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Edicts for the Ages

ANANYA VAJPEYI

In January 2004, I found myself at the World Social Forum (wsf) in Mumbai, alone in a vast multitude of people from every part of the world. I was staying in a guest room attached to the student hostel at St Xavier's College. Each morning I took the train up to Goregaon and back down late at night to south Mumbai. I had never been among so many human beings – and I mean both on the train and at the wsf. Certainly, I had never been by myself in such a huge crowd. Towards the end of the Forum, the Pakistani band Junoon performed for an audience of thousands, and I made my way almost to the stage, right at the crest of the thronging field.

Collective Political Consciousness

Almost five years later, I remember that evening vividly because it was the exact moment when I felt, for the first time in my adult life, a distinct realisation that I can only describe as “political”. I was completely alone and yet I was not. I felt no danger from those around me, only solidarity. I knew no one but I knew everyone. The band from Pakistan sang for me even though I was indistinguishable from the scores of other people from Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe that must have been visible from the stage. In the gathering dusk I had the palpable sensation that the narrow constraints and particular problems of my life were falling away from me like an old skin. As long as one stood in this multitude, the possibilities seemed limitless. Whatever alchemy took place that night, it transformed my sense of who I could be if I remained aware of a world full of others like me. After the concert was over, as I crossed the grounds where the wsf was spread out, I now saw many familiar faces pass by me, smile fleetingly, exchange momentary greetings. I literally walked away then, from my old way of being, back to the railway station, and on a different journey.

BOOK REVIEW

To Uphold the World: The Message of Ashoka and Kautilya for the 21st Century by Bruce Rich
(Penguin/Viking India), 2008; pp xviii+326, Rs 495.

In October that year I was at the European Social Forum (esf) in London, reporting for an entirely new set of individuals and institutions that I had become connected with over the intervening months. I wrote dispatches that were instantly posted on the internet, travelling to my invisible comrades all over the planet. Whatever it was that I had joined in Mumbai, passing through a subtle doorway from my isolation into a global community, I was now fully inside of it: call it the Multitude, call it the Network Society, call it the Present.

One of the highlights of the Forum's programme was a panel discussion in London University featuring Michael Hardt, the author with Antonio Negri of *Empire* and *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, both works that stood at the centre of the Zeitgeist after 9/11, and were read with near-religious zeal by social forum activists (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004). One of my posts to the media lab in Amsterdam where I worked at the time was titled “The Society of the Spectacle”, in homage to Guy Debord, a forgotten French theorist from the 1960s, who was Hardt and Negri's great inspiration. That particular piece of reportage was about – and against – the public exhibition of torture photos from Abu Ghraib, including at a concert in Trafalgar Square that was supposed to provide a climax to the esf and the anti-war demonstration, much as the Junoon performance has concluded the wsf in Mumbai a few months earlier.

Hardt kept us waiting for almost two hours; when he arrived, however, there was some incongruity between the remarks of this jargon-loving American professor, and what Gopal Balakrishnan, in his rhapsodic reading of *Empire* for the

New Left Review had described as the book's “Virgilian Visions” (Balakrishnan 2000). It is always a little deflating to be reminded of how politically ineffectual it can be to speak from within academia.

From the Axial Age

These two experiences of euphoric collective political consciousness are recounted here in such detail because they came back to me as I read Bruce Rich's *To Uphold the World: The Message of Ashoka and Kautilya for the 21st Century*. His book would find a natural audience in every part of the world except his native us, where political sentiment is both far less unmediated and far less global than his arguments suggest. There were hardly any Americans at the wsf meetings I attended, in India and the UK in 2004 or in Pakistan in 2006. And certainly the relentless incompetence and rapaciousness of eight years of George Bush's regime have put paid to any utopian hopes that the American Left, such as it is, might still cling to for America or for the planet. But Rich, a lawyer and policymaker based in Washington DC, is clearly plugged into developments in both a globalising world and globalisation theory. Moreover, he believes with Arnold Toynbee, in “the philosophical contemporaneity of all civilisations” (p 233). Hence he decides to explore an earlier moment in the history of the Indian subcontinent when there arose a theory of empire as well as a theory of ethical conduct, and to see what we may learn from those who were already thinking globally and ethically in pre-modernity. His protagonists are Kautilya, author of the *Arthashastra*, the first Sanskrit treatise on power, state and political economy sometime in the third century BC, and Ashoka (c 268-233 BC), whose edicts and embassies propagated the Buddha's Dharma all over Asia.

Readers conversant with Romila Thapar's monumental scholarship on the Mauryan empire, and more recently, with Pankaj Mishra's meditative travelogue, *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World* will be familiar with the details and controversies surrounding the historical lives of the Buddha, Kautilya and Ashoka, as well as

the broad lineaments of Buddhist thought and culture in India and elsewhere, right up to B R Ambedkar and his new Buddhism, founded in the mid-20th century (Mishra 2004). What is interesting about Rich's account is the unexpected way in which he yokes together the world of the Mauryas, permeated by ancient categories like *artha*, *dharma*, and *dhamma*, and utterly contemporary references, from foreign aid to human rights, sustainable resource use, environmental awareness, political correctness, good governance, deep ecology, due process, the 14th Amendment (to the US Constitution), and even the Peace Corps! This method of making connections between things separated by two millennia and by significant cultural difference has some of the witty angularity of John Donne's poetic metaphors, though to those accustomed to thinking historically, the comparisons do not always work. From the Axial Age to the Information Age is a vast distance to traverse, and not all of us have the imaginative agility to inhabit a vanished antiquity as Rich would like. At some point, we have to recognise that the world *has* changed, maybe for the worse, but also irreversibly.

Message of the Ancients

Rabindranath Tagore's invocation of the Ashokan inscriptions conveys better our relationship to premodernity than Rich's more straightforwardly pedagogical desire that we learn a lesson from the "message" of the ancients. Tagore describes the carved rocks and polished pillars bearing Ashoka's impress as mute monuments standing along the highway of history, what he calls "the roadside of eternity". As we pass them by, we are momentarily riveted by their timeless address, their "silent gestures", but then we continue onwards. "The noble words of Ashoka... had been standing on the wayside for all these ages longing to find a refuge in the mind of every man" (p 226). Tagore captures exactly how we can be haunted by Ashoka's words and yet fail to give them a living voice. That which was inscribed on the rock faces scattered all over Ashoka's vast empire – the teaching of the Dhamma, what Max Weber tellingly called "the propaganda of piety" – is at once permanent, and past (Weber 2000).

Rich's sense is that history is directly accessible, that history translates, that the "message" of Ashoka and Kautilya in principle can speak to the 21st century, that the fruits of history may simply be plucked from the tree of time as and when we wish. This strangely unhistorical way of thinking is responsible for the author's bitter disappointment with the violence in Buddhist-dominated Sri Lanka as well as the military dictatorship in Buddhist Burma (Myanmar). Again and again he seems to ask: But how could these Buddhists be so murderous, why do they not follow the dhamma, why have they forgotten ahimsa? The very question betrays the inability to separate the doctrinal and ethical content of any religion (Buddhism, but surely also Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam), from the work that religious identity is made to do in the service of primordialist nationalism and ethnic violence in the modern world, in not just Sri Lanka, but dozens of countries. There is not one conflict, one riot, one pogrom that does not violate the basic principles of the faith in whose name identities are mobilised and hatreds are fed. That a cutting of the original Bodhi tree was transplanted from Gaya and grows to this day in Anuradhapura is no talisman against exclusionary, violent and fundamentalist religious nationalism in Sri Lanka, where Buddhists and Tamils have fought a bloody war for decades. By this logic Jerusalem, Ayodhya and Lhasa, to take just three examples, ought to be the safest, most peaceful places in the world, but we know that they are the sites of some of the deadliest persecutions of our times, where attackers have not been checked by their faith, nor victims saved by theirs.

Revisiting History

To Uphold the World carries a Foreword by Amartya Sen, and also engages seriously with his writing, together with Martha Nussbaum, on human capabilities. Rich is similarly engaged with the progressive ideas of Karl Polanyi, Manuel Castells, Vaclav Havel, Joseph Stiglitz and a number of other contemporary thinkers and theorists, including Hardt and Negri. Gandhi too is an obvious choice, for a book about the revival of ethical and ecological thinking

within a framework of civilisation, globalisation and cosmopolitanism. The Dalai Lama provides an encouraging and appreciative Afterword. The ethico-political categories available in India, from *niti* and *dharma* to *dhamma* and *ahimsa*, from *artha* and *kama* to *satya* and *karuna*, have a fascinating history that is always rewarding to revisit. Rich writes with ease, so that the complex statecraft laid out in Kautilya's text and the conflicted personality of Ashoka shine through his accounts, as though 2,300 years had not passed since these men founded a tradition of political thought for the subcontinent.

But whether we ought to look at these categories historically or anachronistically is an open question. For some of us, they play a role in elucidating an Indic political tradition, much as the categories of Plato and Aristotle launch a western political tradition. To see them as such, as elements of a specific political tradition, requires that we anchor them at all times to history: Dhamma means something different in the time of the Buddha than it does for Ashoka, Harsha, Shankara and finally, Ambedkar. There is continuity, but also particularity, and also transformation. To historicise Dhamma is to understand that our reconstruction of this category in the 21st century is constitutively mediated by how it was re-imagined by our founding fathers in the moment when they were creating the new republic, and garnering for India all the resources of a deep but fragmented past. For Rich, however, the silent Ashokan inscriptions speak loud and clear across continents and centuries. That is why he may pause along the roadside of eternity and read, effortlessly, the message graven on the rocks planted there for all time by an agonised king, long long ago.

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