



Kris Manjapra. *M. N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism.* Delhi: Routledge India, 2010. xxiv + 201 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-44603-7.



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M. N. Roy: The Making of a Cosmopolitan Anticolonial Intellectual

Manabendranath (M. N.) Roy is something of an enigmatic figure in the history of anticolonial radicalism. Born Narendranath Bhattacharya in Arbelia, Bengal, in 1887, the broad outlines of Roy's political activities and intellectual musings are by now well known. An anticolonial insurgent who during World War I played a key role in an effort to secure arms from Germany for an uprising in India, he later became a political exile whose life took to the United States, Mexico, Russia, and Germany, and through several pseudonyms and political permutations. As a member of the Communist International he debated Lenin on national liberation and operated in the upper echelons of international communism; this was followed by his tragic failure in organizing the communists in China in 1927 and subsequent expulsion from the Comintern, and then his slow drift into the shadows of postcolonial Indian politics, and his articulation of an esoteric radical humanism that marked his alienation from radical political struggles. Or so the story has been told.

Kris Manjapra's new, exceptionally engaging and theoretically rich intellectual history reorients this story

of M. N. Roy's life and thought to offer a portrait of an anticolonial activist whose international travels (the United States, Mexico, Germany, Russia, China) fostered a diverse range of intellectual influences that shaped his ultimate preoccupation with the possibilities of full human freedom. Engaging South Asian historiography, especially works out of India, Manjapra interrogates how what he calls the historical "forgetting" of Roy resulted from his persistent positioning between many different worlds—between a global Indian anticolonial network and international communism, between the German communist fringe and Soviet orthodoxy, and between the Indian National Congress's postcolonial project of Indian state building and a sustained critique of Gandhian notions of national culture. Yet, to accurately capture Roy's role as an intermediary between worlds that paradoxically contributed both to his forgetting as a political figure, and to the power and widespread influence of his ideas (p. xv) requires breaking from both the Marxist and postcolonial frames that would see Roy as either muddling dialectical materialism, or embracing

Western rationality and science.

The roots of Roy's cosmopolitan anticolonial politics lie in a movement that is hardly ever noted in discussions of his life in India: the Swadeshi avant-garde, a modernist intellectual movement that emerged at the dawn of the twentieth century. The Swadeshi movement joined Brahma exegesis and dharmic asceticism, with their notions of universal time that challenged the determinist and stage-ist historical time regimes of colonial universality, to foster a de-territorial nationalism, a sense of Indian independence unbounded geographically and tied to other liberation struggles. The history of Swadeshi calls into question the priority granted to home politics and to territorial aspiration in the study of anticolonial nationalism (p. 3), as their thinking went beyond territorial nativism (p. 5). The ability of anticolonial nationalism to orient itself beyond a given territory was apparent in an Indian international network that stretched from the subcontinent to Japan, Germany, the United States, and Mexico. Rather than building the interiority of national culture, Manjapra explains that the Swadeshi movement bore the mark of hermeneutic engagement with European scholars, which also involved creating an alternative englobement of time for Indian (Hindu) subjectivities (p. 19).

The Swadeshi movement's intellectual ecumenicalism informed Roy's intellectual labors between his leaving India in 1915 (working among U.S.-based Indian diasporic radicals; helping establish the Mexican Communist Party) and arriving in Russia in 1920. His writing in this time bore subtle reflections of this influence, especially challenge to Woodrow Wilson's limited notion of self-determination. This was the modernist milieu, Manjapra claims, in which M. N. Roy debated Lenin on national liberation at the Comintern's Second Congress in 1920, and questioned Marxism's European focus and embrace of colonial historical time. Rather than rehash whether Roy's was a Marxist argument, that debate is seen as foreshadowing his eventual break with Marxist historicism, and his expanding sense of proletarian revolution.

This break was to signal his decline, as Roy actively engaged German intellectuals, especially August Thalheimer and the Frankfurt School, as he continued to think about alternative approaches to revolution. Roy was slowly moving away from Soviet orthodoxy, the influence of the German communist fringe on his thought evident in his contemplating the possibilities of building solidarity in the Indian context between peasants, proletariat, and the petty bourgeoisie (p. 79). Expelled from

the Comintern in 1928 along with the German fringe, Roy now felt that mass consciousness had to be cultivated through the ongoing work of building social solidarity (p. 81). That broad new focus also informed his conflicts with the Indian National Congress, Gandhi, and Indian intellectuals more generally. Roy returned to India in 1930, and was imprisoned by the British until 1936. Yet he used that time to cultivate what evolved into radical humanism. Operating again on the margins of the nation-building project, Roy turned to sexual politics as a way to a full or global humanity, and criticized notions of cultural authenticity. Never mastering state-building politics, Roy used his marginality in independent India to forward an alternative politics where it was up to the individual to imagine his own dream civilisation (p. 155). This shift began in 1925 and led to his disillusionment with international communism. In 1949, Roy focused on creating an Indian version of the Frankfurt School, the Indian Renaissance Institute at Dehra Dun, where he would articulate his radical humanism as merging scientific rationalism with a belief in man's ability to make the world—a notion of revolution as altering one's consciousness that broke from Enlightenment rationalism and Marxism's material/ideal divide.

M. N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism is a masterful study of a poorly understood figure in South Asian and anticolonial history. It is the second work in the Routledge Pathfinders series, slim volumes that break with the accepted canons of South Asian history/studies. Manjapra's corrective of Roy will prove critical for future work in anticolonial intellectual history. Manjapra's notion of colonial cosmopolitanism is especially suggestive for thinking about those figures relegated to historical obscurity. This frames Manjapra's caution against the easy dichotomies postcolonial theorists draw between Western modernity and coloniality. Unfortunately, the series's structure (less than 170 pages of text) prohibits a fuller discussion that might engage Partha Chatterjee's notion of outside and inner domains.^[1] This structure also leaves little room for discussing Roy's conflicts with Indian anticolonial radicals outside India (Lala Lajpat Rai and Ghadar Radicals in the United States; German-based Indian communists in Russia) and gives the appearance that Roy's criticisms of Indian nationalism emerged only after independence. But this hardly detracts from the importance of this work. Manjapra's accessible prose and attention to detail make *M. N. Roy* an especially useful text for teaching the history of anticolonial intellectuals to undergraduates; its dense theoretical arguments will serve well the grad-

uate seminar, and will interject forcefully into debates in Marxism, postcolonial theory, and South Asian history/studies.

[1]. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

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