are only the third or fourth generation in the country. The great wave of European immigration of the past 150 years shaped today’s ethnic and racial character of the country. Argentina consists almost exclusively of people of European ancestry. The Indians and *mestizos* were all but eradicated by the Europeans who populated Buenos Aires from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s.

Between 1857 and 1939, more than 3.5 million laborers were added to the population. Today, 85 percent of the population is children or grandchildren of Spanish or Italian immigrants. Even if the children of immigrants were quick to identify themselves as Argentines, in recent decades many of them, pressed by the harsh economic situation, have rediscovered their ancestors. A large proportion of the population now claims to have two identities: an Argentinean passport and a passport of the European Community. No one sees this as a betrayal or as antipatriotic. In fact, most Argentines today proudly recognize their European heritage.

There are many Argentinean sayings about the confused nature of their psyche. One claims that an Argentinean is an Italian who speaks Spanish, lives in a French-style house, and thinks he is British. Another holds that the Mexicans are descended from the Aztecs, the Peruvians from the Incas, and the Argentines from ships.

In Latin America, particularly in Argentina, the issue of uprootedness faced by Dr. Nandy raises the question of roots. In a country where 85 percent of the population claims a European heritage, Argentines’ connection with their native heritage is almost nonexistent.

The attempt to make Argentina a European country in Latin America is evident at first glance. The sweeping Avenida de Mayo is a tribute to Madrid’s Gran Vía; the Colón Opera House faithfully emulates Milan’s La Scala; and the swanky Barrio Norte is a shrine to Paris’s Right Bank. While Mexicans proudly display their Aztec monuments and Peruvians feel proud of the

Inca citadel — Macchu Picchu — museums in Argentina seem more like dusty attics. They are full of family treasures such as spurs, pistols, and letters, the significance of which is obscure. Argentines prefer to show off their European-style cities and natural landscapes.

Jorge Luis Borges, Argentina's most important writer, described this disconnection with the past: "It seems to me," he writes, "the founding of Buenos Aires is a fairy tale. It seems as eternal as water and air."⁹

While Argentines embrace a culture and a history borrowed from Europe in their "melting pot," their relative prosperity, the impressive capital of Buenos Aires, and their European racial tradition have given them a highly intensive nationalistic feeling of superiority over other Latin Americans. In fact, Argentinean nationalism was shaped less by its own internal forces than by the external threats posed by its neighbors, particularly Brazil and Chile. An overwhelming pride leads many Argentines to believe they can remain aloof from others.

Only the last military dictatorship (1976-83), the defeat of Argentinean troops in the Malvinas (a.k.a., Falklands) War, and frequent economic crises in recent decades have led these uprooted Argentines to realize how far they now are from the European continent whence their grandparents came, and how close they are to the common destiny they share with their Latin American neighbors.

C. Brazil

It is in part this obsession with uniqueness among the peoples of the region that distinguishes Argentines from their neighbors. The Brazilians do not spend too much time on this sort of soul searching. Being two countries colonized by Europeans, it is interesting to look at the differences between Argentina and Brazil in terms of national identity. While Argentinean culture is predominantly European, Brazil's culture has been shaped not only by the Portuguese, who gave the country its language and religion, but also by native Indians, black Africans, and other settlers from Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Although often ignored, denigrated, or feared by urban Brazilians, Indian and

African cultures have had a lasting impact on the shaping of modern Brazil and its legends, dance, and music. Unlike the Argentineans, most of whom are descendants of relative “new-comers,” a large number of Brazilian families have been in the country for many generations.

The Portuguese colonizers, unlike the British, were men who arrived alone, a situation that encouraged unbridled sexual license and sometimes violence, ranging from seduction to rape, first of Indian women and later of African women brought to Brazil as slaves. Both the Catholic Church and the Portuguese Crown urged such couples to marry. The Brazilian people were born of this “forced marriage” between different cultures.

Brazil was much more successful than Argentina in overcoming its condition of uprootedness. Subsequent waves of immigrants — first Europeans, then Japanese, and, most recently, Latin Americans from neighboring countries — were integrated into Brazil’s “melting pot.” They do not recognize themselves as “foreigners.” In Brazil, where wealth correlates positively with whiteness, it is not race or nationality that divides society, but the economy.

To an unusual degree, Brazil possesses all the factors that favor the formation and growth of national identity. Its language differentiates it from its Spanish-speaking neighbors. The Brazilians lived under a monarchy throughout most of the nineteenth century and were thus isolated from their republican neighbors during the formative period of Latin American nations.

The sociologist Gilberto Freyre emphasized in his classic study, *The Masters and the Slaves*, that the combination of three races — European, African, and Indian — resulted in the formation of a unique civilization.¹⁰ Nowhere in the world have three races mixed together so freely and so extensively. Each has made contributions to the national language, diet, institutions, traditions, mores, and folklore.

III. Globalization in the South

In the last decade, Argentineans began to remember an old saying former president Juan Domingo Perón (1946–55 and 1973–74) used in reference to Latin America: “The year 2000 will find us unified or dominated.”

Even if Argentinean roots go back to Europe, the political integration of the subcontinent has a long history rooted in the very beginning of the independent life of Hispanic America, when the great liberators, José de San Martín and Simón Bolívar, dreamed of a united Latin American nation by 1800. But only after several economic crises and its defeat in the Malvinas War did Argentina begin to address more objectively and constructively its Latin American identity and its failures in nationalistic rhetoric under the military regime.

Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Argentina are now experiencing a very important integration process through a free-trade agreement called Mercosur, and they are making progress toward the inclusion of Bolivia, Chile, and Peru. It will comprise an economic area of 250 million inhabitants, exporting \$93 billion in products every year — 45 percent of all Latin American exports. Economic integration is also the result of an identity process and soul-searching that is pushing these countries to realize their common destiny in a globalizing world.

As is the case with India and Southeast Asia, Latin America is also living a “reactive affirmation of cultures and identities.”¹¹ Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, during a recent visit to Buenos Aires, expressed what many Latin Americans are now openly recognizing: “Nothing divides us, and everything is carrying us to a common destiny.”

Notes

1. Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), xi.
2. *Ibid.*, xv.
3. *Ibid.*, xi.
4. Ashis Nandy, “South Asian Politics: Modernity and the Landscape of Clannestine and Incommunicable Selves” in *Macalester International* 4 (Spring 1997): 227.
5. *Ibid.*, 235.
6. *Ibid.*, 239.
7. See also Elena Garrido, *Indagación de lo Argentino* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Culturales Argentinas, year of publication unknown).
8. Otto Jespersen, *Mankind, Nation, and Individual: From a Linguistic Point of View* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), 1.

9. Jorge Luis Borges, "Fundación Mítica de Buenos Aires" (The Mythological Foundation of Buenos Aires), in *Cuaderno San Martín* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Proa, 1929).

10. Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization*, translated from the fourth edition by Samuel Putman (New York: Knopf, 1946).

11. Nandy, "South Asian Politics," 243.