

**NATIONALIST THOUGHT  
AND THE  
COLONIAL WORLD-  
A DERIVATIVE DISCOURSE**  
Partha Chatterjee



THIRD WORLD BOOKS



# **Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World**

**A Derivative Discourse?**

Partha Chatterjee



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# **Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World**

**To  
Ranajit Guha  
and  
Asok Sen  
from whom I have learnt the most**

**If there are obstacles the shortest line between  
two points may well be a crooked line.**

Bertolt Brecht, *Life of Galileo*. scene 14

# Preface

In the last scene of Bertolt Brecht's *Life of Galileo*, the scientist is quoted as having said, 'If there are obstacles the shortest line between two points may well be a crooked line.' Given the abstract neatness of the theoretical world of classical mechanics, the statement carries a ring of irony. In the much less well-ordered world of politics, however, it would seem to be a truism.

Yet it is remarkable how seldom political theorists have taken seriously the fact that 'politics' necessarily operates in an ideological world in which words rarely have unambiguous meanings; where notions are inexact, and have political value precisely because they are inexact and hence capable of suggesting a range of possible interpretations; where intentions themselves are contradictory and consequences very often unintended; where movements follow winding and unpredictable paths; where choices are strategic and relative, not univocal and absolute. And still, this inexact world of ambiguity and half-truth, of manipulation and deception, of dreams and illusions, is not wholly patternless, for here, too, objectives are realised, rules established, values asserted, revolutions accomplished and states founded.

This book is about a political revolution, but one whose course cannot be described by selecting from history two points of origin and culmination and joining them by a straight line. The critical viewpoint reveals that it is a revolution which at the same time, and in fundamental ways, is not a revolution. It is in the shifts, slides, discontinuities, the unintended moves, what is suppressed as much as what is asserted, that one can get a sense of this complex movement, not as so many accidental or disturbing factors but as constitutive of the very historical rationality of its process. And it is by examining the jagged edges that we can find clues to an understanding of the political relevance today of the ideological history of nationalism.

I wanted to call this book *Crooked Line*. But friends more knowledgeable than I in the ways of the publishing world have persuaded me that that would not be the best way to reach my potential readers. I have deferred to their judgment.

I began writing this book in the 1981-82 academic year which I spent at St Antony's College, Oxford. I am grateful to the Nuffield Foundation, London, for a travelling fellowship. I continued the work during my short stay in 1982-83 as a Visiting Fellow at the Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian

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National University, Canberra, and completed it on my return to Calcutta. I am grateful to the staff of the Bodleian Library in Oxford, the ANU Library in Canberra, the National Library in Calcutta, the Department of History Library of the University of Calcutta and, of course, the Library of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, for their help.

Among those who have read and commented on earlier drafts of this book are Anouar Abdel-Malek, Shahid Amin, Jasodhara Bagchi, Dipesh Chakrabarty, John Dunn, Omkar Goswami, Ranajit Guha, Tapati Guha Thakurta, Sudipta Kaviraj, Rudrangshu Mukherjee, Gyan Pandey, Abhijit Sen and Asok Sen. I thank them all for their criticisms and suggestions.

I have presented and discussed different parts of this book in seminars at Algiers, Oxford, Canberra, Baroda, Paris and Calcutta. My thanks to all participants at those seminars.

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**Partha Chatterjee**  
Calcutta

December 1985



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# 1. Nationalism as a Problem in the History of Political Ideas

To trouble oneself with the task of dealing with something that has been adequately dealt with before is superfluous, a result of ignorance, or a sign of evil intent.

Abu Bakr Muhammad Ibn Bajjah [Avempace],  
*Tadbir al-mutawaḥḥid*

## I

In one of his less celebrated articles, John Plamenatz has talked about 'two types' of nationalism:<sup>1</sup> in both, nationalism is 'primarily a cultural phenomenon' although it often takes a 'political form'. One type is 'western', having emerged primarily in Western Europe, and the other 'eastern', to be found in Eastern Europe, in Asia and Africa, and also in Latin America. Both types depend upon the acceptance of a common set of standards by which the state of development of a particular national culture is measured. In the first type, however, although there is the feeling that the nation is at a disadvantage with respect to others, it is nevertheless already 'culturally equipped' to make the attempt to remove those deficiencies. Thus, although the new global standard of progress may have been set for the rest of the world by France or Britain, they were based upon a set of ideas 'about man, morals and society' which, in their social and intellectual origins, were West European generally. Britain and France may have been the cultural, economic and political pace makers, and may have been envied or admired for this reason, but simultaneous with the process of their emergence as world leaders, there had emerged a 'comity of nations' in Western Europe 'which had already learned to think of itself as ahead of all the others'. Consequently, when nationalism emerged in the other countries of the West, despite the fact that it was the product of a sense of disadvantage with respect to the standards of progress set by the pace makers, there was no feeling that the nation was not culturally equipped to make the effort to reach those standards. Germans or Italians, for instance, already had the necessary linguistic, educational and professional skills that were deemed necessary for a 'consciously progressive civilisation'. They had therefore 'little need to equip themselves culturally by appropriating what was alien to them'. That is to say, although the acceptance of a universal standard of progress had produced an

awareness of disadvantage, that universal standard itself was not seen in any fundamental way as being alien to the national culture.

'Eastern' nationalism, on the other hand, has appeared among 'peoples recently drawn into a civilisation hitherto alien to them, and whose ancestral cultures are not adapted to success and excellence by these cosmopolitan and increasingly dominant standards'. They too have measured the backwardness of their nations in terms of certain global standards set by the advanced nations of Western Europe. But what is distinctive here is that there is also a fundamental awareness that those standards have come from an alien culture, and that the inherited culture of the nation did not provide the necessary adaptive leverage to enable it to reach those standards of progress. The 'Eastern' type of nationalism, consequently, has been accompanied by an effort to 're-equip' the nation culturally, to transform it. But it could not do so simply by imitating the alien culture, for then the nation would lose its distinctive identity. The search therefore was for a regeneration of the national culture, adapted to the requirements of progress, but retaining at the same time its distinctiveness.

The attempt is deeply contradictory: 'It is both imitative and hostile to the models it imitates . . .' It is imitative in that it accepts the value of the standards set by the alien culture. But it also involves a rejection: 'in fact, two rejections, both of them ambivalent: rejection of the alien intruder and dominator who is nevertheless to be imitated and surpassed by his own standards, and rejection of ancestral ways which are seen as obstacles to progress and yet also cherished as marks of identity'. This contradictory process is therefore deeply disturbing as well. 'Eastern nationalism is disturbed and ambivalent as the nationalisms of Herder and Mazzini were not.'

Unlike much of his other work, this article by Plamenatz is neither rigorously argued nor particularly profound. But in making the distinction between the two types of nationalism, it states with sufficient clarity the premises of what may be called the liberal-rationalist dilemma in talking about nationalist thought. The same dilemma can be seen in the standard liberal histories of nationalism, most notably in the work of Hans Kohn.<sup>2</sup> This historiography accepts nationalism as an integral part of the story of liberty. Its origin is coeval with the birth of universal history, and its development is part of the same historical process which saw the rise of industrialism and democracy. In its essential aspects, therefore, nationalism represents the attempt to actualize in political terms the universal urge for liberty and progress. And yet the evidence was undeniable that it could also give rise to mindless chauvinism and xenophobia and serve as the justification for organized violence and tyranny. Seen as part of the story of liberty, nationalism could be defined as a rational ideological framework for the realization of rational, and highly laudable, political ends. But that was not how nationalism had made its presence felt in much of recent history. It has been the cause of the most destructive wars ever seen; it has justified the brutality of Nazism and Fascism; it has become the ideology of racial hatred in the colonies and has given birth to some of the most irrational revivalist movements as well as to the most oppressive political regimes in the contemporary world. The

evidence was indeed overwhelming that nationalism and liberty could often be quite irreconcilably opposed.

The distinction between the two types of nationalism is an attempt to come to terms with this liberal dilemma. Indeed, Kohn also made a distinction of this sort, between 'western' and 'non-western' nationalisms,<sup>3</sup> and later between 'good' nationalism and 'evil' nationalism.<sup>4</sup> The distinction is designed to explain how a profoundly liberal idea could be so distorted as to produce such grossly illiberal movements and regimes. It does this by constructing a dichotomy, between a normal and a special type. The normal is the classical, the orthodox, the pure type. This type of nationalism shares the same material and intellectual premises with the European Enlightenment, with industry and the idea of progress, and with modern democracy. Together they constitute a historical unity, defined with a fair degree of clarity in both geographical and chronological terms. This gives the liberal-rationalist his paradigmatic form in which nationalism goes hand-in-hand with reason, liberty and progress. The special type emerges under somewhat different historical circumstances. It is, therefore, complex, impure, often deviant; it represents a very difficult and contradictory historical process which can be very 'disturbing'. There is nothing in it, the liberal-rationalist would argue, that is necessarily illiberal. But being a special type, operating in unfavourable circumstances, it can often be so. 'No doubt,' says Plamenatz, 'nationalists have quite often not been liberals, but this, I suggest, is largely because they have so often been active in conditions unpropitious to freedom, as the liberal understands it. I see no logical repugnance between nationalism and liberalism.' Indeed, the very fact that nationalists of the 'eastern' type accept and value the ideal of progress — and strive to transform their inherited cultures in order to make them better suited for the conditions of the modern world — means that archaic forms of authority are destroyed, conditions are created for the growth of a certain degree of individual initiative and choice, and for the introduction of science and modern education. All this cannot but be liberating in a fundamental historical sense. Consequently, even when this kind of nationalism appears in the form of revivalist movements or oppressive regimes, it still represents an urge for progress and freedom.

We must see this nationalism as part of a social, intellectual and moral revolution of which the aspirations to democracy and personal freedom are also products. It is connected with these aspirations, and even serves to strengthen them and to create some of the social conditions of their realisation, even though it so often also perverts them.

Thus the liberal-rationalist saves the purity of his paradigm by designating as deviant all those cases which do not fit the classical form. Even in these deviant cases, he would argue, one can still discern the basic historical urge to attain the classical ideals. The deviations themselves are to be explained by the special circumstances in which this attempt has to be made in countries where conditions are 'unpropitious to freedom'. That is to say, the deviations are to be explained *sociologically*, by grouping and classifying the various empirical

cases and then constructing coherent sets of sociological conditions which may be said to be the cause for each particular type of deviation.<sup>5</sup>

The argument could then start, to take one example,<sup>6</sup> by recognizing first of all the world-wide sweep of 'the tidal wave of modernisation', but distilling its essence in the awareness of man's 'capacity to contribute to, and to profit from, industrial society'. It would then proceed to describe the erosion of the 'structure' of traditional society, conceived as a system of role relationships, and its replacement by the 'culture' of industrial society, in which the classification of people by culture is the classification by nationality. The argument would then take in the fact of the notorious 'unevenness' of the process of industrialization, in terms of geographical and cultural regions. Not only does industrialization disrupt traditional society, it disrupts it unevenly. But now there is also a common standard by which the states of advancement of different regions can be compared. The perception of uneven development creates the possibility for nationalism; it is born when the more and the less advanced populations can be easily distinguished in cultural terms. 'Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist — but it does need some pre-existing differentiating marks to work on . . .' The two crucial social groups which carry the struggle forward are the proletariat and the intelligentsia. The intellectuals 'will exchange second-class citizenship for a first-class citizenship plus greater privileges based on rarity'. The proletarians will exchange 'hardships-with-snubs for possibly greater hardships with national identification'. The dilemma of a choice between imitation and identity? 'Superficially', the intellectuals

always face the crucial dilemma of choosing between 'westernising' and a *narodnik* tendency . . . But the dilemma is quite spurious: ultimately the movements invariably contain both elements, a genuine modernism and a more or less spurious concern for local culture . . . By the twentieth century, the dilemma hardly bothers anyone: the philosopher-kings of the 'underdeveloped' world all act as westernisers, and all talk like *narodniks*.

Thus the liberal dilemma is circumvented by a positive sociology. The urge for modernization is a positive fact of contemporary history. If the struggles in the backward parts of the world 'to lift oneself by one's own shoelaces, economically', mean a certain repressive attitude, that too is a sociological fact, to be understood and explained. But it is on the whole a good thing that these struggles are being conducted within a framework of nationalism. There are, first of all, the 'psychological blessings' of dignity and self-respect, of the elimination of inferior grades of citizenship. There is also the fortunate consequence that these political convulsions 'do not need to be re-imported into the developed, previously imperial, territories'. They can be fought out at a distance, with a certain degree of autonomy. If the liberal conscience of the West adopts the right moral attitude of sympathy and non-interference, these backward nations will find their own chosen paths to independence, freedom and progress.

An elaboration of this sociological understanding of the phenomenon of

nationalism would then inevitably proceed towards a teleology, i.e. a theory of political development. And once this step is taken, the empirical relation between nationalism and illiberal regimes can even be justified by a theory of the stages of development. Thus, it could be argued that given the very special sociological circumstances in which the new nations have to struggle to modernize themselves, it might be a perfectly rational strategy for them, in a sense, to postpone the democratic consummation of their efforts until the economic structures of their society are sufficiently industrialized and their social institutions modernized.<sup>7</sup> An empiricist sociology can do wonderful things to resolve the moral dilemmas of a liberal conscience.

Indeed, armed with his sociological explanation of the 'conditions' which give rise to nationalist movements, the liberal theorist can even assert that nationalism poses only a very trivial problem for the history of political ideas. 'It is not so much,' runs the self-complacent judgment of Ernest Gellner,

that the prophets of nationalism were not anywhere near the First Division, when it came to the business of thinking . . . It is rather that these thinkers did not really make much difference. If one of them had fallen, others would have stepped into his place . . . The quality of nationalist thought would hardly have been affected much by such substitutions. Their precise doctrines are hardly worth analysing.<sup>8</sup>

Why? Because given the 'conditions' in which nationalism made its appearance, there was little scope for genuine doctrinal innovation or philosophical defence. Or more precisely, the necessary philosophizing had already been done, in a different context — that of the rise of 'industrialism'. (Gellner quaintly refers to Hume and Kant as the ones who 'explored, with unparalleled philosophical depth . . . the general logic of the new spirit . . .')<sup>9</sup> By the time nationalism came on the scene, mankind was 'irreversibly committed to industrial society, and therefore to a society whose productive system is based on cumulative science and technology'. This commitment necessarily meant coming to terms with the requirements of industrial society, namely a cultural homogeneity and its convergence with a political unit. Cultural homogeneity was an essential concomitant of industrial society, 'and we had better make our peace with it. It is not the case . . . that nationalism imposes homogeneity; it is rather that a homogeneity imposed by objective, inescapable imperative eventually appears on the surface in the form of nationalism.'<sup>10</sup>

Thus nationalist thought did not even need to investigate 'the general logic' of the kind of society it was trying to build: that logic was given to it objectively. It did, of course, have to confront the problem of selecting from pre-existing cultures in agrarian society some of the distinctive elements of this new homogeneous national culture. Nationalism 'uses some of the pre-existent cultures, generally transforming them in the process, but it cannot possibly use them all'.<sup>11</sup> It often defines itself in the name of some putative folk culture. But this is a myth, a piece of self-deception; that is not what it really does. In reality,

nationalism is, essentially, the general imposition of a high culture on society, whose previously low cultures had taken up the lives of the majority, and in some

cases of the totality, of the population. It means that generalized diffusion of a school-mediated, academy-supervised idiom, codified for the requirements of reasonably precise bureaucratic and technological communication. It is the establishment of an anonymous, impersonal society, with mutually substitutable atomized individuals, held together above all by a shared culture of this kind, in place of a previous complex structure of local groups, sustained by folk cultures reproduced locally and idiosyncratically by the micro-groups themselves. That is what *really* happens.<sup>12</sup>

What if the new high culture happens to be the product of an alien imposition? Can it then effectively supersede the various folk cultures and become a truly homogeneous national culture? Is there not a problem of incommensurability and inter-cultural relativism which the new national culture must overcome? Gellner recognizes that there is a problem here, but it is not one which he thinks needs to be taken seriously. The fact is that with the universal acceptance of the imperative of industrialism, every national culture does manage to overcome incommensurability and relativism.

The question concerning just *how* we manage to transcend relativism is interesting and difficult, and certainly will not be solved here. What is relevant, however, is that we somehow or other do manage to overcome it, that we are not hopelessly imprisoned within a set of cultural cocoons and their norms, and that for some very obvious reasons (shared cognitive and productive bases and greatly increased inter-social communication) we may expect fully industrial man to be even less enslaved to his local culture than was his agrarian predecessor.<sup>13</sup>

Nationalist thought, in other words, does not pose any special problems for either epistemology or political philosophy. All its problems can be reduced to the sociological requirements of industrial society whose universal sway provides the context for the understanding of nationalism.

It is by a recourse to sociology, in fact, that the liberal-rationalist can first identify in positive terms, and then 'sympathetically' understand, the difficult conditions under which the poor and oppressed nations of the world have to strive in order to attain those universal values of reason, liberty and progress which the latter have, at last, learnt to cherish. There is unfortunately a great historical lag which they must make up. The knowledge of backwardness is never very comforting. It is even more disturbing when its removal means a coming to terms with a culture that is alien. But that is the historical destiny of the backward nations. There can be no merit, as Plamenatz gently chides 'Western critics of nationalism', in expressing distaste for the failings of these backward peoples. 'In a world in which the strong and rich people have dominated and exploited the poor and the weak peoples, and in which autonomy is held to be a mark of dignity, of adequacy, of the capacity to live as befits human beings, in such a world this kind of nationalism is the inevitable reaction of the poor and the weak.'<sup>14</sup>

## II

'Guilt!' an unrepentant critic of nationalism like Elie Kedourie will say: '... guilt, indignation, and moral passion'; '... powerful and corrosive feelings of guilt'.<sup>15</sup> This merciless self-accusation has been propagated in recent years by European publicists, and their audience, always so keen to be fair and considerate to the underdogs, have accepted the charge without protest. The very idea of nationalism being a rational and self-conscious attempt by the weak and poor peoples of the world to achieve autonomy and liberty is demonstrably false. Nationalism as an ideology is irrational, narrow, hateful and destructive. It is not an authentic product of any of the non-European civilizations which, in each particular case, it claims as its classical heritage. It is wholly a European export to the rest of the world. It is also one of Europe's most pernicious exports, for it is not a child of reason or liberty, but of their opposite: of fervent romanticism, of political messianism whose inevitable consequence is the annihilation of freedom.

Kedourie's is a severe indictment of nationalism, and one against which liberal defenders of the doctrine have been hard put to it to state their case. Of course, Kedourie's own brand of conservative politics, the ground from which he has launched his powerful attack, could easily be dismissed as archaic and irrelevant. For instance he states his belief in the essential fairness and nobility of the true principles of empire. He believes that those who rule and those who are ruled are 'different species of men' and that it is most conducive for political order when those distinctions are clearly maintained. He believes in a style of politics in which emotions and passions are kept to a minimum, where interests are not given the illusory form of moral principles, where governance is not compromised by the fickle determinations of a plebiscite. These ideas may seem quaint or bizarre, depending on one's particular taste for such old-world wisdoms. But they can be dismissed quite easily.

Why, then, the continuing debate with Kedourie, and the hesitant, almost timid, defence of the liberal's case? Anthony Smith, for instance, objects that Kedourie's description of the consequences of nationalism is a one-sided misrepresentation.<sup>16</sup> It overlooks 'the advantages and blessings of nationalist revivals': Dvořák and Chopin, for example, or Césaire, Senghor, 'Abduh and Tagore. Nationalism has often had a great humanizing and civilizing influence. Besides, it is misleading to portray nationalist politics merely as secret conspiracy and terrorism or nihilism and totalitarianism.

Nobody would dispute that these have been features of some nationalisms . . . But it is only fair to recall the extreme situations in which they operated . . . Kedourie forgets the uses of nationalism in developing countries, the way in which they can legitimate new regimes desirous of maintaining political stability and keeping a fissiparous population under a single and viable harness. He forgets too the examples of nationalism providing an impetus to constitutional reforms, as in India or Ottoman Turkey, not to mention its uses in legitimising sweeping social change and modernisation . . .



This, of course, is a rather feeble rejoinder, conceding at the very start a great deal of empirical ground: 'Nobody would dispute that these have been features of *some* nationalisms . . .', but *not of all*. Smith then goes on to construct a defensible case by stating a 'core doctrine of nationalism', itself 'incomplete' and 'unstable', but capable of being rounded out by 'specific' theories that can encompass particular sets of empirical cases of movements conventionally called nationalist. The core doctrine 'fuses three ideals: collective self-determination of the people, the expression of national character and individuality, and finally the vertical division of the world into unique nations each contributing its special genius to the common fund of humanity'.<sup>17</sup> As such, this doctrine can be regarded 'as a not unreasonable application of Enlightenment principles to the complexities of modern politics and societies . . . it constitutes a necessary condition for the search for realistic conditions of liberty and equality, not to mention democracy, in an already divided world'.<sup>18</sup> About the 'specific' theories which are additionally necessary to encompass the many particular cases of nationalist movements, Smith's submission is that they are the products of very specific historical circumstances and are therefore 'morally highly variegated', and it would be wrong to make 'a *simplicite* ascription of all these concrete manifestations to the *unmediated* effects of "nationalism"'.<sup>19</sup>

The problem of the 'specific', or rather the 'deviant', cases is thus consigned to the domain of the historically contingent, to be explained by a suitable sociological theory, and therefore not requiring a moral defence. The core doctrine, however, does assert a moral claim, made up of three separate but related parts: self-determination, expression of national character, and each nation contributing its special genius to the common fund of humanity. This is how the often contentious claim to national autonomy is reconciled with the ideal of universal liberty and fraternity. But in specifying this application of Enlightenment principles to the conditions of modern politics, the liberal defender of nationalism must invariably play straight into Kedourie's hand. For this specification will have to be in terms of the idea of progress, of the spread of science and rationality, of modernization and industrialization, and probably equality and democracy as well. And this will immediately destroy the central moral claim of the 'core doctrine' of nationalism, namely, the autonomy of national self-consciousness.

Now Kedourie can retort by beginning from the very first sentence of his book: 'Nationalism is a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century'.<sup>20</sup> Every part of the nationalist doctrine, he will argue, can be taken apart and shown to have been derived from some species of European thought. It is totally alien to the non-European world: 'it is neither something indigenous to these areas nor an irresistible tendency of the human spirit everywhere, but rather an importation from Europe clearly branded with the mark of its origin'.<sup>21</sup> For the non-European world, in short, nationalist thought does not constitute an autonomous discourse.

Once that position has been surrendered, Kedourie can fire volley after volley directed at the spurious claims of a liberal doctrine of nationalism. The