

# Imperial Subjects in the Soviet Union: M.N. Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, and Re-Thinking Freedom and Authoritarianism

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## Abstract

The compelling trope of ‘Russia and the West,’ or to be more precise, ‘Russia Under Western Eyes,’ has produced a vast and significant body of literature. This has helped in the political framing of the twentieth century as a world divided between the democratic and market-based nations of the West, and the dictatorial and state controlled countries in the Soviet East. Simultaneously, it has served to bury, blunt, and otherwise obscure perspectives from the colonized world on the East–West dichotomy. An analysis of the travel writings of two important Indian visitors to the Soviet Union, M.N. Roy and Rabindranath Tagore, shows that Europe’s imperial subjects filtered their impressions of Soviet authoritarianism through their own experiences of repressive Western imperialism, thus charting a new global map of political freedom. Roy and Tagore’s writings, powered by both their colonial and Soviet experiences, make a significant contribution to the twentieth-century intellectual debates on moral freedom, individualism, and authoritarianism.

## Keywords

Cold War, ‘God that Failed,’ M.N. Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, totalitarianism

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 was in many ways a hyper local event. When a group of relatively unknown conspirators led by Lenin, a theoretician *par excellence*, seized power in the turbulent city of Petrograd – a city seething with disaffected soldiers and hungry workers – few were surprised. Such uprisings were commonplace

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in European cities at the end of the First World War as the horrific rate of casualties mounted, and food supply chains were disrupted across the continent.<sup>1</sup> Even the USA, saved from much of the destruction of the First World War by accidental geography and intelligent diplomacy, witnessed a monumental upsurge in labor radicalism and left-wing militancy leading up to the infamous Red Scare of 1919.<sup>2</sup> Populist anger at elites openly profiting from the unending World War was fuelled by the ideologies of anarchism, socialism, and nationalism. Military defeats and demobilized soldiers added to the heady mix of hate, hunger, and resentment brewing in the city streets bringing down the Romanov, the Ottoman, the Hohenzollern, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire in its wake.

The initial victories of the left in European capitals were short lived and it was only in Russia that the Bolsheviks prevailed definitively.<sup>3</sup> As time progressed, the Bolshevik Party, headed by Lenin and Trotsky, held onto power through a bloody civil war, and withstood the armed interventions mounted by Germany, the USA, UK, Japan and France.<sup>4</sup> In the long run, the local events of October 1917 turned out to have true global significance. Observers across the world, depending on their political beliefs, reacted with either unalloyed excitement or horror as the Bolsheviks instituted the first socialist society and economy in world history. They repudiated capitalism, a system of economic production and social organization that had grown exponentially during the nineteenth century. Bolsheviks argued that the accumulation of private property was fundamentally unfair, and capitalism as a mode of production, with its in-built cycles of booms and busts, was highly inefficient. They nationalized banks, transportation systems, factories and agricultural estates, and began investing, albeit modestly, in the fields of education, culture, healthcare, labor and women's rights. During the first decade the Soviet revolutionary experiments in culture, society and economics mesmerized the world.<sup>5</sup>

From 1917 to 1991, despite travel restrictions and difficult material conditions, the Soviet Union hosted many, many visitors. Revolutionaries of all stripes came seeking salvation and funding, journalists looked for the scoop of their lifetime,

1 L. Haimson and C. Tilly (eds), *Strikes, Wars and Revolution in an International Perspective* (New York, NY 2002); M. Neuberger, 'Hungry for Revolution: Women, Food and the Bulgarian Left, 1917–1923,' in C. Chatterjee, S. Marks, M. Neuberger and S. Sabol (eds), *The Wider Arc of Revolution. The Global Impact of 1917*, in three volumes (Bloomington, IN forthcoming).

2 R. Murray, *Red Scare. A Study in National Hysteria, 1919–1920* (Minneapolis, MN 1955).

3 A. Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* (Ann Arbor, MI 2004); P. Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution. Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914–1921* (Cambridge, MA 2002); and J. Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse. The Great War and the Destruction of the Russian Empire* (New York, NY 2014).

4 D. Foglesong, *America's Secret War Against Bolshevism: U.S. Intervention in the Russian Civil War, 1917–1920* (Raleigh, NC 1995); and E. Mawdsely, *The Russian Civil War* (New York, NY 2007); J. Smele, *The 'Russian' Civil Wars 1916–1926* (New York, NY 2016).

5 M. Frame, B. Kolonitskii, S.G. Marks and M.K. Stockdale (eds), *Russian Culture in War and Revolution, 1914–1922*, vols 1 & 2 (Bloomington, IN 2014); S. Marks, *How Russia Shaped the Modern World: From Art to Anti-Semitism, Ballet to Bolshevism* (Princeton, NJ 2003); and R. Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams. Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York, NY 1991); and J. Bowlt (ed.), *Russian Avant-Garde Theatre. War, Revolution and Design* (London 2014).

and even capitalists begged for mining concessions and contracts to build socialist factories. Depression era workers looked for socialist conditions of labor, and intellectuals and academics looked for definitive proof to either validate or discredit the Soviet political system, the planned economy, and the welfare state. In the West, expertise about the Soviet Union could lead to lucrative and high profile careers in politics, universities, and in print journalism. The Bolshevik project was shaped by intense competition with the West and the Soviet Union sought to influence notable western intellectuals, artists, policy makers, and academics, and shape their opinions about the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup>

The near axiomatic conflation of Russia and the West has led to the production of a vast body of excellent scholarship on the subject. At the same time the influential academic trope of ‘Russia and the West,’ or to be more precise, ‘Russia Under Western Eyes,’ has also served to bury, blunt, and obscure the travel writings of visitors from other parts of the world. A hundred years after the revolution of 1917, with notable exceptions<sup>7</sup> we still have very little information about non-western travelers to the Soviet Union and even less about those who came from the colonized and un-free areas of the world. The intellectual profile of the colonial visitor to the Soviet Union resists categorization within the well-known tropes of naïve enthusiasts, and disillusioned Cold Warriors. The introduction of two travelers to the Soviet Union from British India: Rabindranath Tagore, poet,

6 D. Cauter, *The Fellow-Travelers. Intellectual Friends of Communism* (New Haven, CT 1988); C. Chatterjee and B. Holmgren (eds), *The Russian Experience: Americans Encountering the Enigma, 1890 to the Present* (New York, NY 2012); K. Clark, *Moscow the Fourth Rome. Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Cambridge, MA 2011); M. David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941* (New York, NY 2012); D.C. Engerman, *Modernization from the Other Shore: American Intellectuals and the Romance of Russian Development* (Cambridge, MA 2003); A. Etkind, *Tolkovanie puteshestvii: Rossiia i Amerika v travelogakh i intertekstakh* (Moscow 2003); D.S. Foglesong, *The American Mission and the “Evil Empire”*: *The Crusade For A Free Russia since 1881* (Cambridge 2007); P. Hollander, *Political Pilgrims. Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba, 1928–1978* (New York, NY 1981); M. Malia, *Under Western Eyes. From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (Cambridge, MA 1999); and L. Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920–1940. From Red Square to Left Bank* (New York, NY 2007).

7 S. Cronin (ed.), *Iranian-Russian Encounters. Empires and Revolutions Since 1800* (New York, NY 2013); D. Engerman, ‘Learning from the East. Soviet Experts and India in an Era of Competitive Co-Existence,’ *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 33, 2 (2013), 227–38; E. McGuire, ‘The Sino-Soviet Romance: How Chinese Communists Fell in Love with Russia, Russians, and the Russian Revolution,’ PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley (2010); M. Matusevich, *Africa in Russia and Russia in Africa: Three Centuries of Encounters* (Trenton, NJ 2007); T. Rupprecht, *Soviet Internationalism after Stalin: Interactions and Exchange between the USSR and Latin America During the Cold War* (New York, NY 2015); S.A. Smith, *Revolution and the People in Russia and China. A Comparative History* (New York, NY 2008); D. Spenser, *Stumbling its Way Through Mexico: Early Years of the Communist International*, trans. Peter Gellert (Tuscaloosa, AL 2011); H. Vasudevan, *In the Footsteps of Afanasii Nikitin: Travels through Eurasia and India in the Twenty-First Century* (Delhi 2014); See also Jie-Hyun Lim, ‘Nationalizing the Bolshevik Revolution Transnationally-In Search of Non-Western Modernization among Proletarian Nations,’ Ali İğmen, ‘Between Empire and the Nation-State, between Humanism and Communism: Nazim Hikmet’s Noble Struggle with Modernity,’ and Afshin Matin-Asgari, ‘The Bolshevik Revolution’s Impact on Iranian Modernity,’ forthcoming in Chatterjee, Marks, Neuberger and Sabol (eds), *The Wider Arc of Revolution*.

novelist, Nobel Laureate, and M.N. Roy, nationalist, global revolutionary, and self-proclaimed 'radical humanist,' also unsettles the fiction of a bipolar world that has dominated much of twentieth-century political thinking and history. In this article I argue that Roy and Tagore looked for new vistas of global democracy beyond the templates of Soviet socialism and Western imperial liberalism. Their political writing offers us a crucial vantage point to re-think the structure of Cold War history, and more importantly, chart a new global map of political freedom in the twenty-first century.

While Tagore's 1930's visit to the Soviet Union was a scripted and state-managed event as befitting a global celebrity, Roy fled from Moscow in 1927 in the aftermath of the Soviet foreign policy debacle in China that brought Chiang Kai-shek to power. Tagore's vast corpus of literature was translated and even celebrated in the Soviet Union, while Roy became a persona non grata and was referred to as the 'renegade Roy' in Soviet official correspondence after 1928.<sup>8</sup> Tagore's literary legacy is regularly invoked at Indo-Russian diplomatic events and his statue adorns the Park of Friendship in Moscow; Roy's penetrating treatise, *The Russian Revolution*, has been accorded little critical attention. Roy, a hardcore revolutionary, was deeply contemptuous of Tagore's literary works and humanist philosophy, while Tagore's communist nephew, Saumyendranath Tagore, a bitter rival to Roy in Indian leftist circles, probably conveyed his negative impressions about Roy to his influential uncle.<sup>9</sup> But in a curious way both the 'world poet' and the 'world revolutionary' came to remarkably similar conclusions about the nature of freedom and unfreedom, the roots of authoritarianism, and the role that the thinking individual must play to prevent the accumulation and the concentration of power in any political context: liberal or authoritarian.

Roy and Tagore's political ideas that were incubated in the conditions of British colonialism, and subsequently filtered through their Soviet experiences, has the power to subvert the powerful political framing of the twentieth-century world as divided between a free West and an unfree East; of a world forced to choose between the two options of capitalist and socialist modernity. The former representing parliamentary democracy, civil liberties, and free markets, the latter encoding party control of society, and the economy. As time progressed and Soviet oppression grew more manifest especially during the Spanish Civil War and Stalin's Great Terror during the 1930s, self-proclaimed European and US leftists such as George Orwell, Richard Wright, Arthur Koestler, Stephen Spender, Louis Fischer, and Andre Gide, among many others disavowed their commitment to communism in dramatic acts of public repentance.<sup>10</sup> They became important crusaders in the fight for freedom and democracy, and their literature serves as an important

8 RGASPI (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History), fond 495, delo 213, opis 18 for Soviet opinions of Roy.

9 See Roy's savage article on Tagore in his article, 'Philosophy of Property,' *The Masses of India* 1, 1 (January 1925) reprinted in Sibnarayan Ray (ed.), *Selected Works of M.N. Roy*, vol II (Delhi 1988), 341-6; S. Tagore, *Historical Development of the Communist Movement in India* (Calcutta 1944), 10.

10 R. Crossman (ed.), *The God That Failed* (London 1950).

arsenal in the twentieth-century contest between liberalism and totalitarianism. Isaiah Berlin's brilliant ruminations about 'negative freedom,' Hannah Arendt's ideas about the importance of the nation for the existence of 'civil society,' Karl Popper's advocacy of an 'open society,' and Friedrich Hayek's diatribes against government intervention in markets leading to the 'road to serfdom,' took on increasing salience as the twentieth century drew to a close.<sup>11</sup> These were supplemented by discourses on moral and inner freedom as a means of authentic resistance to authoritarianism created by famous dissidents such as Anna Akhmatova, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Czeslaw Milosz, Boris Pasternak, Andrei Sakharov, Vaclav Havel, and many others.<sup>12</sup>

During the interwar period when this narrative was beginning to take shape, millions of subjects laboring in the invisible empires of the 'democratic western nations' in Asia and Africa were bemused, confused, and even outraged by the sophisticated deployment of an imperial and Orwellian double-speak on liberty and freedom: one that allowed the repressive French, Dutch, and the British empires to seize the mantle of freedom against an oppressive Soviet Union. Under millions of 'colonial eyes,' Soviet oppression made manifest through enforced labor, confiscation of private property, and the suppression of intellectual and political freedom was powerfully reminiscent of policies created by European empires.<sup>13</sup> Writing in 1934 Tagore observed,

unfortunately for us, however, the one visible relationship of Europe with Asia is that of exploitation; in other words, its origins are commercial and material . . . There is no people in the whole of Asia today which does not look upon Europe with fear and suspicion.<sup>14</sup>

When the Bolsheviks came to power in October 1917 the mighty British Empire stretched from islands in the Caribbean to significant parts of South and East Africa, from special mandate territories in the Middle East to outright colonial possessions in Asia and the Indian Ocean. British businessmen ruthlessly extracted labor, and material and environmental resources in plantations, mines and

11 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (2nd edn, Chicago, IL 1998); I. Berlin, *Liberty. Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty* (2nd edn, New York, NY 2002); F.A. Hayek, *Road to Serfdom* (London 1944); K. Popper, *Open Society and its Enemies* (Princeton, NJ 2013); J. Cohen and A. Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge 1992); and J. Isaac, *Arendt, Camus and Modern Rebellion* (New Haven, CT 1992).

12 L. Chukhovskaia (ed.), *The Akhmatova Journals*, three vols. (Vremya 2007); C. Milosz, *The Captive Mind* (New York, NY 1953); B. Pasternak, *Dr. Zhivago* (New York, NY 1958); A. Sakharov, *Memoirs* (New York, NY 1990); and A. Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (New York, NY 1961).

13 H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, NY 1951); A. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York, NY 2001); L. Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC 2015); F. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* (Reprint edn., New York, NY 2005); U. Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire. A Study in Nineteenth Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago, IL 1999); and J. Nehru, *Toward Freedom: The Autobiography of Jawaharlal Nehru* (Boston, MA 1941).

14 'East and West,' Letter to Gilbert Murray in S. Kumar Das (ed.), *English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 3 (New Delhi 2002), 350.

factories in India assisted by a native bourgeoisie and a bureaucratic elite that grew significantly under imperial control. The British administration met colonial claims for democratic forms of governance, and free markets with violence and incarceration, using native troops, policemen, and bureaucrats to suppress demands for freedom. The same was true in the French colonies in Asia and Africa, the Dutch empire in Indonesia, and US possessions in the Caribbean and the Pacific, especially in the Philippines.<sup>15</sup>

Given this historical context, for the colonized the most revolutionary act of the Bolshevik government shortly after taking power, much more so than the nationalization of private property, was to bring to the light the infamous European secret treaties that sought during the course of the First World War to divide up the remaining un-colonized areas of the world.<sup>16</sup> Both Lenin and Trotsky argued that the colonies in Asia and Africa should have the right to self-determination:

The colonial populations were drawn into the European war on an unprecedented scale. Indians, Negroes, Arabs and Madagascans fought on the territories of Europe – for the sake of what? For the sake of their right to continue to remain the slaves of England and France? Never before has the infamy of capitalist rule in the colonies been delineated so clearly; never before has the problem of colonial slavery been posed so sharply as it is today.<sup>17</sup>

Lenin's argument in his widely read *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917) that the First World War was nothing more than a capitalist scramble worldwide for new markets, natural resources, and cheap labor to offset falling rates of profits at home rang true to many laboring in European colonies. The Marxist understanding of colonialism as enabling the success of capitalism in Western Europe by providing cheap labor, raw materials, markets, and a steady source of capital from taxation carried considerable explanatory power in the early

15 J. Burbank and F. Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ 2010); N.B. Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, MA 2006); C. Hall, *Civilizing Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Chicago, IL 2002); P. Levine, *British Empire. Sunrise to Sunset* (2nd edn, London 2013); D. Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals* (New Haven, CT 2000); A.S. Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand 1868–1910: A Comparison with British India* (New York, NY 2008); V.A. Rafael, *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History* (Durham, NC 2000); and S. Sen, *Distant Sovereignty: National Imperialism and the Origins of British India* (London 2002).

16 James Bunyan and H.H. Fisher (eds), *Bolshevik Revolution, 1917–1918: Documents and Materials* (Stanford, CA 1934), 243–8; S. Seth, *Marxist Theory and Nationalist Politics: The Case of Colonial India* (New Delhi 1995); and A. Raza, F. Roy, and B. Zachariah (eds), *The Internationalist Moment. South Asia, Worlds, and World Views, 1917–1939* (Los Angeles, CA 2014).

17 *Manifesto of the Communist International to the Workers of the World* was adopted at the First World Congress of the Communist International on 6 March 1919, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/ffyci-1/ch01.html> (accessed on 12 December 2016); P.C. Joshi and K. Damodaran (edited by Sobhanlal Datta Gupta), *A Documented History of the Communist Movement in India, 1917–1922*, vol. 1 (New Delhi 2007).

twentieth century, and even today forms the basis of much postcolonial history and economic critique.<sup>18</sup>

Lenin's analysis of imperialism became even more important during the peace negotiations in Europe in the aftermath of the German collapse, when it became very apparent that Woodrow Wilson's ideas about national self-determination were going to be selectively applied only to the European territories of the former Romanov, Hohenzollern, Ottoman, and the Austro-Hungarian empires.<sup>19</sup> The countries in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East were considered to be too backward to receive either independence or nationhood. Much of the Modern Middle East was detached from Ottoman control and large areas granted to the French and British under the Mandate System. Colonies in Asia and Africa were aghast that their cries for national independence were not even subject to discussion at the 1919 Paris Peace conference of the major world powers, nor were they allowed any representation at the negotiating table. US support for an exploitative European colonialism worldwide forced many towards the Soviet Union during the twentieth century, and the Comintern played a brilliant if limited role in organizing disaffected and disgruntled nationalists from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East: providing them with arms, modest resources, and more importantly, a comprehensive ideology of global anti-colonialism.<sup>20</sup>

M.N. Roy, a consummate revolutionary who believed that only armed struggle would rid India of British rule, had been sent abroad by Indian nationalists to procure weapons from the German government during the First World War. Roy knew little if anything about communism and had been trained by important Indian nationalist leaders such as Jatin Mukherjee and Aurobindo Ghosh. After his travels throughout China, Japan, Batavia and other parts of East Asia in search of arms and material support, he landed on the West Coast of the USA where he met many left-wing American intellectuals at Stanford and Berkeley. Roy's coterie

18 A. Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (New York, NY 1992); K. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago, IL 2010); and S. Datta Gupta, *Marxism in Dark Times. Select Essays for the New Century* (London 2012); For opposing points of view about the development of capitalism see P. Bairoch, *Economics and World History. Myths and Paradoxes* (Chicago, IL 1995); S. Marks, *The Information Nexus. Global Capitalism from the Renaissance to the Present* (Cambridge 2016).

19 E. Manela, 'Imagining Woodrow Wilson in Asia: Dreams of East-West Harmony and the Revolt against Empire in 1919,' *The American Historical Review*, 111, 5 (December 2006), 1327–51; and E. Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment. Self-Determination and the International Origins of an anti-Colonial Nationalism* (New York, NY 2007).

20 For histories of the Comintern see Silvio Pons' brilliant explication of Lenin's ideas on world revolution in S. Pons, *The Global Revolution. The History of International Communism, 1917–1991*, trans. Allan Cameron (Oxford 2014); K. McDermott and J. Agnew, *The Comintern. A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (New York, NY 1997); L. Kirschenbaum's equally brilliant explication of communism as lived experience in *International Communism and the Spanish Civil War. Solidarity and Suspicion* (New York, NY 2015); R. Service, *Comrades! A History of World Communism* (Cambridge, MA 2007); B. Studer, *The Transnational World of Cominternians* trans. Dafydd Rees Roberts (London 2015); A. Vatlin, *Komintern: ideii, reshenie, sud'by* (Moscow 2007); and F. Petersson, 'We Are Neither Visionaries nor Utopian Dreamers'. W. Münzenberg, 'The League against Imperialism, and the Comintern, 1925–1933,' PhD thesis, Åbo Akademi University (2013).

of friends included Evelyn Trent, a young radical, a student at Stanford, and his future wife and political companion in the Soviet Union. Roy was introduced to socialism in the USA where he exchanged his nationalist fervor for the cosmopolitan and universal ideas of socialism.<sup>21</sup> When the US administration cracked down on Indian revolutionaries at the behest of the British authorities, Roy fled to Mexico carrying a letter of introduction from David Starr Jordan, the pacifist President of Stanford University. He befriended Mikhail Borodin, a former Russian émigré to the USA, and helped found the Communist Party of Mexico. In Mexico, Roy utilized the generous subsidies of the German government and Borodin's intellectual tutelage, to learn the socialist canon.<sup>22</sup>

Roy quickly rose in the transnational world of communism on account of his oratorical brilliance, theoretical abilities, and an unshakable self-confidence even as he rapidly changed his political views according to the changing political contexts. However, Roy's ability to change his mind based on evidence and reason proved anathema to many who believed that ideological consistency alone was the hallmark of a true revolutionary. He was invited to the Soviet Union at the behest of Borodin, and famously challenged Lenin on his colonial theses at the Second Congress of the Comintern (Communist International) held in Moscow in 1920.<sup>23</sup> While Lenin and other Soviet leaders wanted to support national wars of independence in Asia and Africa as the way to weaken European empires and ultimately bring about the proletarian revolution in the heart of Europe, Roy argued that British rule in India had created a powerful native bourgeoisie that was becoming increasingly influential in the Indian independence movement through its affiliation with the Indian National Congress. In both India and China, Roy advocated that the Soviet Union should support and create decentralized workers and peasant movements rather than promote nationalist movements per se. Mere freedom from British rule rather than a social and economic revolution in India, Roy argued repeatedly throughout his life, would actually strengthen the Indian bourgeoisie and hasten the spread of transnational capitalism.<sup>24</sup>

Roy proved to be persuasive and at the Second Comintern Congress of 1920 both Lenin and Roy's theses were presented to the delegates before their final approval. Roy recreated himself as a highly authoritarian leader in the mold of the tough Bolsheviks that surrounded him. He became a member of the Central Asian Bureau of the Comintern, and operating from Tashkent he used

21 V.B. Karnik, *M.N. Roy, Political Biography* (Bombay 1978); K. Manjapra, *M.N. Roy. Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism* (New Delhi 2012); S. Ray, *The Twice Born Heretic. M.N. Roy and the Comintern* (Calcutta 1986), 38.

22 C. Shipman, *It Had To Be Revolution: Memoirs of an American Radical* (Ithaca, NY 1993), 84. I thank Lisa Kirschenbaum for this citation.

23 S. Datta Gupta, *Comintern and the Destiny of Communism in India: 1919–1943* (Kolkata 2006); J. Haithcox, *Communism and Nationalism in India. M. N. Roy and the Comintern Policy 1920–1939* (Princeton, NJ 1971).

24 M.N. Roy, *India in Transition* (Geneva 1922); *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in China* (Calcutta 1946); *My Experience in China* (Calcutta 1945). For Roy's writings see S Ray (ed.), *Selected Works of M.N. Roy* in four volumes published by Oxford University Press.



revolutionary networks to help destabilize the western borders of British India in Afghanistan and the North West Frontier Provinces, in a replay of the Russian and British Great Game of the nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Roy contributed greatly to the formation of the Communist Party of India through his theoretical publications on the applicability of communist theory to colonial conditions. He was a member of the Presidium of the Comintern for eight years during which time he was active in the revolutionary movements of Western Europe, especially in Berlin, a city that he truly loved.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps because of Roy's uncompromisingly hard and Bolshevik attitude he was chosen to accompany his erstwhile mentor, Mikhail Borodin, to China to bring about a socialist revolution. However, Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the Kuomintang, upset the poorly conceived Soviet plans, and the Chinese debacle of 1927 helped Stalin popularize the idea of revolution in one country and as an internal blueprint for reorganizing the economy under the Soviet Five Year Plans.<sup>27</sup>

This marked a major foreign policy shift against Trotsky's ideas about a permanent and worldwide revolution. International communist parties were explicitly instructed to believe that social democrats and all those who resisted Moscow's line were the real enemies, while fascism was to be regarded as nothing more than the most extreme form of capitalism. Roy, who initially sided with Stalin in his fight against Trotsky and had even voted for his expulsion, eventually came to disagree with Stalin's monumentally obtuse misunderstanding of fascism. He managed to leave Moscow for Berlin with the help of the German communist, Louise Gessler, and Nikolai Bukharin in 1928, and was thereafter expelled from the Comintern in 1929. Subsequently, Roy declared his open support for the Communist Party Opposition in Berlin and worked with prominent members such as Jay Lovestone, August Thalheimer, and Heinrich Brandler, the latter two being his former mentors and comrades. They were also disciples of Rosa Luxemburg, one of the original critics of Leninist ideas about party centralization and dictatorship.<sup>28</sup> In a series of articles published in *Gegen Den Strom*, a communist opposition journal, Roy argued that the undemocratic centralization in the communist movement under Soviet, rather than international leadership, would inevitably lead to terror.<sup>29</sup>

25 H. Vasudevan, 'India and the October Revolution: Nationalist Revolutionaries, Bolshevik power,' and 'Lord Curzon's Nightmare,' forthcoming in Chatterjee, Marks, Neuberger and Sabol (eds), *The Wider Arc of Revolution*.

26 M.N. Roy, *Fragments of a Prisoner's Diary: Letters from Jail*, vol. 3 (Calcutta 1943).

27 O. Khlevniuk, *Stalin. A New Biography of a Dictator*, trans. Nora Favorov (New Haven, CT 2015); R. Service, *Stalin: A Biography* (Cambridge, MA 2005); E. Van Ree, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin* (London 2002); and D. Volkogonov, *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy* (Rocklin, CA 1996).

28 K. Manjapra, *Age of Entanglement: German and Indian Intellectuals Across Empire* (Cambridge, MA 2014).

29 S. Ray, *In Freedom's Quest. A Study of the Life and Works of M.N. Roy, 1887–1954*, vol III, Part I, *Against the Current, 1928–39* (Kolkata 2005), 129–68.

Roy returned to British India against all advice to the contrary in 1930 and played a significant role in organizing the Indian trade union movement. After an extensive manhunt, British authorities in India arrested Roy in 1931, and accused him of 'conspiring to deprive the King Emperor of his sovereignty in India.' He was sentenced without a trial to a 12-year term of imprisonment. He served five and a half years in various British prisons in India under circumstances so terrible that it drew protests from many western intellectuals, including Albert Einstein, in a campaign orchestrated by his companion and future wife, Ellen Gottschalk.<sup>30</sup> Roy came out of prison in poor and broken health but armed with nine volumes of his *Prison Writings* that ranged from texts on material philosophy, history, feminism, and even a beautifully written memoir of a cat.

Roy joined the Indian National Congress (INC) hoping to turn the struggle for independence into a simultaneous struggle against Indian capitalists and landowners. But his hopes soon faded as Roy failed to win the fight against Gandhi's political vision for Indian independence, one that he fundamentally misunderstood.<sup>31</sup> Roy compared Gandhi's iron control over the INC to Stalin's hold over the CPSU and refused to treat him as either a saint or a prophet. He was appalled that the INC, under Gandhi's leadership, chose to launch the Quit India movement in 1942, as he believed that fascism was the greatest evil of the age and that India could never become independent in an unfree and totalitarian world.<sup>32</sup>

Roy's inability to follow orders, and independence of thought led him to what some considered to be political wilderness and irrelevance in India during the 1940s, especially after he disbanded his Radical Democratic Party. But during this period leading to his death in 1954, Roy produced some of his most original and compelling political writing that has been little analyzed. Roy had initially published his magnum opus, *The Russian Revolution*, as a series of articles in 1937 after he was freed from prison by the British authorities in India, but he updated this work substantially when he reissued it in 1949. Anticipating that his work would be compared to Trotsky's infinitely better-known *History of the Russian Revolution*, Roy critiqued Trotsky's work as '... a masterpiece of imaginative literature; but as a work of history, it is of doubtful value.'<sup>33</sup> A gifted and a prolific writer, Roy in many ways resembled Trotsky, which makes his animosity towards the latter hard to understand. He wrote rather uncharitably that, 'Trotsky was a great man, and was very eager that he be recognized as such.'<sup>34</sup> Roy alleged that Trotsky's egotism came in the way of his political achievements and that Trotsky only achieved greatness when his actions were tempered by Lenin's

30 S. Ray (ed.), *The World Her Village. Selected Letters and Writings of Ellen Roy* (Calcutta 1979); See also the letter campaign waged by Evelyn Trent from the USA to release Roy, RGASPI (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History), fond 495, delo 213, opis 18, ll, 5-9.

31 S. Ray, 'Tagore, Gandhi and Roy: Three Twentieth Century Utopians,' in S. Ray (ed.), *M.N. Roy, Philosopher-Revolutionary* (Delhi 1995), 235-50.

32 RGASPI, fond 495, op 213, delo 18, ll 67-68.

33 M.N. Roy, *The Russian Revolution* (Calcutta 1949), vii.

34 M.N. Roy, 'A Critical Appreciation of Leon Trotsky' (written in 1940 after Trotsky's assassination), *ibid.*, 62.

objective and philosophical guidance. Roy even went so far as to hint that, but for Trotsky's intransigent opposition to the New Economic Policy, the history of the Soviet Union would have been less ruthless, less terrifying.<sup>35</sup>

Roy's antipathy to Trotsky was strange, given that he himself had become a cosmopolitan internationalist from his early days in the USA and then in Mexico. Roy, like Trotsky, believed in the concept of a global revolution till the end of his life. But whereas Trotsky argued that the Russian revolution should move to Western Europe for support and sustenance, Roy thought that the revolutionary ideas of communism would work best among the colonized areas of Asia and Africa. If Trotsky claimed that Stalin, supported by an iron bureaucracy, had betrayed the revolutionary promise of October, Roy never quite managed to repudiate his personal admiration of Stalin despite his criticism of various aspects of his policies.<sup>36</sup>

Roy predicted that Stalin would be remembered as a great leader in world history, and extolled his historic military victory over the armies of fascism. But after the Second World War when the Soviet Union colonized much of Eastern Europe, Roy argued that Soviet communism could not be applied indiscriminately to the democratic and liberal traditions of Western Europe. He was deeply critical of the Soviet turn towards national chauvinism and argued that Stalin's foreign policy represented a resurgence of Russian Pan-Slavism. Roy wrote,

Stalin dropping the long coat and cap of the ordinary Red army man, the simplicity which made him loved, to don the Marshal's regalia – there is tragedy in that picture. How awkward he looked in that ridiculous outfit, sitting between Roosevelt and Churchill at Tehran.<sup>37</sup>

The Soviet imperialistic attack on Eastern Europe was a bitter blow for many colonial Marxists, especially since their attraction to the Soviet Union was based on Soviet anti-colonial ideology. This was an important 'God That Failed' moment for Roy. But as we will see, unlike the ex-communists from the West, Roy never found the God of liberalism in its place. He continued in his quest for a polytheistic, and heterodox political ideology based on reason, individualism, and a commitment to social justice. An independent thinker, Roy looked for a political freedom that lay beyond the binary intellectual positions of the Cold War, and he refused to validate a bourgeois template of liberal politics even as he criticized Soviet socialism.

If communism had degenerated into a one-party dictatorship in the Soviet Union where all original thought and criticism had been stifled, an expansive universalist vision had been replaced by a phony and chauvinistic nationalism, then Roy argued that parliamentary democracy, although a great improvement on the

35 M.N. Roy, *M.N. Roy's Memoirs* (Bombay 1964), 508–9.

36 M.N. Roy, 'The Death of Stalin,' *Radical Humanist*, XVII (15 March 1953).

37 M.N. Roy, *If I Were Stalin* (Calcutta 1988), 50.

former, was becoming unrepresentative of, and unresponsive to the needs and desires of the populace in both Western Europe and in an independent India. Parliamentary democracy was a powerful fiction that could disguise class interests only temporarily, but as a system it needed to be fundamentally re-thought, updated, and recreated for the present. Roy argued that his Marxist training had led him to reject all dogma, whether on the right or the left, and had led him to understand that no political system was sacred. He believed that all political systems evolved over time, and even the best ones should be continually improved to enlarge and ensure democratic participation. Roy argued that the mere existence of more than one political party and periodic elections did not guarantee that a political system was either democratic or representative of the popular will. He used the example of the dominant role of the INC in Indian politics to explain that the adoption of formal parliamentary democracy in India had not led to the creation of a truly inclusive political system.

Disillusioned with two modern political alternatives of liberalism and Stalinism, Roy proposed a new philosophy, one that he called Radical Humanism.<sup>38</sup> Roy combined the intellectual traditions of rational inquiry, scientific method, and the emphasis on individuality and individualism (drawn from Classical Greek, Indic, Islamic, and modern European intellectual thought), with the democratic ideas of community organization at the local level. He drew from anarchist, syndicalist, religious, trade union, and local movements of the global pre-Soviet left, a tradition that was exemplified by thinkers and activists such as Leo Tolstoy, Emma Goldman, Rosa Luxembourg and others.<sup>39</sup> Roy, a passionate believer in individual freedom, argued that the anarchist left of the pre-Soviet era had been too quick to dismiss the claims of individual liberty in favor of the collective. An idealized, utterly ahistorical, and spurious vision of the collective will found its violent and most anti-democratic expression in the deification of the nationalist state in fascism, and of the proletarian class in communism. Both fascism and communism fell into the fallacy that 'great men, heroes and supermen' could and should represent the will of the people.<sup>40</sup>

But classical liberalism was equally flawed, as in the name of economic freedom and popular sovereignty it had created parliamentary democracy; a system that was dominated and controlled by political parties that represented the interests of their donors, rather than the people that they claimed to serve. Roy argued that periodic elections of party representatives did not exemplify democratic self-expression, but

38 Roy launched the Radical Humanist Movement in India in 1948 and in 1952 was invited to join *International Humanist and Ethical Union*, an organization that drew membership from Europe and the USA and was dedicated to the defense of human rights globally; and M.N. Roy, *New Humanism. A Manifesto* (Calcutta 1947).

39 G. Eley, *Forging Democracy. History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (New York, NY 2002); For other egalitarian visions see A. Kumar, *Radical Equality: Ambedkar, Gandhi, and the Risk of Democracy* (Stanford, CA 2015). M. Ramnath, *Decolonizing Anarchism. An Anti-Authoritarian History of India's Liberation Struggle* (Oakland, CA 2011); B. Maxwell and R. Craib (eds), *No Gods, No Masters, No Peripheries: Global Anarchisms* (Dexter, MI 2015).

40 M.N. Roy, *Politics, Power and Parties* (Calcutta 1960), 54.

instead signified the surrender of individual political rights to political parties that were themselves utterly undemocratic institutions. In a parliamentary system, popular sovereignty was vested in political parties, rather than in the people themselves. Roy described elections thus:

With music, brass bands, flags and shouting, the judgment of the people is dulled and benumbed; they are placed under some spell, and in that condition they are asked to decide their fate. This is naturally more so in backward countries, but on principle it is the same everywhere.<sup>41</sup>

Roy returned to a consideration of grass roots democracy as a possible solution to modern politics during the last years of his life.<sup>42</sup> He used the Russian model of the Soviets or worker councils that were developed during the Russian Revolution of 1905 (when Trotsky played a significant role), to unearth the concept of multi-class, local, and democratic councils that would represent local populations.<sup>43</sup> Roy argued repeatedly that the state had to be coterminous with society, not stand apart as an alien or occupying force, however benevolent or well intentioned. Political representatives, drawn from councils would represent their local electorates and their needs at the next level of government, rather than work at the behest of political parties who for the most part were formed around national or elite interests that had little local relevance. Roy believed, like Mikhail Bakunin and Pyotr Kropotkin before him, that a global society could be built on the basis of self-governing local councils or Peoples' Republics. He further advocated that these People's Committees should have a designated constitutional status to prevent their assimilation into a formal party system.

It was not mere happenstance that Trotsky, architect of the concept of the militarization of labor during the Civil War, and who had helped Lenin crush the Worker Opposition Movement led by Alexander Shlyapnikov and Alexander Kollontai after the Civil War,<sup>44</sup> also returned to the idea of workers' councils in the final pages of his magnum opus, *Revolution Betrayed* (1937). Perhaps revolutionaries only return to democracy when they lose power! But even at the end of his life Trotsky was unable to think beyond the Leninist paradigm of the revolutionary leader taking the masses to political victory. In the final pages of his brilliant and

41 M.N. Roy, *Politics, Power and Parties*, 52.

42 It would be an interesting exercise to compare Roy's ideas with that contained in the infinitely better known work by E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London 1985), and the four volumes of *prison writings* of the Kurdish leader, Abdullah Öcalan. (I thank Dr. Afshin Matin-Asgari for the last reference).

43 O. Anweiler, *Soviets: The Russian Workers, Peasants and Soldiers Councils, 1905–1921* (New York, NY 1905); J.H.L. Keep, *The Russian Revolution. A Study in Mass Mobilization* (New York, NY 1977); D. Koenker, *Moscow Workers and the 1917 Revolution* (Princeton, NJ 1981); S.A. Smith, *Red Petrograd, Red Petrograd. Revolution in the Factories, 1917–1918* (New York, NY 1983); and A. Wildman, *End of the Russian Imperial Army. The Old Army and the Soldiers' Revolt (March–April 1917)* (Princeton, NJ 1980).

44 B. Allen, *Alexander Shlipanikov 1885–1937. Life of an Old Bolshevik* (Boston, MA 2015).

incendiary text, *Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky called for a violent overthrow of the Stalinist system.<sup>45</sup>

Lenin had famously updated Marxist thought by arguing that a small disciplined party led by an indomitable leader could lead the proletarian class to power during periods of international crisis.<sup>46</sup> While Trotsky created the Fourth International as an alternative to the Soviet Third International, Roy came to the opposite conclusion. He argued that political parties and power hungry leaders created conditions of unfreedom in the first place, and even the most qualified leader with the best of intentions could not serve as a cure for political authoritarianism. Roy had admired Lenin his entire life and considered him to be the greatest political leader of the twentieth century. But in 1946, Roy, broke with Lenin's dicta on revolutionary politics, and disbanded his party of Radical Democrats. Roy, contra Lenin who had brilliantly theorized the road to power, argued that the desire for power and the capture of political power whether through revolutionary or parliamentary means, created the original problem of modern politics: that is, the loss of individual freedom. The condition of unfreedom was further exacerbated by the concentration of power in the hands of the few whether in the form of the dictator or political parties.

Roy believed that the capacity for freedom of thought and action was one of the essential characteristics of the human condition, and that ultimately human beings would rebel against any political institution that was designed to frustrate their desire for freedom and equality.<sup>47</sup> The role of a leader was not to capture power through either the ballot box or through revolutionary methods, and lead the masses to victory. Instead the true leader should awaken the desire for freedom, reason, and radical self-government among their fellow human beings, and through that process, render the political leader irrelevant and even redundant. The best leader should practice the politics of superfluity. At the end of his life Roy found in education, and in rational and critical thought, the most potent tool of political emancipation and independence. He argued repeatedly that democracy could not function in the absence of an educated and informed electorate, and that aspiring politicians should be educators and facilitators, rather than leaders. At the end of his life Roy would have agreed with Tagore's pithy summation of parliamentary democracy:

What in the West is called democracy can never be true in a society where greed grows, uncontrolled, encouraged, even admired by the populace. In such an atmosphere, a constant struggle goes on among individuals to capture public organizations for the satisfaction of their own personal ambition, and democracy becomes like an elephant whose one purpose in life is to give joy rides to the clever and the rich.<sup>48</sup>

45 G. Swain, *Trotsky and the Russian Revolution* (London 2014); I. Thatcher, *Trotsky* (London 2002); and D. Volkogonov, *Trotsky: Eternal Revolutionary* (London 1997).

46 V.I. Lenin, *What is To Be Done* (1902) and *State and Revolution* (1917).

47 M.N. Roy, *Reason, Romanticism and Revolution* (Reprint edn, Delhi 2016), vols., 1 and 2.

48 Tagore, *City and Village* (1924), reprinted in *English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 3 (New Delhi 2002), 512–13.

While Roy based his analysis of Leninism and Stalinism on close observation and personal involvement in the politics of the global left, Tagore's observations were based on a single, two-week visit in September 1930. Some of Tagore's work had already been translated into Russian during the preceding decades and his famous volume of poems, *Gitanjali*, had found numerous admirers amongst the Russian literary public, especially Ivan Bunin's version. Even Lunacharsky, the Soviet Minister of Culture, was an admirer of the 'Indian Tolstoy'.<sup>49</sup> Tagore traveled to Moscow accompanied by Harry Timbres (among others in his entourage), an American doctor from a Quaker community who had worked extensively in both India and the Soviet Union in the field of healthcare.<sup>50</sup> Tagore was honored at numerous political meetings, dinners and gatherings in Moscow, and also had the chance to meet with ordinary Soviet citizens from different walks of life. Unlike Bernard Shaw or H.G. Wells, Tagore did not meet with either Stalin nor members of his inner circle; perhaps his reputation for bluntness and plain speaking had preceded him!

Tagore published his *Letters From Russia* in Bengali in 1930 and soon thereafter he authorized an English language translation that was published in *The Modern Review* in 1934. But neither the Soviet government nor the British authorities were pleased with Tagore's nuanced analysis of the Soviet situation. During Tagore's visit to the USA shortly after his trip to Moscow, the US press criticized him for his positive comments about the Soviet Union and Tagore was even characterized as Soviet Russia's 'most effective propagandist'.<sup>51</sup> The Russian translation of Tagore's letters that were published in 1956 was highly edited.<sup>52</sup> In Great Britain, Tagore's trip to the Soviet Union became the subject of intense controversy. Angry questions were raised in the British House of Commons as to why Tagore's letters were allowed to have been published in Bengal in the first place, and *The Modern Review* was prevented from serializing the rest of Tagore's travel writing about the Soviet Union.<sup>53</sup>

Tagore used his Soviet visit to explore two important themes in world history: wealth and inequality in the modern world, and the role of the welfare state, especially in the field of education. Friends and foes alike agreed that the material conditions of the Soviet Union left much to be desired, but Tagore took perverse pleasure in the absence of visible signs of wealth, and in the run-down buildings and degraded amenities of Moscow. Instead of reinforcing the trope of material poverty in the Soviet Union that is widespread in western writing about the Soviet Union,<sup>54</sup> Tagore condemned the arrogance of wealth that is usually framed against

49 A.P. Gnatyuk-Danil'chuk, *Tagore, India and Soviet Union. A Dream Fulfilled* (Calcutta 1986).

50 Harry and his wife, Rebecca, were among the many so-called 'naïve' westerners who were impressed by Soviet attempts to provide basic services and amenities to all. H. and R. Timbres, *We Didn't Ask Utopia. A Quaker Family in Soviet Russia* (New York, NY 1939).

51 'Tagore Russia's Friend,' *Literary Digest* (1 November 1930), 19; S. Hays, 'Rabindranath Tagore in America,' *American Quarterly*, 14, 3 (Autumn 1962), 439–63.

52 R. Tagore, *Pis'ma o Rossii* (Moscow 1956).

53 Sisir Kumar Das's introduction to *English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 2 (New Delhi 2002), 24; R. Verma, *Rabindranath Tagore: Prophet Against Totalitarianism* (London 1964).

54 C. Chatterjee, 'Everyday Life in Transnational Perspective. Consumption and Consumerism, 1917–1939,' in C. Chatterjee, D. Ransel, M. Cavender and K. Petrone (eds), *Everyday Life in Russia Past and Present* (Bloomington, IN 2015), 368–89.

the backdrop of a muted but pervasive poverty in most capitalist cities in the world. 'It is because the distinction of wealth is non-existent here that the visage of wealth has changed; there is not the unseemliness of poverty, there is mere want.'<sup>55</sup> If nobody was well dressed in Moscow, then Tagore took comfort in the fact that this meant that a privileged and leisured class no longer existed.

Proletarian and relatively egalitarian Moscow was a huge shock to Tagore's system and shook to the core his normalized worldview that had been incubated in a hierarchical, caste-ridden, and hideously unequal India. This had only been reinforced by other unequal civilizations that he had visited in his travels to countries in Europe, Asia, the USA and Latin America. Tagore, a scion of a major landowning family in Bengal, became deeply ashamed of his family business, and even more ashamed of his own parasitical status as a landlord.<sup>56</sup> For the first time in his life Tagore realized clearly that the vast majority of his fellow human beings were neither a backdrop to a tableau about the rich and famous, nor objects of pity, commiseration, philanthropy and welfare. He condemned the liberal political attitude that fatalistically condemns us to accept vast, and visceral inequality as the natural order of things.

Tagore treated the Soviet government in Russia as analogous to the British rule in India. He compared the ruinous state of India after 160 years of colonialism to the progress and energy that he witnessed in the Soviet Union after only a few years of Bolshevik rule. He was especially pleased to meet confident and articulate peasants, workers, school children and even citizens from 'backward' Central Asia, who stood in sharp contrast to the obsequiousness and self-effacement that the poor displayed in India. In public interviews Tagore paid many fulsome compliments about Soviet innovations in agriculture, the arts, education and healthcare, some of which sound both embarrassing and ill-advised today, especially in light of the many archival revelations about Stalinist repression during the 1930s.

Tagore's political analysis was based on a colonial perspective of an impoverished peasant India that had been devastated by decades of British policies of taxation and commercial agriculture, and who were exploited further by a class of avaricious and oppressive landowners that included Tagore's own family. He drew on a critique of wealth and capital accumulation that was derived partly from his knowledge of Indic texts. 'Since my visit to Russia I have realized the sayings of the Upanishads: *ma gridhah*—do not covet.'<sup>57</sup> In his Hibbert Lectures (*Religion of Man*) delivered at Oxford University earlier that year before his visit to the Soviet Union, Tagore had elaborated on this concept of greed and covetousness as the bane of the modern world. He said that, '... when greed has for its object material gain it can have no end. It is like the chasing of the horizon by a lunatic.'<sup>58</sup> In *Letters from Russia*, Tagore elaborated on this concept

55 R. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, trans. by Sasadhar Sinha (Calcutta 1984), 7.

56 See Tagore's letters to his son dated 14 October 1930, and 31 October 1930 in Rabindranath Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, 157.

57 R. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, 54.

58 Tagore, *Religion of Man* (1931), reprinted in *English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 3 (New Delhi 2002), 151.



of greed, and argued that both capitalism and colonial exploitation arose from an aggressive desire for material wealth. He was pleased to see that in the Soviet Union wealth was no longer important as a marker of social status, and hoped that the Soviet civilization would be able to de-mythologize the concept of greed as an economic good and a desired political goal.<sup>59</sup> While Tagore recognized that the institution of private property was important for both human identity and self-expression, he also believed in the concept of social property. Social property, Tagore argued should be earned through non-exploitative methods, and should be used to enhance the welfare of both the individual and the local community.<sup>60</sup>

Tagore, the grandson of Prince Dwarkanath Tagore, a fabulously wealthy merchant in British India whose fortune had been derived partially from the opium trade with China, always had an ambiguous attitude towards inherited wealth. Tagore never mentioned his colorful grandfather in any of his writings and led a lifestyle that was distinguished by simplicity. Tagore's aversion to material displays of affluence probably derived from his young days when he had been deputized by his father to collect rent from their impoverished peasants in rural Bengal. Tagore donated most of his earnings from his books, lectures, and paintings to support his educational institutions and even toyed with the idea of giving away all his wealth derived from his landholdings after his return from the Soviet Union, although he never achieved this laudable goal.<sup>61</sup> In one of his famous poems, 'My Little Plot of Land' (1895) Tagore did not cite but basically echoed Proudhon's famous dictum that 'property is theft.' In the poem he shows clearly how a poor peasant, Upen, is dispossessed by a primal act of violence. Upen's lands are expropriated by the landlord, and later when he tries to eat a fruit from his own tree, he is branded a thief.

Tagore, throughout his life, believed that education, both humanistic and scientific, was the perfect antidote to poverty and a key to creating a democratic community. Like other progressive western visitors such as John Dewey, Tagore was deeply impressed by the resources that the Soviet state devoted to the achievement of universal literacy and education.<sup>62</sup> He was especially excited by the fact that arts, literature, music, cinema and drama had been liberated from the

59 See letter to Amiya Chakravarty (poet, academic and secretary) dated 7 March 1935 in R. Tagore, *Chithipatra* (Correspondence), vol. XI (Calcutta 1974), 146–7.

60 *Wealth and Welfare* (1929), *ibid.*, 623; See also Tagore's lectures on the subject before he traveled to the Soviet Union, translated as *The Co-Operative Principle* (Calcutta 1963); Tapati Dasgupta, *Social Thought of Rabindranath Tagore. A Historical Analysis* (New Delhi 1993); S. Radhakrishna, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (London 1918); A. Chakrabarti and A. Kumar Dhar, 'Development, Capitalism, and Socialism: A Marxian Encounter with Rabindranath Tagore's Ideas on the Cooperative Principle,' in *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society*, 20, 3 (June 2008), 487–89; and U. Das Gupta, *Rabindranath Tagore. A Biography* (New Delhi 2004).

61 K. Dutta and A. Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore. The Myriad-Minded Man* (New York, NY 1995), 296–9; S. Bhattacharya, *Rabindranath Tagore. An Interpretation* (New Delhi 2011).

62 J. Dewey, *Impressions of Soviet Russia: And the Revolutionary World Mexico-China-Turkey* (New York, NY 1929); G.S. Counts, *The Soviet Challenge to America* (New York, NY 1931); S. Webb and B. Webb, *Soviet Communism: A New Civilization* (New York, NY 1936); and L.W. Williams, *The New Schools of New Russia* (New York, NY 1938).

bourgeois label of 'high culture,' and made available to ordinary people. An avid educator who had experimented with novel educational techniques at his school, Santiniketan, and university, Visva-Bharati, Tagore was particularly interested in the Soviet educational policies. At the same time Tagore had a lifelong aversion to authoritarianism, and anticipating Foucault, believed that most schools were pernicious instruments of state control that facilitated the spread of nationalism, capitalism and militarism. As a child Tagore had suffered intensely in educational institutions and as a result the Nobel Laureate had barely any formal schooling.<sup>63</sup> Tagore wrote about Russia that:

I do not say that all is perfect here . . . Briefly the defect is that they have turned their system of education into a mould . . . If the theory of education does not correspond with the law of the living mind, either the mould will burst into pieces or man's mind will be paralyzed to death or man's mind will be turned into a mechanical doll."<sup>64</sup>

In one of his speeches in Moscow, delivered to an audience of students and teachers from a technical training institution on 15 September 1930, Tagore spoke about his own childhood and how he had hated the experience of school as a disciplinary institution. He recalled the mindless repetition of facts, and criticized the modern transformation of education from a journey of exploration of the self and the world, into a defined good ascribed with both monetary and political value.<sup>65</sup> His speech was a thinly veiled attack on the political content of modern education and its intent to shape and coerce human thought.

In his perceptive analysis of authoritarianism, Tagore, unlike George Orwell or Hannah Arendt, freed it from its exclusive affiliation with modernity and the political ideologies of the right and the left. He located authoritarian tendencies in the individual, in human nature, and in our desire to control and dominate our political and social surroundings. In 1933 Tagore published his anti-fascist dance opera, *House of Cards*, and in 1934 he published his last and least popular novella, *Four Chapters*, written shortly after his return from the Soviet Union. The publication set off a political storm in Bengal as audiences correctly perceived it as an attack on the violent and terroristic wing of the Indian national movement that was very popular among the Indian middle class.<sup>66</sup> For the most part *Four Chapters* has been understood and read exclusively in its domestic context of Indian national politics, but it should be regarded as a major and early contribution to the twentieth-century canon of anti-totalitarian fiction. Ashish Nandy, in his brilliant analysis of Tagore's political ideas, sees the text as a response to modern twentieth-century violence exercised in the colonial context, and following in his footsteps I enlarge the frame of analysis to include Tagore's experiences of fascism and

63 Sir R. Tagore, *My Reminiscences* (New York, NY 1917).

64 R. Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, 4.

65 GARF (State Archive of the Russian Federation), fond 5238, op 8, delo 75, ll 48–50.

66 See Rimli Bhattacharya's excellent afterword in her translation of the novel, *Four Chapters* (New Delhi 2002).

Bolshevism.<sup>67</sup> Tagore knew full well that his novel would outrage many at home and abroad; he described it as a protest against all ‘variants of unconstrained and unrestrained politics.’<sup>68</sup>

*Four Chapters*, written as a series of conversations between three members of a revolutionary cell, features Indranath, the charismatic and highly educated leader of a revolutionary group, Atin, scion of an aristocratic family who is looking for the meaning of life in revolutionary politics, and Ela, whose beauty, sincerity, and genuine revolutionary fervor is used by Indranath to draw followers to his cause. Ela, unlike the two men, possesses both intelligence and emotional sincerity, and this helps her separate their political cant about nationalism from the lust for power that it thinly conceals. To the reader of Russian fiction, Indranath appears to be a composite character drawn from various nihilist characters from Russian novels such as Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s *What Is To Be Done*, Feodor Dostoevsky’s *Demons*, and *Crime and Punishment*, and Ivan Turgenev’s *Father and Sons*. Indranath is a brilliant scientist frustrated in his academic ambitions in a colonial India. He exercises absolute and lethal control over a coterie of young nationalists through a combination of his considerable personal charisma, his amoral and psychological manipulation of the group dynamics within the cell, and a judicious use of violence to ensure complete obedience to his injunctions.

Atin, using his capacity for reason, recognizes the fatal flaw in Indranath’s convictions that revolutionary ends justify the use of unethical, and violent means. He even manages to convince Ela, an erstwhile devotee, about the immorality of their supreme leader, Indranath. But at the end Atin is unable to break free of the disciplinary apparatus of the intensely hierarchical organization, and mistakenly sacrifices his true nature to the realm of the political. Atin is sent by Indranath to kill Ela, his beloved, who is becoming a liability to the group. Ela accepts her death sentence from her lover, but not as the final act of submission to a great cause as exhibited by the revolutionaries in Arthur Koestler famous novel, *Darkness At Noon* (1940). Ela’s acceptance of her own death is an act of ethical independence, and a passionate act of love that resists and ultimately frustrates Indranath’s desire to completely control the minds of his followers. Tagore shows quite clearly that the capacity for independent thought, and the capacity to forge genuine and selfless relationships across political borders, are the only real antidotes to authoritarian politics that seeks to destroy intimate relations in a quest for total power.<sup>69</sup>

In his last interview conducted in Moscow with a reporter from *Izvestiia* on 25 September 1930 (that was suppressed in the Soviet Union and only published in 1988, although the text was widely available in the West),<sup>70</sup> Tagore warned

67 A. Nandy, *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism. Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self* (New Delhi 1994), 20–1.

68 See letter dated 11 December 1934 to Amiya Chakravarty in Rabindranath Tagore, *Chithipatra* (Correspondence), vol. XI (Calcutta 1974), 126.

69 E.M. Forster was to make a similar point about human relationships a few years later in his celebrated essay from 1938, ‘What I Believe.’

70 *Daily News India* (22 May 2011), <http://www.dnaindia.com/world/report-stalin-had-blocked-out-rabindranath-tagore-s-criticism-of-communist-system-1546303> (accessed 28 December 2016).

the Bolsheviks about the dangers of inculcating class hatred through political indoctrination and about propaganda. With characteristic frankness Tagore said: 'There must be disagreement where minds are allowed to be free. It would be an uninteresting but sterile world of mechanical regularity if all of our opinions were forcibly made alike... Violence begets violence and blind stupidity.'<sup>71</sup>

While the phrase 'ma gridhah' can be interpreted as an injunction to curb one's desire for material goods, Tagore believed that the quest for power was analogous to the lust for wealth. He wrote that, '... the greed of unlimited power vitiates the mind.'<sup>72</sup> Tagore would have agreed that the immoderate acquisition of extreme wealth through the means of capitalism and colonialism was a process similar to the concentration of extraordinary political power in Bolshevik Russia. Tagore identified the Biblical/Upanishadic concept of greed as the root cause of inequality: one that led to the erection of unjust and oppressive economic and political systems. Drawing on the ancient but virile traditions of renunciation as elaborated in Indic, Sufi, and Buddhist philosophy, he urged his audiences to engage with the world not for their immediate self-gain, narrowly defined as material success, but for the larger and ethical self that they would gain when working for the commonweal. Tagore believed that if elites disavowed greed, power and wealth in a quest to redefine themselves it would lead to the creation of a more just society.

Tagore's antipathy to organized politics, political parties, and strong leaders, was rooted in an anarchist and even aristocratic resistance to all forms of authority. Roy, the more systematic political thinker of the two, came to a vision of radical democracy following his political experiences in an intensely hierarchical British India and an oppressive Soviet Union. Roy and Tagore, from very different political positions, came to the realization that the single-minded pursuit of power and wealth was in and of itself a dangerous thing, and that these illiberal and even asocial desires were often nurtured and encouraged in liberal and socialist systems. Tagore refused to join a political party and was bitterly critical of the many shortcomings of nationalism as a political philosophy and of national politics in India.<sup>73</sup> Instead, Tagore devoted his life to the pursuit of public education and socio-economic reconstruction in rural India. Roy refused to legitimize the democratic window dressing that the Indian National Congress provided to an independent India after 1947. By dissolving his Radical Democratic Party in favor of the global Radical Humanist Movement, Roy demonstrated his capacity to eschew political power for the sake of moral authority.<sup>74</sup> At the end of his life Roy analyzed the

71 Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, 215–16.

72 Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, 92.

73 R. Tagore, *Nationalism* (New York, NY 1917); M. Collins, *Empire, Nationalism and the Postcolonial World. Rabindranath Tagore's Writings on History, Politics and Society* (New York, NY 2012).

74 Roy was very influential in shaping the anarchist ideas of noted activist Jay Prakash Narayan: see, E.-M. Nag, 'Marxism and Beyond in Indian Political Thought: JP Narayan and MN Roy's Concepts of Radical Democracy,' PhD thesis, London School of Economics (2003).

politics of radical equality embedded in local civic associations: he concluded that such a society could only be possible in a leaderless world.

It is important to remember that the ‘God that Failed’ literature, which has been used to frame and discredit socialism throughout the globe, was developed in the heat of the Cold War. As such it should be treated as a set of polemical discourses, not received as the tried and true wisdom from the ‘winning side’ of history. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the economics of ‘free markets’ and the political philosophy of ‘representative democracy’ has taken on a near canonical status worldwide. These intellectual ideas have been used to justify neoliberal policies and provide the philosophical underpinnings of contemporary globalization.<sup>75</sup> Roy argued that to accept any unequal political system, whether liberal or authoritarian, is contrary to our capacity for reason and deforms our innate desire for freedom. Tagore would add that our education should make us question received wisdom, not render us compliant and ineffectual in its assimilation. The universal, classless, and feminist visions spawned by the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 have ebbed a hundred years later, as we confront an unprecedented wave of fascist tinged populism, ferocious inequality, environmental degradation, and political authoritarianism worldwide. We desperately need lineages of alternative thinking that lie beyond the orthodoxies of the right and the left: political visions that can nourish our faith in an egalitarian, sustainable, and democratic future.

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<sup>75</sup> A. Atkinson, *Inequality. What Can Be Done* (Cambridge, MA 2015); B. Milanovic, *Global Inequality. A New Approach for the Age of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA 2016); D. Brady, *Rich Democracies. Poor People. How Politics Explain Politics* (New York, NY 2008); M. Eagleton-Pierce, *Neoliberalism. The Key Concepts* (New York, NY 2016); N. Klein, *This Changes Everything. Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York, NY 2015); T. Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty First Century* (Cambridge, MA 2014); and A. Roy, *Capitalism. A Ghost Story* (Chicago, IL 2014).

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