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# The Critical Traditionalism of Ashis Nandy

## Occidentalism and the Dilemmas of Innocence

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**Abstract**
This article offers an analysis of the construction and deployment of the ideas of 'the West' and 'tradition' in the social commentary of Ashis Nandy. It argues that Nandy's 'critical' defence of tradition is framed and animated by occidentalism and renders tradition into a paradoxical space of redemption and innocence. The first part of the paper shows that Nandy's nativist narratives of loss and his suspicion of political ideologies place him both in and against post-colonial cultural politics. The second section examines and illustrates the mutually defining nature of occidentalism and traditionalism. It is shown that Nandy's stereotypes of authentic Indian culture undermine the critical capabilities of his 'critical traditionalism'. Part three explores Nandy's dilemmas further by reference to his attempts to align tradition with reflexivity.

**Key words**
India ■ Ashis Nandy ■ nativism ■ occidentalism ■ traditionalism

> The pathway to the future may be through aspects of our pasts. (Nandy, 2002: 2)

## Introduction

Much of Ashis Nandy's work has been focused upon the re-evaluation of traditional popular culture, especially those aspects of it that appear to confront or, in some way, bypass, the rationalism and

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authoritarianism that he locates in western civilization. He defines this project as 'critical traditionalism'. This article seeks to interrogate these ideas by offering an analysis of Nandy's construction and deployment of the ideas of 'the West' and 'tradition'. It argues that these themes are sites of dilemma and instability in Nandy's output. More specifically, it is shown that Nandy's 'critical' defence of tradition is framed and animated by occidentalism and renders tradition into a paradoxical space of redemption and innocence.

For Vinay Lal, Nandy is 'India's most formidable and controversial intellectual . . . a cultural and political critic without perhaps any equal in South Asia' (Lal, 2004). What Miller calls 'the scandal called Ashis Nandy' (1998: 303) has provided a wide-ranging challenge to assumptions about the future and past of India, a challenge that has established Nandy as not only a major public intellectual but also a source of, often vituperative, controversy.[1] For at least some of his critics, Nandy's books and essays are at the centre of a reactionary 'new consensus' of anti-modernity and anti-secularism (Baber, 1996, 1998, 2002), which threatens the well-being of ordinary Indians whilst claiming to speak on their behalf (see also Bhatt, 2001; Desai, 1999; Nanda, 2003, 2005). Yet even his critics usually concede that Nandy's voice is a subtle one, that it pushes the boundaries about how we think about the social role and anxieties of the reflexive 'modern' intellectual (see also Chakrabarty, 2002; Guneratne, 1997).

Ashis Nandy (b. 1937) has been contributing to a wide variety of disciplines and debates for many years. He is perhaps best known for his work as a political psychologist, more specifically the psychological impact of colonialism (Nandy, 1983) and the possibilities of 'non-western' psychoanalysis (Nandy, 1995). However, he has also written extensively on film, science, medicine, nationalism and many other topics. This paper does not attempt any kind of summary of Nandy's broad contribution but is focused on critical traditionalism, a particular but important theme within his work. The argument that Nandy constructs 'tradition' by way of an 'othering' of 'westernized' Indians provides a necessary but initial starting point for this discussion. Although much criticism of Nandy begins and ends with this line of argument, it is equally necessary to engage Nandy's negotiation of ambivalences and uncertainties. For as Chakrabarty (2002: 41) notes, what is 'truly interesting and powerful' about Nandy's work is his preparedness to continuously open up, or at least make visible, the tensions that animate his project. Nandy is fully aware that he is participating in processes of reification. He does not apply inverted commas around 'tradition' and the 'West' but he, nevertheless, offers them as necessary myths, essentialisms that are strategic and yet also transcend the instrumental, rationalist, language of strategy and intimate a new reverence for the popular and what Nandy calls the 'non-modern' sources of human creativity.

The landscape of paradox Nandy opens before us is, at turns, frustrating and illuminating, familiar and original, conservative and radical. This is, perhaps, nowhere more evident than in Nandy's attempts to define

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critical traditionalism. Nandy has talked about this idea as the sifting out of a socially critical content within the broader field of tradition:

> Critical traditionalism refers to the living traditions which include a theory of oppression, overt and/or covert. No tradition is valid or useful for our times unless it has, or can be made to have, an awareness of the nature of evil in contemporary times. (2004: 21)

This definition raises many questions: How are we to identify traditions that have the potential for an 'awareness' of 'evil'? How can we defend such an instrumental approach to tradition whilst rejecting modernity because of its instrumentalism? In fact, having defined critical traditionalism, in his next sentence Nandy pull backs from, or complicates, his own definition:

> This is not an odd restatement of instrumentalism which dominates most modern, secular theories of oppression . . . I am speaking of a more holistic or comprehensive cognition of those at the receiving end of the present world. (2004: 22)

There are multiple ambitions in Nandy's attempt to corral and speak for 'tradition'. Like much of Nandy's work, his approach evades easy categorization. It is, nevertheless, clear that at the centre of his work sits a set of ideas about the West. Nandy insists that to know 'the living traditions of the non-western civilizations' we have to arrive at 'a theory of the West' (2004: 22). Hence, his project is bound up with what Hubel describes as Nandy's ambition of 'putting the West into an Indian perspective' (1996: 536). Yet Nandy's 'theory of the West' is a turbulent and contradictory enterprise. The West is written off, then taken ownership of: it is the 'intimate enemy' (Nandy, 1983) of which Indians must rid themselves, yet it appears necessary to constantly evoke it and maintain its presence.

Paradoxes provide the thematic structure for this paper, which has three parts. The first part offers a particular academic and political context for Nandy's work. Nandy may appear to have clear sympathies with the rise of what I term 'postcolonial nativism'. However, as we shall see, Nandy has an awkward relationship to this literature. His unembarrassed narrative of loss, and suspicion of political activism, suggest that he should be located both in and against the postcolonial project. The second part examines and illustrates the mutually defining nature of occidentalism and traditionalism in Nandy's work. Nandy's stereotypes centre on the identification of the cultural and physical violence occasioned by westernization in India. Yet his reliance on occidentalism generates incongruity. For it places the burden of representation on the negative term, leaving the authentic and non-westernized aspects of Indian culture as an uncertain presence, a lightly drawn receptacle for a heavy redemptive burden. In part three, a fuller picture of the complexity of Nandy's dilemmas is developed by looking at his alliance of critical traditionalism with reflexivity. Reflexivity has been addressed as

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a characteristic of *post*-traditional societies. Indeed, it has been identified as a moment of emancipation from tradition, especially if we define tradition as an unself-critical 'formulaic notion of truth' (Giddens, 1994: 63). Yet Nandy employs reflexivity in the defence of tradition. The resultant intellectual space is in and against modernity and (as a result of Nandy's identification of modernity with the West) in and against the West. Indeed, we also find in Nandy's work a demand that the project of critique be taken into a new, post-reflexive, terrain that is reliant on an image of the 'non-West' as a site of authenticity that transcends critical rationality. In the conclusion I contend that such claims to 'innocence' should be as thoroughly interrogated as their modern counter-parts. This argument is reinforced by reference to the fact that Nandy's statements of faith in Indian civilization arrive at a time when India is emerging as a global power.

Scholarship on 'occidentalism' continues to be organized around two different definitions of the term. First, there are those for whom occidentalism refers to 'the image the West has of itself when it subjects the "others" to Orientalism' (Santos, 2009: 105; see also Venn, 2000; Coronil, 1996). A second, and larger, body of work has emerged that represents occidentalism as referring to images of the West produced from outside of the West (Carrier, 1995; Aydin, 2007; Chen, 1995: Bonnett, 2004; Tate, 2005). For Boaventura Santos the latter approach is to be deprecated because it 'carries the reciprocity trap: the idea that the "others", as victims of western stereotypes, have the same power . . . to construct stereotypes of the West' (2009: 105). However, in the context of globalization and increasingly fluid power relations, Boaventura Santos's strictures appear increasingly unworkable and anachronistic. It is also pertinent to note that the analysis of the interplay of ideas of modernity and the West in South and East Asia that we find, for example, in Bonnett (2004) and Aydin (2007; see also Friedman, 2009), is premised on an engagement with the presence and power of the West.

In fact, these two definitions of occidentalism do not necessarily suggest different conceptual approaches but rather different points of geographical focus. A more substantive distinction can be found by contrasting academic and popular studies. The former – whether focused on the West or the non-West – have reached for historical examples in order to connect occidentalism to broad sociological themes (such as modernity). They have often offered an equally broad view of occidentalism, as the construction of a set of interconnected images, or stereotypes, either positive or negative, that define and control the presence of the idea of the West in narratives of identity. These considerations have tended to steer the academic debate away from critical engagement with recent critics of westernization. By contrast, more popular engagements with occidentalism are engaged in contemporary political questions. Most have been organized around a definition of occidentalism as 'a cluster of images and ideas of the West in the minds of its haters' (Margalit and Buruma, 2002; see also Buruma and Margalit 2006; Hanson, 2002). This agenda has been focused upon examples of

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'haters' of the West and reflects concerns about radical Islamist insurgency in the wake of 9/11.

This paper is, in part, premised on the idea that it may be useful to bring the interest in the interplay and ambivalences of occidentalism, that we find in much of the academic literature, to bear on a contemporary thinker who, whilst not being any kind of 'hater' of the West (nor a religious believer), offers a high-profile instance of the critique of westernization. Engaging Nandy's occidentalism will also help us respond to Tate's (2005) call for specific explorations of 'popular representations of the Occident' (p. 350) and Blunt and McEwan's (2002) plea for empirically and biographically focused approaches to the postcolonial imagination.

## For Innocence: The Nativism of Ashis Nandy

Recent years have witnessed the postcolonial reanimation of the one of the central tropes of anti-colonialism, nativism. The specific form of nativism that has come to the fore offers a narrative of popular dissent that pits the West's supposedly technocentric, rationalist culture of modernity against the culture of 'the people' in a variety of majority world locations. A well-known example is Walter Mignolo's *Local Histories/Global Designs* (2000), which draws most of its material from the Americas. Mignolo calls for the 'restitution of Amerindian philosophy of life and conceptualization of society' (2000: 302) and a 'symbolic restitution of the past in view of a better future' (p. 149). He suggests that

> the organic intellectuals of the Amerindian social movements (as well as Latino, Afro-American, and women) are precisely the primary agents of the movement in which 'barbarism' appropriates the theoretical practices and elaborated projects, engulfing and superseding the discourse of the civilizing mission and its theoretical foundations. (2000: 299)

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) has pursued a similar argument in even more trenchant terms, categorizing 'modern knowledge and modern law' as irredeemably oppressive and pitting them against 'popular, lay, plebeian, peasant or indigenous knowledges'.

As de Sousa Santos's words imply, nativism (also sometimes called indigenism) offers a popular politics of cultural difference. It is a political project that relies for its authority on a construction of 'the people' as a repository of radical ambitions and alternative forms of knowledge. Thus Nanda can write that:

> The 'people' have acquired an unprecedented centrality in contemporary social theory. Their 'emancipation' from the West as well as all institutions of modern nation-states, even democratically elected, developmentalist states, has become the cherished end of every post-colonial social project. (Nanda, 2001: 163)

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Ashis Nandy's work has a clear resonance with these postcolonial agendas. However, his particular contribution comes into sharper definition if we consider the two main points of difference between Nandy's position and postcolonial nativism. First, Nandy's message is far more explicit in its references to a sense of loss and nostalgia. Second, Nandy distances himself from celebrations of transgression and hybridity. In the remainder of this section I will develop these distinctions in more detail before turning to a third difference, between Nandy's suspicion of progressivist ideologies and the leftist sensibility that is often to the fore within postcolonial scholarship.

Despite the prominence given to the native past, postcolonial theory has been characterized by a suspicion of traditionalism and nostalgia. Authenticity has been represented as a 'cult' or a 'myth' across a broad range of postcolonial interventions. Appiah notes that 'its *post*, like postmodernism's, is also a post that challenges earlier legitimizing narratives' (1995: 123). Indeed, David Scott rather acidly argues that 'Postcolonial theorists have made a considerable name for themselves by criticizing their predecessors, the anti-colonial nationalists, for their essentialism' (2004: 3). Although Scott's remark is unfair, it intimates a broader truth, which is that postcolonialism has marked its distance from anti-colonialism through its suspicion of narratives of authenticity. As this implies, postcolonialism contains a dislocated relationship to 'tradition'. The resultant mixture is often populist yet omnivorously critical, nativist yet imaginatively and continuously insurgent. These threads have sometimes been tied together into an affirmation of trangressive hybridities, in which the native voice comes to invade or, in Mignolo's terms, 'engulf' the West. Another example of this interweaving can be found in Akhil Gupta's account of the hybrid modern-traditionalists of the Indian peasantry. The conception of postcolonial development Gupta identifies is one of

> multivalent genealogies of modernity, at the limits of 'The West', where incommensurable conceptions and ways of life implode into one another, scattering, rather than fusing, into strangely contradictory yet eminently 'sensible' hybridities. (1998: 238)

Gupta's elaborate prose also reminds us that the intended audience for postcolonial theory is largely academic. However, the difference with Nandy does not lie merely in the fact that the latter is a public intellectual who avoids intellectual jargon. Although, as we shall see, Nandy also has a problematic relationship to tradition, he does not allow these difficulties to dilute his interest in what he calls the 'authentic innocence' (1983: xii) of native cultural resources. For Nandy, empowerment and cultural recovery do not proceed through hybridity, 'scattering', or acts of engulfment, but through the open admission of loss. 'My intention', he says,

> is to reinstate the dignity and intellectual relevance of the everyday lives of people and communities who live with and in traditions, reinvented or

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> otherwise. . . . An understanding of loss will serve as a corrective to the easy optimism of the currently dominant theories of progress. (2005: 41)

Whilst many postcolonial arguments present deracination as a site of political opportunity, Nandy's project has been steadfastly antagonistic to cultural uprooting. Nandy places himself in a lineage of anti-colonial Indian activists and intellectuals, notably Tagore and Gandhi, for whom the cultural and psychological upheaval and fragmentation of 'the people', especially when coalesced into the lonely crowds of 'urban mass culture' (Nandy, 1995: 200), is a destructive force. It is unsurprising, therefore, that Nandy is also at odds with the idea that authentic Indian culture may be identified with restless and rootless versions of cosmopolitanism.[2] For Nandy, migration and mobility not only accelerate deculturation and westernization but they also occasion desperate and self-destructive attempts to fabricate a sense of roots amongst the deracinated:

> modern cosmopolitanism is grounded in this uprooting . . . this massive uprooting has produced a cultural psychology of exile that in turn has led to an unending search for roots, on the one hand, and angry, sometimes self-destructive, assertions of nationality and ethnicity on the other. (2003: 96–7)

Nandy reinforces the point by noting that 'the more doubtful one's roots, the more desperate one's search for security in exclusion and in boundaries' (2004: 301).

Unlike many postcolonial theorists, Nandy acknowledges the interplay of nativism and romanticism in his work. Indeed, this interplay may also be cast as part of his inheritance from Tagore and Gandhi, a legacy that, in Nandy's hands, does not produce 'creative unity' (cf. Tagore, 1922) but a necessary yearning for the authentic and organic in Indian culture. Anticipating the charge of primitivism, he writes:

> Some Western thinkers, artists and writers have located the idea of loss in a revitalised concept of primitivism. Thus, the pastoral becomes an infantile, pre-rational utopia. The South has no obligation to accept the current global hierarchy of scholars and their work; it can reassess Western thought. The South may decide that the so-called Romantic is a valid stratagem to counter the social evolutionary presumptions of urban-industrial society. (2005: 42)

Nandy's openness to a relocated romanticism may also be contrasted to one of the non-nativist origin points for postcolonial studies in India, namely the attempts made by the subaltern studies school of radical historians to re-write anti-colonialism around previously marginalized class and gender locations (Guha, 1984; Prakash, 1994). Although diverse in their critical agendas, these studies have worked to deconstruct the absence of 'subaltern'

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voices in earlier histories whilst offering a. cultural Marxist emphasis on consciousness and resistance. This kind of, apparently resolutely unromantic, project reinforces the third point of difference between Nandy's work and postcolonial studies, namely Nandy's suspicious attitude to political progressivism. From the neo-Marxism of subaltern studies, to Robert Young's (2001) 'tricontinentalist' communism, to the less easily categorized but still vaguely insurgent and anti-capitalist politics found across other interventions, narratives of revolution and politicization are widely privileged in postcolonial studies (for discussion see Bonnett, 2010; Scott, 1999, 2004; Moore, 2001). Nandy positions his project firmly on the side of 'the victims of history' (2004: 25). However, he does not appear to find any natural, or easy, alliance between this standpoint and the left. Indeed, many of Nandy's battles have been with those on the left who he regards as conspiring in the westernization of the culture of the people. Thus for Nandy 'modern oppression' cannot be corrected through narratives of class struggle, mass mobilization or upheaval. These are symptoms of the problem, not parts of the answer:

> the resistance to modern oppression has to involve, in our part of the world, some resistance to modernity, and to important aspects of the modern theories of oppression. The resistance must deny in particular the connotative meanings of concepts such as development, growth, science and technology, history and revolution. (2004: 22)

## Tradition in the Mirror of the West

In this section I draw together Nandy's vision of the West with his representation of tradition and, more specifically, the project he calls 'critical traditionalism' (for other uses of the term see Arrowsmith, 1999; Lantz, 2002). The mutually defining stereotypes that Nandy constructs of the West and tradition are outlined. These stereotypes are shown to frame and sustain the anti-secularist, anti-statist and 'culturalist' arguments that are central to Nandy's output. However, we will also encounter an interesting asymmetry, namely that whilst the problems of westernization are detailed in intimate and lengthy fashion by Nandy, the content and nature of tradition are offered in terms that are relatively distant and hazy. This observation leads to another, namely that Nandy's occidentalism undermines the critical capacity of his critical traditionalism, turning it into a reifying and celebratory narrative of the 'non-West'.

The provocative nature of Nandy's attempt to carve out a critical function for tradition comes into sharper relief when contrasted with the widespread sociological assumption that tradition is inherently anti-critical. Indeed, sociologies of modernity have tended to assume that tradition can be defined as customs and practices which sustain authority and maintain social stasis (for example, Weber, 2007). Contrasting tradition with

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reflexivity, Giddens explains that the former 'renders many things external to human activity' because '[f]ormulaic truth, coupled to the stabilizing influence of ritual, takes an indefinite range of possibilities "out of play"' (Giddens, 1994: 76). By contrast, for Nandy, tradition, more specifically the traditions of 'the people', provides a repertoire of resistance against western cultural imposition. This is not an entirely original approach. Many of the images of the West he works with have been to the fore, both inside and outside the West, for many decades, notably the notion that the West is an authoritarian, massified, and rationalist civilization (for discussion see Bonnett, 2004). The idea that the organic and humane culture of village India finds itself pitted against the West also has a considerable pedigree (see, for example, Hay, 1970). Indeed, these occidentalist tropes are so firmly established that Nandy rarely bothers to evidence them. In his few forays into the empirical depiction of the supposedly alienated and inhuman nature of western society, Nandy can be alarmingly casual.[3] Nevertheless, there are three themes within Nandy's characterization of the relationship between the West and critical traditionalism that he has elaborated in innovative ways and which provide the core of his prolific written output.

First, Nandy asserts the primacy of culture in the struggle between India and the West. He argues that culture 'is not only the language of resistance; it is itself resistance' (2003: 156). This position relies on the idea that 'culture . . . lies primarily with the people' (2003: 31). The struggle for culture is also a struggle between the 'culture-oriented' and the 'statists', or 'official rationalists':

> The culture-oriented approach believes that when the lowest of the low in India are exhorted to shed their 'irrational', 'unscientific', anti-developmental traditions by the official rationalists, the exhortation is a hidden appeal to them to soften their resistance to the oppressive features of the modern political economy in India. (2003: 25)

The other two characteristic points of emphasis within Nandy's critical traditionalism are the idea that secularism is a destructive and alien western import into South Asia and his elaboration of the notion that the Indian middle class provides the principal vector for westernization and, hence, the destruction of Indian culture. I will illustrate these two points briefly before turning to the dilemmas of critical traditionalism.

For Nandy, religion must be distinguished from faith. The latter is an age-old, fluid and non-rational manifestation of the human spirit. The former, by contrast, has become akin to an ideology: it is a modern, western creation that demands 'well-bounded, mutually exclusive religious identities' (2002: 66). Nandy thinks that '[i]f faiths are in decline, they begin to search for ideologies linked to faiths, in an effort to return to forms of a traditional moral community' (2003: 62). This position has led him to the conviction that religious fundamentalism and religious violence are entirely the creatures of modernization and westernization. The idea that secularism

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and westernization are to blame for 'communal' violence in India (the best known examples being Muslim–Hindu conflict) is supported by Nandy by reference to the *political* interests of the elite groups and individuals who he accuses of orchestrating this kind of bloodshed. Thus he observes that 'most instances of communal violence are the work of people motivated by entirely secular, political cost-calculations' (2006: 72). In one of Nandy's best known essays, 'An Anti-secularist Manifesto', which was first published in 1985, he explains that:

> Only a secular, scientific concept of another human aggregate or individual – only total objectification – can sanction the cold-bloodedness and organization which has recently come to characterize many riots. (2003: 54)

In even more dramatic terms Nandy concludes that secularism 'is definitionally ethnophobic and frequently ethnocidal' (2002: 64). Nandy's penchant for combative prose is just as evident in his treatment of the group he blames for secularism and 'cold-bloodedness' in India, the westernized middle class. In *The Intimate Enemy*, Nandy suggests that this group suffers from a 'pathology' that demands that they 'hide the real self' (1983: 84). Their lack of authenticity also extends outwards, for, according to Nandy, they are 'trying hard to turn [India] into a second class imitation of the modern west' (2002: 56). The damage this type of person does to India and to themselves is approached and detailed from many different angles and across the majority of Nandy's recent essays. Of course, the definition of this figure relies on a vision of a very different kind of Indian: the ordinary, genuine Indian. However, Nandy's relationship to this latter constituency is shot through with uncertainties and tensions. As we shall now see, although Nandy's critical traditionalism acts to partially cohere some of these dilemmas, they still remain visible.

To give a sense of the empirical content of Nandy's critical traditionalism we may turn to his essays on sati. Although one of his critics, Zaheer Baber (1998: 38), refers to 'The Sociology of Sati', from 1987, as Nandy's 'now infamous article' on sati, his views also found expression in his earlier historical essays on the topic (in Nandy, 2004) and under the title 'Sati in Kali Yuga' (in Nandy, 1995; also Nandy, 1988, 1994: within Hindu scripture, 'Kali Yuga' is a spiritual dark age). At the centre of the pieces published from 1987 is Nandy's attempt to understand the death of Roop Kanwar, a 17-year-old widow who, following the traditional practice of sati, was burnt to death in a village in Rajasthan in 1987 on the pyre of her husband (it remains unclear whether her death was voluntary). Nandy wishes to distinguish sati as an 'event' from sati as a 'system or practice'. The latter represents a cultural imaginary that Nandy asks us to respect, along with 'the simple faith of the pilgrims' that Kanwar's death inspired. The former, by contrast, is an act of exploitation and cruelty, represented by 'the actions of the organizers of the event, who profited from it' (1995: 41). This contrast is also to the fore in Nandy's pitting of 'sati as profit versus sati as a

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spectacle' (Nandy, 1994). Nandy castes modern sati as a response to deracination and bewilderment, noting that, during the 19th century, it was 'popular in groups made psychologically marginal by their exposure to western impact' (2004: 40). He extends this observation to Kanwar's death which, he says, was a

> desperate attempt to retain through sati something of the religious worldview in an increasingly desacralized, secular world . . . [sati] reaffirms, even in a bizarre, violent and perverted fashion, respect for self-sacrifice in a culture in which increasingly there is no scope for self-sacrifice. (1987)

Nandy has returned repeatedly to the contrast between westernized death and the meaningful deaths of traditional India. In an interview he remarks that, once,

> [w]hen people died or killed for their king and country, death at least had some kind of meaning. Such death granted minimum dignity to the victims, to the people who were sacrificed. Now, it is more a matter of bureaucratized, industrialized violence. (2006: 111)

These examples re-emphasize the point that when Nandy talks about culture as resistance he is not speaking of an instrumental, leftist or activist politics. It is rather in the paradigmatic difference, the incomparability and incompatibility between what he regards as spiritual popular culture and western, rationalist and elite culture that he finds the location of opposition.

Nandy's essays on sati provide one of the more controversial expressions of this thesis (for criticism see Baber, 1996, 2002; Loomba, 1993; cf. Spivak, 1988). They have been greeted with some guardedness, even by those thinkers who are otherwise sympathetic to his provocative spirit. Thus, for example, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002) finds Nandy's thoughts on sati revealing precisely because he considers Nandy's attempt to distinguish between the *spectacle* or *system* of tradition and tradition as an *event* questionable. Chakrabarty pointedly notes that, rather than develop this contrast, Nandy's account turns towards a series of *reductio ad absurdum* rhetorical attacks on legal attempts to ban the 'glorification' of sati (see Nandy, 1995). Chakrabarty suggests that because Nandy

> does not explicitly confront the issue that the past has produced at this point in his problematic – how to combine a respectful attitude toward tradition with the search for the principles with which to build a more just society – the dilemma breaks out into a plethora of practical, policy-related questions. (Chakrabarty, 2002: 44)

Hence, Chakrabarty concludes that Nandy's wish to turn the past against the present, to employ and deploy the 'non-West' for critical ends, not only 'breaks out' but 'breaks down' (2002: 43). Nandy's 'problematic' is made

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more intractable by the fact that, whilst he portrays the violence and authoritarianism of westernization in intimate and fulsome terms, his evocations of tradition have a distant quality. Indeed, it is, in part, his broad-brush approach to tradition that ensures that occidentalism sits at the centre of his work. The point is reinforced by considering a further set of Nandy's images of the damage done by secularism. In his essay 'The Twilight of Certitudes' (in Nandy, 2003), Nandy goes into considerable detail on the violence of modern religious nationalism. However, when he turns to describe traditional communities of faith, his representations become cloudier:

> secularism was introduced . . . to subvert and discredit the traditional concepts of inter-religious tolerance that had allowed the thousands of communities living in the subcontinent to co-survive in neighbourliness. . . . Often there were violent clashes among communities, as is likely in any 'mixed neighbourhood'. But the violence never involved such aggregates or generic categories as Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Tamils or Sinhalas. Conflicts were localized and sectored, and were almost invariably seen as cutting across religious boundaries, for such boundaries were mostly fuzzy. (2003: 68–9)

Nandy's critique relies on the anachronistic and circular argument that the historical absence of the battling 'aggregates or generic categories' that distinguish modern India implies that the past was more harmonious (see also Baber, 1998). However, it also demonstrates that, whilst tradition is a key symbolic site for Nandy, his relationship to tradition is instrumental and romantic. We see this pattern again in Nandy's contention that, in comparison with their occidentalized compatriots, ordinary, faithful, Indians 'resist', or, in some way, are removed from modern violence. '[T]he huge majority of the citizens', he claims, '[w]hen the chips are down, they resist religious and ethnic violence' (2002: 8). Nandy's vision of the innocent native turns on his insistence that 'traditional India' is inherently adaptive and tolerant (2002: 79). Yet this endorsement is asserted rather than evidenced and, hence, has a gestural quality.

The critical function of Nandy's contrast between the supposedly boundary dependent identities of the West and the fluid and plural selves that he claims for traditional culture is clear. However, in a society marked by spectacular levels of inequality, the related implication that critical traditionalism must apply the sharpest edge of its criticism outwards, against what is not traditional, but not necessarily inwards, towards traditions themselves, carries considerable political baggage. More specifically, the lack of consideration Nandy gives to breaking down the use-value of different traditions for different groups, or to the notion that modernization has a variety of advocates (for example, amongst outcaste and lower caste groups as well as amongst the middle classes), implies that Nandy is relatively sanguine about the caste system. Indeed, Nandy has gone beyond the conventional defence of caste, as providing a social basis for activism, to offer caste as an Indian success story. In a revealing reflection of the critical point of

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critical traditionalism Nandy concurs with the view (which he associates with the historian of India, Ananda Coomaraswamy) that 'the untouchables in traditional India were better off than the proletariat in the industrial societies' (2004: 298). The critical thrust of this remark strikes two ways: against the West but also against the claim of outcaste groups to be oppressed. Nandy goes on to offer a demographic argument in support of caste:

> I think at this point in time the caste system is doing a rather good job in Indian democracy because the lower castes have taken better advantage of the democratic process than the less numerous upper castes. (2006: 89)

Thus caste is legitimized by being given a democratic momentum. Yet, like many of Nandy's other commentaries on the content of tradition, there is a curious thinness to this defence. It rushes to protect, to judge and to provoke. Yet we can also read such statements as containing an emotional logic of uncertainty: the exaggerated defence, the dramatic 'turning of the tables' on the assumptions of, supposedly dominant, secular Indians; these tropes have a staged quality which hint at Nandy's difficult relationship to his own nostalgic and occidentalist myths.

## Reflexive Traditionalism?

> I am not a product of village India. Nor am I a believer. I'm a child of the modern age. I have not landed from Mars. I feel comfortable with critical rationality; my writings are proof of that. (2006: back cover)

Who is Ashis Nandy? What does Ashis Nandy want? The answers may appear obvious from the earlier sections of this essay. He is a critical intellectual who wants what is not westernized and what is faithful and tolerant to emerge from under the shadow of the cynical and violent power of the West. But we have also seen that Nandy's attitude to tradition is a distant one – he evokes it as a sign of protest but not as something experienced and complex. For Nandy the West is the 'intimate enemy' and Indian tradition is the authentic self. But he does not speak from the standpoint of tradition but from somewhere else – the place of the critical and reflexive intellectual, the place of creative alienation. In this section I look at how Nandy negotiates and, in part, resolves these ambivalent locations.

Nandy's portraits of the West and of India are not innocent statements but useful constructs. 'I wanted', he explains in interview,

> to rediscover tradition as an antonym of modernity and use it as a resource for resistance and for alternative visions of a desirable society . . . there is a clear political edge to the idea of tradition. . . . I am aware that these traditions are in recession everywhere. (2006: 62)

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These remarks help us to re-orientate our view of Nandy. More specifically, they enable us to bring his anti-colonial concerns alongside his debt to the dialectics of modernity developed within the Frankfurt School.

> The idea of tradition in my work is thus a form of negation, in Herbert Marcuse's sense. . . . Empirically speaking, modernity and tradition here are clearly not in opposition. . . . However, at an ideal-typical level, I have tried to protect the idea of an adversarial relationship between the two. (2006: 59)

Nandy develops and clarifies this argument in the following passage, from his essay 'Cultural Frames of Transformation':

> Is there an Indian tradition with a built-in theory of oppression? The question is irrelevant. The real issue is: can we construct a tradition which will yield a native theory of oppression? (in Nandy, 2004: 23)

Nandy's apparently instrumental use of tradition as a tool to apply against the present sits awkwardly alongside his commitment to the non-rational and the non-political in Indian civilization. It appears that Nandy both disbelieves yet continues to have faith in his culturalist myths of India. He wishes to find a way to shape these myths, to employ and deploy them, but also to recognize them and understand their power. What results may be presented as a negotiation of a crisis of meaningfulness, a crisis in which 'the people' are always central and always distant and in which political reason is both evoked and denied. In the following passage Nandy offers this site of dilemma as a necessary 'slum of politics',[4] a place in which conflict can never be easily or neatly resolved:

> you have to learn how to handle these sentiments, passions, and beliefs of the people. The less transient part of these sentiments, passions, and beliefs is what I call tradition, because it is a structuration of these sentiments, passions and beliefs, or at least a substantial part of it. The concept of tradition gives you practical, democratic entry into this part of the democratic process, which can be called the dark side of democracy. (2006: 72–3)

However, we can also read Nandy's creation of a mythic realm of tradition as a way out of and beyond both politics and history. His image of authentic India as a place beyond history, beyond what the 'historically minded, westernized' (1995: 53) can grasp, emerges from his belief that historical consciousness lacks the 'radical self-reflexivity' to grasp the conditions of its own production (2003: 95). This allows him to indigenize reflexivity, to claim that critical traditionalism allows both history and non-history to be understood. Thus Nandy is able to take ownership of a supposedly western intellectual form whilst sealing off 'Indian culture' from the acids of critical enquiry. This argument rests upon a very particular, and contentious, representation of the historical imagination:

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> There is one thing the historical consciousness cannot do . . . it cannot admit that the historical consciousness itself can be demystified or unmasked and that an element of self-destructiveness could be introduced into that consciousness to make it more humane and less impersonal . . . Why have historians till now not seriously tried to critique the idea of history itself? (2003: 90–91)

Nandy's claim about what 'the historical consciousness cannot do' is an odd one. Not only is the idea that historical time is a social construction a familiar part of the study of history but it has occasioned many critiques of the eurocentric assumption that there are peoples who remain without, or outside of, history. Nevertheless, for Nandy this is a necessary thesis. For by translating critical reflexivity into a traditional, non-modern, form, he is able to help resolve and cohere the dilemma of the modern/non-modern, critical/traditional intellectual.

Nandy's geography of reflexivity is a challenge to the arrogance of the West. However, it appears that this same geography also allows Nandy to render tradition into a space beyond analysis. This dynamic – with its simultaneous opening and closing of critique – may be captured under the term 'reflexive traditionalism'. Reflexive traditionalism contributes a challenging new dimension to the theory of reflexivity, notably theories of reflexive modernization associated with Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994). More specifically, it challenges the anchoring of reflexivity in a specifically European experience both because we find in Nandy a different locale for this process and because Nandy's reflexivity is constituted through a mutually constituting imaginative geography of occident and India. Although Beck and Giddens emphasize that reflexive modernization is 'marked by the rediscovery of tradition as well as its dissolution' (Beck, 1994: 185), their argument offers a passive role for tradition: it can be re-invented but it is not considered to be capable of becoming a central critical force (see also Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1992). By contrast, Nandy's work suggests how tradition can be fashioned into a provocation that questions the purpose and parameters of reflexivity and demands that 'post-traditionalism' defend and define its limits.

However, while Nandy's traditionalism may offer new insights into the politics of reflexive modernization, the critical flow also works in the other direction. For not only does Giddens, in particular, place the invention of tradition at the heart of his portrait of modern reflexivity, he provides a highly relevant portrait of the empty symbolism that can accompany modern uses of tradition. Anxious moderns return to tradition but they cannot recreate it, he argues; instead, they produce 'tradition without traditionalism: repetition that stands in the way of autonomy rather than fostering it' (1994: 70). As we have seen, Nandy's use of tradition closes down as many critical pathways as it opens. It hankers after tradition but it is alienated from it, a dislocation that is framed and animated by occidentalism.

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## Conclusion

Critical traditionalism is an attractive, provocative and paradoxical concept. Although Ashis Nandy is its most ardent and sophisticated progenitor, it is likely to appeal to a variety of projects and movements. In exploring Nandy's development and use of the concept, this article has identified dilemmas that are likely to remain pertinent for others who wish to combine a claim on the critical imagination with the assertion of tradition.

We have seen that Nandy's vision of authentic 'cultural India' is of a site of challenge and resistance. But it is also a curiously blank realm, a space of 'ideal types' that is also a realm of unfathomable faith, of the unknowable. Nandy provides us with an ambivalent portrait of the non-modern, non-western world-view: it is the unreadable that is read as 'resistance', it comes from a place that is no place (a 'utopia'), and from a time outside of time. It is an unstable vision, creative and transgressive but alienated from its own myths. In creating this sealed off space of redemption, Nandy fences off his own 'critical traditionalism' from a fuller and more self-critical acknowledgement of its dependency on occidentalism and nostalgia. The sense of yearning that animates Nandy's project is unmatched for its rawness and emotional honesty. Moreover, his insistence on the centrality of themes of tradition and loss in contemporary social theory anticipates a number of recent revaluations of nostalgia as a chronic facet of modernity (Fritzsche, 2004; Bonnett, 2010). However, in contrast to these interventions, Nandy's nostalgia is staged not as a compromised but inevitable product of modernity, but as a genuine flight into the non-modern. It is not surprising, therefore, that despite his clear denunciations of religious ideology and nationalism, his work has been criticized for 'serious and systematic complicities with the contemporary Indian right's cultural politics' (Desai, 1999: 695) and 'unwittingly reproduce[ing] the epistemic resources' of Hindu nationalism' (Bhatt, 2001: 9).

However, Nandy's emphasis on timelessness over history, intuition over rationalism and tradition over change also echoes some of the classic western formulations of modern conservatism. We may also be reminded of the way that, whilst Edmund Burke allied his vision of 'wisdom without reflection, and above it' (1910: 31) to an anti-revolutionary creed, his name was put into service as a founding father of a conservatism that sanctioned capitalist upheaval. Despite his own intent, Nandy's anti-revolutionary defence of India's cultural resources may be equally available for 'revolutionary' political deployment in 21st-century India. Nandy hopes that India will 'not become a proxy-West, successfully beating the West at its own game' (2006: back cover). But if, as many believe, India is already 'beating the West', and its place as a world power is relatively secure, then a form of 'critical traditionalism' that stereotypes and disparages history, rationalism and the West, in order to assert the country's cultural eminence, takes on both economic and geo-political dimensions (see also Nanda, 2009). In an era of multiple globalizations the uses and abuses of 'Indian tradition' are

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matters of global interest. Although Nandy is India's most prominent critic of modern authority, his romance of Indian innocence may be too innocent of its own relationship to power and India's changing international role.

*Notes*

1. The most high-profile recent controversy concerning Nandy occurred in 2008 when the Ahmedabad police, in Gujarat, registered a First Information Report (FIR) against him, paving the way for his arrest under a law preventing the promotion of 'enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, place of birth, residence, language'. The FIR was prepared after the police received a complaint about a newspaper article by Nandy titled 'Blame the Middle Class'. Following the intervention of the Supreme Court the threat of arrest was lifted (see http://ashisnandysolidarity.blogspot.com/).

2. For Nandy, cosmopolitanism is integral to Indian tradition but has a different form to western cosmopolitanism. The latter is bureaucratic and shallow, it relies on 'diversity that is permissible, legitimate, tamed', whilst the former is a deeply rooted '[r]adical diversity [in which] you tolerate and live with people who challenge some of the very basic axioms of your political life' (Nandy, 2009).

3. To take a typically stark example, in an essay on 'the ideology of adulthood', Nandy offers the following statement: 'The estimated 1000 children who die every year at the hands of their parents in Britain ... are victims of meaninglessness' (2004: 427). It is an assertion that assumes a readership predisposed to (a) believe almost any shocking fact concerning the fallen nature of the West and (b) tie such narratives to the decline in faith and tradition (and with little incentive to find out the actual number of British children who die in this way). Given the stability of the child murder rate in the UK, it will suffice to note that in 2005/6 the number of children under 16 killed by one or both of their parents in England and Wales was 24 (see http://rds.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs07/hosb0207.pdf).

4. The phrase is from a remark, cited with approval by Nandy, of Arnold Toynbee on the death of Gandhi: 'henceforth mankind would ask its prophets, "Are you willing to live in the slum of politics?"' (Nandy, 2006: 75).

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