

Shamans, Savages and the Wilderness:

**On the Audibility of Dissent and
the Future of Civilizations**

We are living in a global civilization, even if it does not look to us sufficiently global. This civilization has certain features and “ground rules” and those who want to consolidate, transcend or dismantle it, must first identify them.

Foremost among the rules are a few laws of obedience that come in many guises, only two of which I shall touch upon here. The first is the peculiarly narrow and specific form dissent has to take, to be audible or politically “non-co-optable” in our times. The second is the strange inaudibility that plagues those who, by design or by default, have become citizens of the dominant global culture. In the first section of this paper, we shall discuss the former; in the second, the latter. I shall then suggest that the two can be conceptually collapsed and the Third World can be made to represent that collapsed category, but the reader need not accept that part of the story.

The Dissent of the Shaman

If the first criterion of a global civilization is that all other surviving civilizations define themselves with reference to it, the signs today are all too clear. The old classification between the historical and ahistorical societies may not have broken down, but all large ahistorical societies now have sizeable sections of population that have become, through a process of over-correction, entirely captive to the historical mode. They not only would like to rewrite their own histories but to live up to someone else’s history. It is a remarkable feature of our times that so many individuals and collectivities are willing and are even eager to forego their right to

design their own futures. Some societies do not any longer have a workable concept of the future. They have a past, a present and someone else's present as their future. "The entire East", Rabindranath Tagore said more than fifty years ago, is "attempting to take into itself a history which is not the outcome of its own living."¹

Some other societies have done even better; they have got rid of parts of their past and present, or rewritten the rest from the point of view of their borrowed futures. Their journey from the past to the present now reads remarkably like similar journeys undertaken by other — usually west European — societies during the last three hundred years. They are the success stories in the global civilization today; they can be called the new historical societies.

More than forty years ago, Ruth Benedict wrote her *Chrysanthemum and the Sword*.² In that book, written during the Second World War and published soon after, she identified a configuration of cultural and personality characteristics which could be identified as the source of Japanese authoritarianism and militarism. Less than twenty years later Robert Bellah, then in his earlier incarnation, wrote of the Protestant-ethics-like elements in Japanese culture — as a clue to Japan's growing economic muscle.³ As it happened, some of the elements on which Bellah focused were not terribly different from the ones that to Professor Benedict had looked so dangerous. Within another decade, Herman Kahn, the technocratic oracle, wrote another book on Japan, this time a highly adulatory one.⁴ Trying to explain the success of what he predicted would soon be world's third superpower, Kahn stumbled

on many of the same traits Benedict and Bellah had touched upon, only with a sense of awe and a touch of admiration and zeal.

It is easy to explain all this away by saying that nothing succeeds like success. It is more difficult to admit that all criteria, except the ones handed down to us by the dominant global consciousness, are being either pre-empted or rendered obsolete. On the one hand, Japan's developmental success has silenced its internal cultural critics and reconstructed Japan's past from the point of view of her preferred future; on the other, it has given Japan a new set of criteria of self-evaluation from the present global civilization, including parts of a brand-new identity.

The same case can be made about the well-known "failures" within the present global civilization. Thanks to her defeat in the game of development, Bangladesh today, to use a cliché, is an "international basket case". Her all other self-definitions are facing extinction. And you have to only read the Indian press and listen to the lament of the Indian literati today to know how unhappy the modern Indians are that many aberrant self-definitions still persist in Indian society and how much they, the modern Indians, derive psychological security from the fact that at least the political ultra-élite in India at the moment seems fully immersed in the global mass culture of politics.

The recovery of the other selves of cultures and communities, selves not defined by the dominant global consciousness, may turn out to be the first task of social criticism and political activism and the first responsibility of intellectual stocktaking in the first decades of the coming century. But that recovery may not be easy. As I have said, radical dissent today constantly faces the danger of

getting organized into a standardized form. It begins to borrow from the dominant worldview to sustain itself, to reach out to the mainstream, to model itself on the previously successful and popular. Whether revolution consumes its children or not, it certainly follows an Orwellian logic to produce a new priesthood — may be a revolutionary priesthood but a priesthood nonetheless — to somehow attain respectability within the present global culture. We shall come back to this issue later in this essay, albeit through a different route.

The only way out, at this moment, seems to be that of the shaman. The shaman not as the heroic symbol of all non-co-optable dissent but the shaman as a more modest symbol of resistance to the dominant politics of knowledge, the shaman as one whose style of negation and whose categories do not make any sense centre-stage but always seem to touch the disempowered in the wings. A shaman is not an expert and he or she cannot be produced through or co-opted by institutional processes. Coming out of a transformative experience and, then, claiming to be a testimony to another way of looking at reality and intervening in it, the shaman is a combination of a mystic healer and an exorcist who identifies demons — popular or unpopular, traditional or modern. The shaman has one foot in the familiar, one foot outside; one foot in the present, one in the future or, as some would put it, in the timeless.

The shaman waits — this shaman I am speaking of, not the anthropologist's favourite subject — until the right moment and the right candidates come, to reproduce him or herself. Because the moment the shaman uses the available institutional

instrumentalities, he or she becomes a part of the everyday world, a priest — someone who has power and perhaps, even charisma, but is not subversive. A priest is never subversive. The priest helps consolidate a culture, whether as a priest to a revolutionary movement or as a high priest in art. He or she might have a subversive past but it is only a past, and nothing is as dead as the past in a historical society.

The shaman *can* survive in a historical society but with difficulty. Usually as a relic of the past, surviving in the present under sufferance and waiting to be superseded by interpreters who will, rationally and systematically, explain shamanism or, if it does not stand up to critical scrutiny, consign it to history, identifying it as belonging to an earlier stage of the evolution of consciousness. The shaman may even manage to survive in a historical society as a lunatic, a schizophrenic who should be psychiatrically committed or, if that becomes politically embarrassing, met with deafening silence.

However, it is possible to argue that once you explain a shaman properly, you turn him or her into a *guru* or, worse, a priest, an odd eccentric priest may be, but a priest nevertheless. The difference between the shaman and the priest is in some ways akin to the one George Steiner, I am told, has drawn somewhere between books and texts. The shaman here is the text, the priest the book. A text can be read in many more ways than a book can ever be. In our times, Marx, Freud and Gandhi are examples of persons who have produced or have become texts. Most of their disciples, though, have consistently tried to turn them into books, closed ones at that.

Alternatively, the shaman can assume a prophetic voice, partly

outside the society and entirely outside the metropolis. Unlike the priest, the shaman can afford to be irresponsible, immature and irrational. The shaman's responsibility is ultimately to an inner vision, or, as many would put it, to an inner vision of truth. Yet, it can be argued that the shaman is actually the repressed self of the society; articulating some possibilities latent in a culture, possibilities which the "sane", the "mature" and the "rational" cannot self-consciously express or seriously pursue.

Probably, I am being unfair. The sane, the rational and the mature, too, will like to explore the shamanic possibilities, but only if the hazards can be foreseen or, at least, cast in the language of probability theory. Unfortunately, the shaman can give certainty only within the shamanic world, not within ours. The choice he or she offers is nothing less than a choice between two worlds.

It can be argued that the shaman also forces a choice between civilizations and cultures. As one who esteems civilizational categories, I say this with a touch of sadness. The concept of civilization carries with it a connotation of civility and the city. It conveys, however indirectly, high culture. The idea of culture is a more modest affair; it can cover the political structure of the African Bushmen, the art of the Navahos or the dying healing system of the Santhals of eastern India. The shaman's whole existence is a defiance of civility and the city. But then, one may say, taking off from William Thompson, that if history represents an oscillation between the city and the wilderness, and by implication between civilizations and cultures, the shaman is a living warning that in that oscillation the wilderness — the insurrection of the little cultures, as some call it — may have to be

taken seriously. Owning up the shaman can be made to mean the responsibility to own up that oscillation, too.

Perhaps, in the present global culture, the shaman, taken metaphysically as the opposition to the king and the priest, remains the ultimate symbol of authentic dissent, representing the utopian and transcendental aspects of the child, the lunatic, the androgynous and the artist. In this sense, he remains the least socialized articulation of the values of freedom, creativity, multiple realities and an open future. At a time when mass culture and media dominate the world capitals, the shaman tries to transcend the manifest reality and the straitjacket of commonsense. True, this expression of defiance uses a language of transcendence or utopianism. But that is partly because the shaman has to force us to move beyond the accessible world of knowledge to the mysterious world of those who remain the undersocialized critics of the present global civilization.

I do not want to push this metaphor too far, for using the shaman as the ultimate symbol of non-co-optable dissent has its hazards. The shaman's concept of collectivity includes a fear of organization and structured dissent. The shaman often is too anarchic, too individualistic, and too suspicious of all formal political processes. But I do want to underscore that, before envisioning the global civilization of the future, one must first own up the responsibility of creating a space at the margins of the present global civilization for a new, plural, political ecology of knowledge. In that ecology, there will certainly have to be a place for our favourite priests and anti-priests but also for a variety of moonstruck shamans, ever ready to lead us into adventures of ideas

which, in “normal” everyday life, must look like lunatics’ visions or children’s fantasies. Not that the visions or fantasies are ever likely to be realized — a shaman’s vision is never realizable in everyday life; it only resonates in the lives of other shamans or prospective shamans and in the dreams of those to whom he or she is not merely a harmless lunatic — but because the shaman experiments with experiences on behalf of us all. The shaman’s dissent is against the conventionality of everyday life and thought.

This does not mean that the shaman does not carry a cultural baggage. Shamans are also human. They are not outside time or space, though they may believe otherwise. Moreover, they rarely love shamans belonging to other tribes. But they do usually consider the world large enough for different kinds and they do usually know how to live with one another. Their empiricism in these matters is derived from life, not books. Their admirers are the ones who find it more arduous to tolerate other shamans and their followers. Karl Marx, who never really ceased to be a shaman, could congratulate Abraham Lincoln on the abolition of slavery in the United States because he was less constrained than the later Marxists by the nature of the system over which Lincoln presided. Human suffering was real to Marx; he tried to look at it directly, not through the pages of books, not even when they were his own.

**Liberation for Those Who Do Not Speak
the Language of Liberation**

Oddly enough, the problem of inaudibility, to which we shall now turn, is not entirely orthogonal to the problem of audibility.

They intertwine in strange ways.

Fyodor Dostoevsky has reportedly claimed somewhere that there are two classes of people in the world: the anthropologists and the subjects of anthropological study. Over the last two hundred years, one subset in the anthropologists' world have learnt to speak the language of liberation — a secularized version of the language of liberation once pre-eminent in much of the Christendom. Today, the power of the language has become so enormous that nearly all dissent within the modern world and the modernized Third World has to be cast in the language, to be heard or taken seriously.

In the world of the subjects of anthropology, the rhetoric of liberation is a new import. It is not usually taken seriously and it is often seen as esoteric radical chic. There are concepts akin to “liberation” in some of the major civilizations of the world — the Sanskritic concepts of *moksa* and *mukti* are obvious examples — but they neither enjoy the same political clout nor the intellectual stature to move the social and political activists. In fact, many indigenous concepts akin to liberation often carry strong connotations of a theory of transcendence and/or other-worldliness.

Predictably, a plethora of social activists since the last century have been trying to teach the objects of anthropological enquiry, scattered all over the world, the beauties of liberation. From St Marx in the nineteenth century to comrade Mao Zedong in the twentieth, from Christian missionaries in the savage world to Reverend Paulo Freire among the volatile, noisy Latin Americans, none has let slip an opportunity to teach the language of liberation

to those who do not speak it.

This language of liberation, as it has grown over the last 150 years, is inextricably linked to the idea of revolution. Revolution is what brings about fundamental or radical changes in a society and, thus, the liberation of oppressed peoples. Its votaries, therefore, see revolution as opposed to both status quo and reform. However, the revolutionaries are usually harshest not on the defenders of status quo but on the defenders of reform. To the partisans of revolution, reform is a false mode of transformative politics, dangerous because it can become an easy substitute for revolution. The best that the idea of reform does, this line of argument goes, is to provide a safe internal critique of a faulty social system and, thus, strengthen the system.

To those who do not use the language of liberation and/or revolution, these debates read like fruitless hair-splitting. For neither do these outsiders view change as intrinsically valuable nor do they see any sustainable philosophical ground to presume a one-to-one relationship between any language of change and the processes of change.

These outsiders are also vaguely aware that the break in linear time a revolution is supposed to represent has a self-contradictory quality about it. Revolution in contemporary times is seen as located in history and the break in time it represents is supposed to be a break in history. Yet, once you have said that, you are faced with the fact that, ever since the concept of revolution has entered the lexicon of social intervention, after every revolution, the effort of both the partisans and the critics of the revolution has been to establish, *ex post facto*, that there really was no break, that the

revolution was inevitable and the historical process was leading up to it. History, thus, gobbles up the idea of the “break in history” intellectually.

Some understanding of this process informs the modern awareness, too, though the popular saying “a revolution consumes its children” does not convey the full implication of the proposal being ventured here, namely that it is not revolution but the language of continuity which consumes the language of change. Once this implication is accepted, the proposal brings us back to the language and worldview of those who refuse — or are unable — to speak the language of change, history, revolution and liberation but who nevertheless, in their own way and with the help of their own categories, resist domination and theorize about it.

The other main argument of this part of the paper is that the attempts to introduce the language of liberation to those who do not speak it, as a precondition for the latter qualifying for what the moderns call liberation, is a travesty of even the normatives of the modern concept of liberation. (Though it is perfectly compatible with the social evolutionism underpinning the concept.) I am not at the moment entering the more serious objection to the modernist demand — the demand that the victim must learn the oppressor’s language and worldview before qualifying as a proper dissenter — that the post-seventeenth century concept of dissent itself is a prototypical pathology of the Enlightenment vision of the human future, a vision which sees itself as the last word in human self-realization and a logical culmination of the Baconian project of building modern science as the ultimate legitimation of

domination, by giving modern scientific rationality absolute priority over democratic rights and over the subjective and objective experiences of man-made suffering.

The modern world, including the modernized Third World, is built on the suffering and brutalization of millions. These victims, rebellious only when in their eyes the stakes and the options are right, seek justice and empowerment. If the moderns want to call this search a search for liberation, it is their lookout and their tryst with their morality. To the lesser mortals, being constantly sought to be liberated by a minority within the modern world, the resistance to the categories imposed on them by the dominant culture of global politics, including the categories imposed by the dominant language of dissent, is part of the struggle for survival.

This resistance takes many shapes in the savage world. It may take the form of a full-blooded rejection of the modern world's deepest faith, scientific rationality. It may take the form of a subtle subversion of the modern world's fondest — I almost said cleverest — charity, development. One can never be sure and the strength of the resistance lies in the fact that one can never be sure.

Note that I am not here concerned with the viability or otherwise of either modern science or development, nor with the substantive justifiability of these rejections. I may have something to say about them but this is not the place. I am here concerned with the politics of these rejections, the way the growing hostility to these cognitive and programmatic ventures, among those whom science and development are supposed to benefit, tells one something about knowledge and the politics of knowledge-based social transformation in our times. I am proposing here that, for a

large part of the world, the negation of certain universals of knowledge is a natural political consequence of the nature of dominance exercised in our times. For domination today is rarely justified through oracles, ritual superiority or claims to birthrights; domination is now more frequently justified in terms of better acquaintance with universal knowledge and better access to universal modes of acquiring knowledge. In the world of awareness in which we live, without such things as scientific rationality, laboratory experiments and analytic reasoning, without the acquisition of a progressivist, social-evolutionist idiom and without a proper historical consciousness, reportedly no human being is any more fully human. All oppressed, to acquire the right to our attention and sympathy, have to first show that they are the truly deserving oppressed and are not a part of the flora and fauna of the Southern world — timeless, unindividuated and living in a mythopoetic world.

The more sensitive modern counter-response to such “irrational”, “infantile” and “atavistic” political response to the favourite slogans of the dominant global culture (provided the counter-response is not as dismissive as it usually is) has been to split the concepts being challenged or resisted. Thus, for instance, there is now a modern science reportedly dominated by the establishment and a modern science reportedly emancipatory or liberative. The former constitutes the mainstream; it is wedded to militarism, capitalism and gigantism. The latter is a form of dissent; it is non-conventional, futuristic and egalitarian. Similarly, development has been split into two: conventional development and “another” development. The latter has many aliases; it is often

called alternative development, sustainable development, ecodevelopment or indigenous development.

I am in great sympathy with many of these efforts to generate alternatives. I have personal links with a few of them. But I cannot for that reason deny that most of the efforts are also products of the same worldview which has produced the mainstream concepts of science, liberation and development. Nor can I deny that the political logic of the battle of minds demands that the victims of the oppressive forces in our times first attack the domination of the ideas of modern scientific rationality, history and progress as the organizing principles of all social intervention and then, only then, seriously consider if some elements from them can be safely accommodated in a postmodern science or in a post-development world.

This does not mean that internal criticisms have no value at this point of time. This means that internal criticisms are internal criticisms. They do not exhaust all criticisms. They certainly do not exhaust the criticisms of human violence and oppression which are implicit in the ways of life, myths, legends and, above all, in the spontaneous defiance and rebellions of the oppressed. These self-expressions are not usually cast in the language of liberation; even less frequently can they be accommodated in a proper theory of liberation. We, standing outside, can try to translate these self-expressions into our language and construct for ourselves a theory of liberation out of the “primitive”, “populist” theories of oppression and spontaneous acts of subversion, but these are our needs, not theirs.

It is with that awareness that we may have to try to give voice

or, at least, to create the space for those who will give voice, to the victims of man-made sufferings in the coming decades. The awareness does not deny that man-made suffering is a joint product of the lifestyles, systems of knowledge and theories of liberation populating the world in which we the moderns live. It insists that those trying to give voice to the voiceless must recognize that, after nearly four centuries of presence on the world stage and after about two centuries of hegemony, the culture of modern Europe and North America no longer arouses the enthusiasm which, as a critique of traditions, it once aroused in the Third World. The first generation of social reformers in the colonized societies hoped to use modernity as a vector within the Asian and African traditions, something which would, by providing an outsider's critique, help them recover certain recessive aspects of these traditions and give more strength and vivacity to the traditions. It is now fairly obvious that such controlled use of modernity has not been possible in the savage world. Modernity is not only triumphant in the Southern hemisphere; it has taken over as an imperial principle in human consciousness in society after society. What was dissent has now become the establishment.

As an in-house criticism of that mainstream, the theories of liberation may have to learn a lot. They will certainly have to be, as a part of the ruling worldview, more modest. As an aspect of the modern world's concept of sane, mature, scientific dissent, with only the romantic traditions of nineteenth-century Europe to give them a touch of unmanageability or untameability, these theories have the idea of historical inevitability to back them up and they can hope to ride piggyback on the urban-industrial vision of life

and mass culture. For that same reason, however, these theories must recognize the existence of dissent that is not only “insane” and “infantile” but which flouts the first canon of all post-Enlightenment theories of knowledge, namely that a dissent to qualify as dissent must be fully translatable into the idiom of modernity.

I doubt if the rebellious spirit of humanity can be ever fully captured in what is essentially one civilization’s concept of rebellion in a particular point of time. What is dissent if it has no place for the unknown, the childlike and the non-rational? And what is the intellectual’s job-definition if it does not include the ability to be in a minority and at the borderlines of the knowable?

One last word on the inaudibility of dissent. Everyone is for the liberation of some group or other in the “civilized” world. The idea of liberation now cuts across most modern ideologies and has become the common currency over a large cultural terrain. But the enthusiasm for liberating others has only infrequently been matched by any respect for the categories, particularly the native “half-baked” theories of oppression used by the others. For, to accept such home-brewed theories is to, in effect, cut out the role of the experts on revolution and de-expertize dissent. That is why there is such limited acceptance, among the theorists of liberation, of the categories of those who supposedly are waiting to be led to their liberation by some specialist group or other.

On second thought, this is less surprising than it seems. Ideologues are always ambivalent towards the peoples whose cause they take up. Ideologues are always embarrassed by their targeted beneficiaries, allegedly stuck in an earlier stage of history and

disinclined to show much interest in the good turn going to be done to them by the ideologues. Horror of horrors, even when the benefits are delivered to them, the beneficiaries conceptualize the benefits in their own way. As a result, their gratefulness to their liberators, too, is often shockingly close to zero. Understandably so. Human nature being what it is, while everyone likes to be a social engineer, few like to be the objects of social engineering.

Such cynicism of the savage world, towards our favourite rhetoric of dissent, may not be such a great loss. For all we know, it may widen our choices and keep the options for future generations more open. In matters of human futures there probably can be no final word. And while the quest for freedom is perennial, the present language of liberation need not be so. In fact, as the temporal and spatial limitations of the language become more obvious, that which looks like a hopeless case of dyslexia may turn out to be a “natural” cognitive advantage. In the sense that those who are thoroughly socialized in the presently dominant language of global communications may find it harder to re-educate themselves than those who start from scratch. In the meanwhile, it is possible to venture the proposal that to survive beyond the tenure of the modern knowledge systems, the language of liberation will have to take into account, respectfully, the quests for freedom which are articulated in other languages and in other forms, sometimes even through the language of silence.

Who knows, those who force the language of liberation to take into account these other languages and forms may have in future a special place in the calculations of those to whom the language of liberation is only a useful but flawed instrument to

actualize the human quest for freedom? But then, so long has the language of liberation been grounded in the nineteenth-century thirst for certitude and objectivist interpretations of the human enterprise that it has probably lost the capacity to make place within itself for the unknown, the unclear and the less than rational. Yet, not recognizing that human freedom has always thrived on a mixture of the two — the certain and the uncertain, the clear and the unclear, the objective and the subjective, the rational and the non-rational — is not merely a form of politics of knowledge designed to marginalize large parts of the cultures of the oppressed the world over, it is a form of politics of knowledge which seeks to abridge the concept of human freedom itself.

Re-Imagining the Third World

The implication of the argument thus far is this: openness to voices, familiar or strange, may well have to be the first criterion of the shared self which transcends nation-states, communities, perhaps even cultures themselves. A direct, sharp awareness of man-made suffering, a genuine empirical feel for it, may be the second. (Philosophers who say that we cannot feel the toothache of others may be right, but we can cognize the ache and use that cognition as the *reductio* of our conceptual frames.) I have tried to convey here that the two issues and the attendant responsibilities — listening to voices and renewing the awareness of the surplus suffering produced by faulty social institutions — are interrelated. For all theories of suffering — in this secular age, we prefer to call them theories of oppression — can become mandates for the

infliction of new forms of suffering which, because they are cast in the language of the latest theory of oppression, can then be neither seen nor heard.

Perhaps, human ingenuity in matters of social domination being what it is, we may have to learn to feel safe with transience of such theories, even when they seem grounded in forms of rationality and scientific truth which look perennial. Perhaps, in the future, social and political theories will be expected to include some minimum checks against themselves, perhaps even an element of self-destructiveness. In the meanwhile, we cannot afford to forget that the one and half million Cambodians who died in the 1970s in the last great genocide of our times, died for the sake of an allegedly perfect theory of oppression and human liberation. They had only one consolation, before dying like so many flies, that the theory was custom-made for them in a university no less than Sorbonne. Only forty years ago, when records for genocide were being thoughtfully set up for the *Guinness Books of Records* in Auschwitz, Dresden and Hiroshima, a galaxy of biologists, doctors, nuclear physicists and social theorists had provided not only the scientific but also the moral wherewithal of doing, what Heinrich Himmler used to call, one's dirty but necessary duty to the dominant idea of a global civilization.

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I shall now briefly turn to two concepts which have begun to recur in virtually every contemporary analyses of man-made suffering, either as indicators of the tragic possibilities inherent in

the present global civilization or as touchstones for judging all visions of the future. The first is the concept of the Third World, the second that of backwardness. I shall suggest that the concepts can be reworked to respond to the problems of audibility and the loss of the feel for direct experience of suffering.

The audible dissent of the shaman, who defies the given formats of defiance, and the inaudible dissent of those, who cannot and sometimes would not cussedly vocalize their protest, converge in the symbolism of the Third World. For the shaman's natural habitat is a "backward", "uncivil", "retrogressive" culture; his natural clientele are those inhabiting the mosquito-ridden, steamy backwaters of Asia, Africa and South America. The shaman is the protest of the non-protesting.

Let us admit straightaway that the concept of the Third World is a disaster. The concept defines neither a shared political economy nor a common political ideology. Apart from the fact that most of the Third World is desperately poor and ruled by despots who live off it as systematically as does the First World, most other identifiers of the Third World are either claptraps or propaganda.

But perhaps one can give meanings or associations to the idea of the Third World which would transcend its internal contradictions and existential realities, perhaps even the dishonesty of its rulers. One can build on the fact that the Third World *has* become the Other of the First, in a way the Second World ceased to be long ago. The Second World could compete with the First in space programmes or in summer Olympics but most people are now convinced, rightly or wrongly, that the Second World gave up rather early the ambition of being anything but a poor man's

version of the First World, more egalitarian perhaps, but nothing more adventurous than that.

The otherness of the Third World opens up — alas, only theoretically — many possibilities. The Third World can claim to be the upholder of traditions, of cultures outside the present global culture, waiting for its prodigal brothers to come back and admit their profligacy. Of course, it is true that the Third World is not prodigal partly because it has been never given its due share of the patrimony in the first place. Most of the Third World has never had the chance to be anything but austere. It also has ambitions to live it up; only it cannot afford to do so. But then, is it not possible to claim that austerity, even when hypocritically espoused, has a role to play in a world hell-bent on squandering away its natural and cultural inheritance? After all, such hypocrisy at least keeps alive the values of conservation and diversity for future generations to build on.

The Third World can be redefined as a concept of trusteeship, a concept analogous to the one Gandhi used in the sphere of economics. The Third World is what holds in trust the rejected selves of the First and the Second Worlds the way gene banks hold in trust germ-plasms which in the future may provide a baseline for exploring new as well as old possibilities, in case the presently-dominant strains exhaust themselves. The Third World is not only the trustee of memories, it is the dirty frontier of the dominant style of “doing” intellectual work today; it is where experiments are possible and lost causes pursued. The Third World is where the shaman survives and, in some cases, thrives.

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Is there a Third World? The question cannot be answered the way the gifted writer from Trinidad, Shiv Naipaul, tried to answer it in his last book.⁵ For an honest answer, the question must be reworded. For our purposes, it ought to be: can we discover a Third World to widen choices in the matter of human futures?

Now, a different set of formulations become available to us which could serve both as a set of propositions about the nature of the present global civilization and as a set of possibilities in another.

For instance, the Third World can now become a reminder — to those whom George Aseniero calls the new Leibnitzians — that everything is not well with this, the allegedly best of all possible worlds. Like beggars in my native Calcutta, who in their utter degradation haunt the citizen who believes that he or she lives in the best of all possible worlds, the Third World could be a source of moral discomfort to the wealthy and the powerful, not only in the First and Second Worlds but also in the Third. The public-spirited, professional social workers may not like to encourage vagrancy by giving alms to beggars, but the professionals may never guess how beggary could keep alive political and moral issues by making the smug and the narcissistic cringe and recoil from the social reality around them.

You are of course protected from the same reality in another way if you take an eagle's eyeview of the Third World, for then you miss no detail and waste no compassion. Many experts do so.

The citizens of the Third World, though, live in the Third World; they have to survive. They have to blur out many of the details around them to live their versions of a normal life. Is the first kind of numbing different from the second? Ruth Praver Jhabwala, the high-priestess of Orientalist fiction on India today, does not think so. India, the new Kipling has declared in the Introduction to her new collection of short stories, is not merely terribly poor but also terribly backward.⁶

Terribly poor, yes. But why terribly backward? Mrs Jhabwala has no clear answer, but seems to suggest that many Indians develop elaborate defences, so as not to be emotionally flooded by the suffering around them. In a small scale, they do what victims and collaborators under duress always do to ensure survival and protect their sanity in an extreme situation, be it in a concentration camp or in a society under oppressive rule. They numb themselves to suffering, to use Robert Lifton's term, in a way which resembles, in howsoever a muted form, the more dangerous numbing that takes place in their oppressors. In any case, why do they, the backward Indians, have to be more of their brother's keepers than the First World intellectuals — or for that matter, Third World intellectuals in the First World — in an age of high-speed global communications? Why should moral responsibility stop at the frontiers of a nation-state? Does a Mizo tribal from Northeast India have more access to information about destitution in the slums of Bombay than an upper middle-class housewife at Manhattan? Once again, Mrs Jhabwala has no answer. We have to take it from her on faith that India is very backward and the moral responsibility for it is solely that of the Indian passport-holders.

This note seeks to expand accountability, not limit it. The loss of the capacity for guilt and the loss of the sense of responsibility that grows out of guilt, this note believes with Lifton, may turn out to be in the contemporary world a greater threat to human survival than the vicissitudes of unconscious guilt against which Freud warned humanity in *Civilization and its Discontents*.⁷ Indians and others of their ilk *are* responsible, probably more than others are. But everyone is accountable, some for immunizing themselves to human suffering, others for generating, running and living off the systems which generate the suffering. The Third World is often a target of supervision and patronage, but it can be made a symbol of planetary intellectual responsibility, even despite the Third World. The experience of the Third World can be turned into something more than the record of its individual nation-states. It can be read as a text on survival which hides a code of transcendence.

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Probably, even in the matter of nation-states, the Third World may have something to say to our age. Not through their spectacular success in the science of nation-building but through their less-than-spectacular failure in it. The main problem with the nation-states is not their resistance to reforms which encroach on their sovereignty but their refusal to abdicate their status as the ultimate unit of political analysis. The problem is cognitive, not political, though it can be called a problem in the politics of knowledge. It is the inability of those exposed to the mass culture of global politics to think in terms of categories even partly

independent of the idea of nation-state which triggers Mrs Jhabwala's lament about Indian insensitivity to suffering. Indian poverty is Indian responsibility, and Indian responsibility means the responsibility of the subjects of the Indian nation-state. The lament is simultaneously a by-product and a justification of an entire generation's attempt to absolutize state-boundaries. Within the boundaries, the state is supposed to act as a focus of all major moral and political awareness and be the source of all ameliorative action.

Compromises with sovereignty many states at some points of time are willing to make. They do it when they are defeated in wars; they do it when they are weak and at the mercy of other states; they do it even for larger political-economic gains (as in the case of the European Union). The United Nations, ramshackle or senile though it may look today — what with its mimic-state status, its international civil servants, its development experts and cultural impresarios — was built out of such compromises. But like the Government of India which, after driving out the IBM and Coca-Cola from India in the late 1970s, dutifully encouraged Indian private enterprise to make a grand success of two brand new, “indigenous” corporations called the IDM and Campa Cola, the United Nations represents only an edited version of the present global nation-state system. For the United Nations itself has acquired many of the trappings of a modern state. Its building blocks are nation-states and its unit of analysis is the nation-state.

Many call this way of thinking “statism”. This is not an appropriate term, but it does convey that a state in the Third World can come to represent something more than the state

conceptualized by at least some of the anti-imperialist movements over the last one hundred years. (Nationalism, as it is commonly understood in the modern world, is however perfectly compatible with statism.⁸) I shall, however, following Ernest Gellner and others, distinguish between patriotism and anti-imperialism on the one hand and nationalism, on the other, seeing the latter as a sub-species of the domain covered by the first two concepts. (Seventy-five years ago, a number of South Asian thinkers — Rabindranath Tagore being the most prominent among them — had used the same distinction creatively in public discourse. However, in the regnant global culture of knowledge, that is neither here nor there, given that the likes of Gellner, have already in practice collapsed all three categories under nationalism and declared all thought associated with it to be shoddy.) Nationalism as a sub-species of patriotism need not occupy the entire space belonging to patriotism. And it can be argued that at least some of the anti-colonial movements in the Third World were moved primarily by the spirit of patriotism but, after winning independence, lost out to nationalism. It can be even argued that it is the spirit of nationalism which helped spread the idea of an imperial state, internalized from the colonial experience, in many of these societies. Colonialism may have vanished from the world scene but its smile lingers in the air.

This distinction has become important because the spirit of anti-imperialism that was sweeping the world only fifty years ago has been finally overpowered by the clenched-teeth nationalism in which Europe used to once specialize, through a process which Sigmund Freud would have loved to identify as a perfect clinical

case of identification with the aggressor.

It is possible that statism and the perverted, self-destructive form of nationalism which goes with it, too, will reach their dead-ends in the Third World. Not because of enlightened internationalism, but because of the contradiction which has arisen between such statism and the democratic principle and because the defiance of the nation-state has become the *sine qua non* of survival for many in the Third World and in the Third Worlds within the First and the Second — the indigenous peoples, the minorities, the political dissenters, who do not or cannot use the language of global mainstream and are partly or wholly outside the market, economically and/or psychologically. While we debate the principles of sovereignty, what the nation-state should or should not give up for the sake of a more humane and equitable world order in the future, the nation-states are increasingly at war with the citizens of the Third World and are being subverted by their own logic. Remember the 22-carat, solid-gold bath tub of the expatriate cabinet minister of one of the African states which the Lloyds of London could not afford to insure some years ago.

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Sustainable politics is usually unheroic. The shamans, therefore, may not ultimately win; sanity and maturity *may* ultimately come to rule the best of all possible worlds; but, in the meanwhile, the onus will be on our generation to decide or at least debate whether this century's dominant faiths do represent the next century's ideas of sanity and maturity. That is what some of us are trying to do.

Endnotes:

- 1 Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism*, Madras: Macmillan, 1985, p. 64.
- 2 Ruth Benedict, *Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, New York: Penguin Books, 1967.
- 3 Robert N. Bellah, "Reflections on the Protestant Ethic Analogy in Asia", *The Journal of Social Issues*, 1963, 19 (1), pp. 52 -60.
- 4 Herman Kahn, *Emerging Japanese Superstate: Challenge and Response*, New York: Prentice-Hall, 1971.
- 5 Shiv Naipaul, *An Unfinished Journey*, New York: Penguin Books, 1987.
- 6 Ruth Prawar Jhabwala, *Out of India*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.
- 7 Robert J. Lifton, "The Concept of the Survivor", *The Future of Immortality and Other Essays for a Nuclear Age*, New York: Basic Books, 1987, pp. 231 -243, see pp. 237 -238.
- 8 On such nationalism, two distinct but not incompatible recent works are Ernest Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983; and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983.