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The Concept of Fascism in Colonial India: M.N. Roy and *The Problem of Freedom*

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M.N. Roy was an Indian-born, widely-travelled activist and intellectual who moved over the course of his life from roles in anti-colonial resistance, militant organizing, Communist and Comintern circles, to what has been termed ‘radical humanism.’ In narratives of the same, as well as in those of the transnational 1920s and 30s and interwar cosmopolitanism, he and intellectuals like him are invoked in order to shape narratives around interconnectedness and parallel modernities that marked the twentieth century. Roy’s own political thought, however, as laid out in one text in particular, lends itself to an alternate reading of his life and moment: one in which resistance is not framed against European empire and with national sovereignty in mind; rather, *The Problem Of Freedom* (1945) sets up the road ahead for India against the threat of fascism. Roy in this text uses fascism as a concept to warn of the threat to come for the post-independence nation-state. Using Reinhart Koselleck’s framework for conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*), this paper examines the historic, psychoanalytic, and propagandistic elements of this text in order to question some of the key assumptions for how global history and intellectual history are written.

In 1945, as the war in Europe was coming to a close, the fascist threat of the past decades appeared to be waning. M.N. Roy disagreed. At this crucial juncture for Europe—and as historians would later write, for European colonies—Roy framed the struggle for independence in India as an anti-fascist struggle. In a series of essays published at the end of that year, entitled *The Problem of Freedom*, Roy established a political trajectory for the future Indian nation-state that mirrored that of Europe, as depicted in the work of Max Weber, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer. The Enlightenment’s authoritarian seeds, the psychoanalytic grip of leaders on a blinded population, and the threat to individualism posed by authoritarianism are all elements of Roy’s acerbic critique of the Indian National Congress (INC) and its representatives. Roy argued that Gandhian nationalism, if realized in the nascent Indian nation-state, would amount to fascism.

An Indian-born and well-travelled activist and thinker, Roy had returned to India in 1930 after fifteen years abroad. His first foreign trip had taken him to Java to meet with German agents during the First World War as part of what would become

known as the Indo-German conspiracy. His travels took him to Mexico, China, Japan, the United States, and various European capitals, including Moscow for the Second World Congress of the Communist International, where he was the representative of the Mexican Communist Party. After a stint in jail, during which he wrote extensively, Roy continued his nationalist agitation, eventually striking out on a path divergent from the INC and its central figureheads, namely M.K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru.¹ After his imprisonment, he aroused suspicion among Indian anti-colonial nationalists, as his allegiances were unclear,² although Roy numbered among the prominent young leaders of the national struggle by 1938.³ He had been warmly welcomed back into the fray by Nehru in the presidential address at the 1936 Congress, and young intellectuals gathered for his speeches and to read his publication, *Independent India*, launched in 1937.⁴ Despite the bevy of important participants in what came to be known as the freedom struggle, including the Bengali leftist Subhas Chandra Bose, in *The Problem of Freedom* it is Gandhi and Nehru who stand in for what Roy considers to be the entirety of the significant Indian nationalist movement. *The Problem of Freedom* is propagandistic in tone and aim; it was written in order to warn of the dangers Roy saw in the negotiations between the Indian National Congress and the British government in India. The particular nation-state configuration that was likely to emerge out of these negotiations was not one that would achieve ‘freedom’ in any real sense; according to Roy, in the absence of a truly revolutionary transition, India was in danger of succumbing to the fascist threat, just as Europe seemed poised to defeat it. Roy uses a psychoanalytic explanation to illuminate why precisely India was suited to the thrall of fascist authoritarianism, but is not particularly rigorous or precise in his use of the term “psychoanalysis” (or indeed, of the term “fascism”), conflating it with biography in one moment, and culture in another.⁵ It is a repetitive and didactic text, condescending in its attitude towards the Indian public and full of entertainingly insulting sketches of Roy’s political adversaries.

¹ Michael Goebel, “Geopolitics, Transnational Solidarity or Diaspora Nationalism? The Global Career of M.N. Roy, 1915–1930,” *European Review of History* 21, no. 4 (2014): 487. For more on the context of this trajectory, in particular the Communist International, the Indian communist parties, and nationalism, see John Patrick Haithcox, *Communism and Nationalism in India: M.N. Roy and Comintern Policy 1920-39* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

² Kris Manjappa, *M.N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism* (Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2010), 112.

³ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Roy was familiar with prominent psychoanalytic texts and thinkers, including but not limited to the Freudian school and clinical psychology. On the Indian Psychoanalytic Society and the institutionalized study of psychoanalysis in colonial India, see Christine Hartnack, “Vishnu On Freud’s Desk: Psychoanalysis in Colonial India,” *Social Research* 57, no. 4 (1990): 921. For a theoretical and literary treatment of psychoanalysis in Europe and the colonies in the period immediately following the Second World War, see: Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

While much of Roy's writing has been published and studied, his 1945 text has not received much attention, least of all by intellectual historians. In this text, Roy elaborates on his analysis of the concept of freedom at this turning point for India. His criticism of the Indian National Congress, Gandhi and Nehru, and the "democracy of counting heads" lends itself to a reading of fascism and the history of the modern world.⁶ The German historian Reinhart Koselleck wrote in 1967 that the purpose of the famed eight-volume encyclopedia of concepts, the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, was to examine "the dissolution of the old world and the emergence of the new in terms of the historico-conceptual comprehension of the process."⁷ Using Koselleck's criteria for such concepts, we can read *The Problem of Freedom* as an attempt at such a process for the transition between British rule and Indian independence. Situated within the larger (and continued) debate around the differences or similarities between Europe and its colonies, and the need for differentiation between the emancipatory strategies of each, *The Problem of Freedom* stands as an attempt to articulate the threat of a European phenomenon—fascism—in a non-European setting, as a pitfall on the road to a universal ideal: freedom. Insofar as this is a polemic against the Indian National Congress, Gandhi, and Nehru—quite tangible adversaries—it is articulated nonetheless in conceptual terms. The *concept* of fascism is discussed theoretically and in the abstract, rather than in terms of what it looks like in action, how it acts in government, or manifests in culture.

In a way, the crucial elements of conceptual history in the German tradition (*Begriffsgeschichte*) are bound by time and place, as Koselleck himself admitted. This was not a problem for Koselleck *per se*, as in texts such as *Critique and Crisis* and *Futures Past* the influential historian sought to explain Western European conceptual change through the canonical philosophers of the German, French, and English traditions. But concepts travel. Margrit Pernau and Dominic Sachsenmaier, in their call for a global approach to conceptual history, characterize the reason behind the shift to this approach as a "growing discomfort with the mental maps which have dominated the professional field since the nineteenth century."⁸ Uncomfortable at its most delicate, angry at its most acute, the reaction of scholars both inside and outside the Western academy to the particular moral and political implications of the historical tradition is not irrelevant in a discussion of this historiographical shift. Even besides this kind of impetus, it is the methodology

⁶ M.N. Roy, *The Problem of Freedom* (Kolkata: Renaissance Publishers Ltd. 2000), Preface.

⁷ Reinhart Koselleck, "Richtlinien für das Lexikon politisch-sozialer Begriffe der Neuzeit," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* vol. 11 (1967), 81, quoted in Keith Tribe's introduction to *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), xiv.

⁸ Margrit Pernau and Dominic Sachsenmaier, "History of Concepts and Global History," in *Global Conceptual History: A Reader*, eds. Margrit Pernau and Dominic Sachsenmaier. (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).

of conceptual history that allows us to disentangle the complexity of periods of extraordinary global exchange.

Roy is an especially fitting test case for the commensurability of conceptual history with the wider lens called for by the authors above. The subject of a comprehensive biography by Kris Manjapra, Manabendra Nath Roy, born Narendra Nath Bhattacharya in 1887, was an active historical player on an international scale.⁹ In a career spanning key epochal breaks such as the Russian Revolution, the First and Second World Wars, and Indian independence, Roy's changing viewpoints and affiliations offer an alternative to a nation-state or party-centered reading of the political history of the period. His break with the Comintern in 1929, his opposition to the Gandhian freedom struggle and the Indian National Congress, and his flirtation with the Frankfurt School and what has been termed 'radical humanism' allow his life and writings to be read creatively and from a variety of vantage points.

In perhaps his most important role as a historical actor, Roy's debate with Lenin at the Second Comintern Congress in 1920 marks a key moment in the relationship between Moscow and European-held colonies on the question of their emancipation. Roy's "supplementary theses on the national and colonial question" challenged Lenin's initial suggestion that it might be prudent to ally with national bourgeois organizations in non-European countries for the purpose of creating the basis of proletarian class consciousness and the subsequent revolution in the colonies, where a working class did not yet exist.¹⁰ This did not sit well with Roy, and his refutation of Lenin's position on the colonial situation was included in the revised theses later published as part of the Congress proceedings. If we consider the long relationship, ideationally and organizationally, between the Left and anti-colonialism, the supplementary theses of the 1920 Comintern Congress could be read as one of the first attempts by orthodox Marxism to reckon with the difference between Europe and the colonies (with Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capital* having been the attempt to read the two as structurally integrated).¹¹

In an essay on the future direction of conceptual history in the Koselleckian tradition, Jan-Werner Müller argues that historians have not yet considered "what happens when concepts move between different kinds of modernities and their associated temporalities."¹² An effort to understand how concepts such as 'liberalism' or 'democracy' change as they move between places and times would

⁹ Manjapra, *M.N. Roy*.

¹⁰ "Minutes of the Second Congress of the Communist International, Fourth Session, July 25, 1920," in *Second Congress of the Communist International: Minutes of the Proceedings, Vol. One and Two*, Trans. R.A. Archer (London: New Park Publications, 1977), accessed June 29, 2017, <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/2nd-congress/ch04.htm>.

¹¹ V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2010 [1917]).

¹² Jan-Werner Müller, "On Conceptual History," in *Rethinking European Intellectual History*, ed. Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 88.

require a theory of conceptual change that can no longer rely on the canon of the European Enlightenment or of a series of changes to the state in Germany, France, or England. Prasenjit Duara has argued that the wave of decolonization that took place in the 1940s–1970s “turned the world into the stage of history.”¹³ This was a renewal of the world-historical trajectory attributed to Hegel, with a similarly ideational core; according to Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, this version of universal history “placed an extraordinary premium on the role of thought in organizing and driving forward the unfolding of a world history.”¹⁴ This widening, after decolonization and with the advent of postcolonial theory and subaltern studies, became couched in the language of liberation and the nation-state. Müller’s comment on the commensurability of conceptual history and “what happens when concepts move between different kinds of modernities and their associated temporalities” takes the existence of this multiplicity as a given, and indeed, pegs the conceptual to the series of transformations that are now attributed to the ‘making of the modern world.’ Among historians concerned with precisely the problem Koselleck discusses most often, that is, the making of the modern, the diffusion model continues to be credible—a process by which industrialization, democracy, individualism, and the nation-state came to the non-Western world unidirectionally by way of the West. This understanding of how the world came to be recognizable to us in the present sits uncomfortably alongside the multiplicity model. The multiplicity model sees these transformations as occurring in many places with many agents and, in historical debates, has led to a discussion of the profusion of modernities and temporalities which Müller seems to take for granted. The notion of ‘alternative modernities’ is decades old and continues to be taken up in the still-growing (and increasingly problematized) approach of global history, which tends to emphasize connectivity and multidirectionality.¹⁵ In an edited volume published for the new millennium, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Leo Ou-fan Lee, and Charles Taylor, among others, approach the fracturing of our understanding of the modern without completely rejecting the diffusion model of European origins:

Born in and of the West some centuries ago under relatively specific sociohistorical conditions, modernity is now everywhere... And it continues to ‘arrive and emerge,’ as always in opportunistic fragments accompanied by utopian rhetorics, but no longer from the West alone, although the West remains the major clearinghouse of global modernity.¹⁶

¹³ Prasenjit Duara, “Introduction: the Decolonization of Asia and Africa in the Twentieth Century,” in *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.

¹⁴ Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, “A Framework for Debate,” in *Global Intellectual History*, ed. Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 6.

¹⁵ Pernau and Sachsenmaier, 8.

¹⁶ Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, “Alternative Modernities,” in *Alternative Modernities*, ed. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 1.

More recently, Vanessa Ogle provides an account of the process by which understandings of work, leisure and practices of time-keeping altered in the nineteenth century. These were not (mere) conceptual changes in how time was understood, but can be read through technological change and political upheaval.¹⁷ As central as a singular, European, historically bounded Enlightenment is to a Koselleckian paradigm, Sebastian Conrad has questioned this by recasting the moment as existing both for longer than previously assumed and in many places simultaneously, as part of the Global Enlightenment of the nineteenth century.¹⁸ It would appear then, when looking at where global history and intellectual history meet in current debates, that modernity, time, and the Enlightenment are to be understood as globally constituted and contested multiplicities.

A number of authors in recent years have made use of Koselleck in understanding difference in terms of “different kinds of modernities and their associated temporalities.”¹⁹ In particular, Koselleck’s notion of “futures past” has been useful for grappling with alternative visions of anticolonial resistance and decolonization that became “foreclosed” as the middle decades of the twentieth century progressed.²⁰ Manu Goswami has called for a re-evaluation of the project of anticolonial internationalism that accounts for “multiple visions of a non-imperial future.”²¹ She argues that the thwarted expectations of colonial intellectuals—past futures—have been ignored. “The privileging of histories of experience over expectation has worked to propel studies of movements, institutions, and categories regarded as durable, prevalent, or immediately recognizable to the present.”²² Gary Wilder levies a similar critique of the centrality of the nation-state form in discussions of anticolonial resistance and, through a reading of Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire, re-inscribes alternative temporalities into the history of negritude and decolonization. “To presuppose that national independence is the necessary form of colonial emancipation,” Wilder argues, “is to mistake a product of decolonization for an optic through which to study it.”²³ The anthropologist David Scott makes use of Koselleck’s distinction between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation to argue that the relation between pasts, presents, and

¹⁷ Vanessa Ogle, *The Global Transformations of Time: 1870–1950* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

¹⁸ Sebastian Conrad, “Enlightenment in Global History: A Historiographical Critique,” *American Historical Review* 117, no. 4 (2012): 999–1027.

¹⁹ Müller, 88.

²⁰ Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000); *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*. Trans. Todd Samuel Presner and others (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

²¹ Manu Goswami, “Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms,” *American History Review* 117, no. 5 (2012): 1461–1485.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2015), 4.

futures “is a relation constituted in narrative” as opposed to the concept *per se* and its mutations.²⁴ Scott believes that the future envisioned in the moment of decolonization has now been foreclosed, and that continuing to write histories of colonialism that are premised on revolution, emancipation, and national sovereignty amount to an ineffective form of both storytelling and praxis he calls “Romantic anti-colonialism.” These critiques of the preoccupations of anti-colonialism and postcolonialism within the academy, whether they center the experiences of realization, the territorialized nation-state, or Romantic emancipation, all hinge on understandings of temporality, and futurity in particular, as they emerged in Koselleck’s conceptual history.

Koselleck has come to be useful for parsing the temporality of the decolonizing and postcolonial world, as shown above. Looking back, the gravity of the situation at the end of the Second World War was bound up in the possibilities of the postwar (post-victory) years for the colonial world. Roy’s involvement at the key junctures of the long history of anti-colonialism and decolonization offers a particularly fruitful opportunity for the application of some Koselleckian insights to his political writing. Diasporic networks of Indian nationalists had been established in the wake of the partition of Bengal and the Japanese victory in the war against Russia, both in 1905. During the First World War, the Indo-German conspiracy saw German weapons and funding handed to Indian revolutionaries as part of a shared desire to see Britain weakened on the subcontinent, and thus at large. Roy also spent time corresponding with members of the Frankfurt School and, according to Manjapra, collaborated with Max Horkheimer.²⁵ Roy’s involvement in the Comintern, combined with these other German influences, suggests an affinity not only in terms of the practice of anticolonial agitation or the “practice of transnational and global history,” but also in the intellectual history of concepts central to mid-century debates.²⁶

Roy begins his analysis of the concept of freedom by way of the “colourful personalities of Indian nationalism.”²⁷ As Roy frames it, there are two choices before India: national independence with the INC at the helm of a post-British nation-state, or the formation of some kind of ‘freedom’ which cannot exist under the proffered INC alternative. The machinations of personalities exist outside of the “rational,” at the level of power politics; what remains “cannot be rationally explained” and so requires psychoanalysis.²⁸ Despite this distinction made early

²⁴ David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 45.

²⁵ Manjapra, *M.N. Roy*, xiii. For more on the connections between German and Indian intellectuals, particularly as pertains to nationalism and psychoanalysis, see: Kris Manjapra, *Age of Entanglement: German and Indian Intellectuals Across Empire*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

²⁶ Goebel, “Geopolitics,” 486.

²⁷ Roy, Preface.

²⁸ Roy, Preface.

in the preface, later in the text Roy submits both Gandhi and Nehru to the scrutiny of psychoanalysis as he sees it. Intending this text as both analysis and warning, he writes:

My contention is that, if a gathering of fifty thousand people could be hypnotized so as to pronounce seeing the sun rise at midnight, that could not be accepted as truth, and an entire people can be placed in a state of mass hysteria. If we do not see what is happening under our very nose, we must, in the fullness of time, thank ourselves for what is in store for us.²⁹

The danger to come is named here as ‘fascism,’ emerging in India just as it is about to be extinguished in Europe. Roy argues that fascism arose in Europe due to its preconditions being embedded within the modern nation-state, and since the form of the bourgeois nation-state is set to be implemented in India by the transition to independence from British rule, this germ will also exist in this new society. Not only does the germ exist, he continues, it is being realized by the mass hypnosis of the Indian people by the INC and the neurosis of Gandhi himself.

Debates among Indian nationalists in 1945 were dominated by the negotiations between the Government in India and the representatives of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League. Roy does not himself refer to the Muslim League, or indeed, any other significant nationalist group here besides Congress, and focuses his criticism on the fact that discussions over the precise configuration of independent statehood were beside the point. He contends that this controversy over the governance of independent India “misses the point” because independence does not necessarily represent freedom for India. The terms of the anticolonial struggle are thus shifted from “a conflict between a foreign government and the people’s urge for freedom” to “a conflict between urge for freedom and fear of freedom.”³⁰ Gandhi’s submission to the fear of freedom is rather archly introduced through the language of neurosis. “Gandhi need not be suspected of dishonesty. No neurotic person ever is; and neurosis is the psychological foundation of demonstrative saintliness.”³¹ In the mien of the non-violent freedom fighter, above sectarian conflict and acting in the sole interest of the Indian people, Gandhi has, for Roy, “confused issues.” The tone here is sarcastic, and it would be unhelpful to read this as a sympathetic view of a Gandhi beset by forces beyond his control—rather, Roy uses the language of psychoanalysis metaphorically, to denote the difference between the “rational efforts made with conscious purpose” and those actions Roy disapproves of, “motivated by subconscious urges.”³²

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Roy, Preface, 11.

Social conditions emerging from India's "medieval past" are the fertile ground in which the seed of authoritarianism will be allowed to grow, according to Roy. Europe is both the model and the warning.

Critical historians and students of social psychology are still to teach the world to what extent the urge for freedom expressed by the Renaissance movement was counter-acted by the fear of freedom represented by the Reformation, and thus laid down the cultural foundation for the rise of authoritarianism in a subsequent epoch. When it is realized that Luther and Calvin, though revolting against the Catholic Church, laid the psychological foundation of a political authoritarianism, one should not be shocked by the discovery that Gandhi played the same reactionary role in India. And his role has been all the more reactionary because it was played in the setting of social conditions and cultural environments much more backward than those of Europe in the seventeenth century.³³

These "social conditions and cultural environments" were ideal for the transformation of the agitation brought about by the First World War, a "degree of unsettlement in the traditional patterns of Indian society and habits." Despite this disruption, which in a society not mired in tradition could have resulted in some kind of action, the Indian masses allowed any "incipient urge for freedom" to be "overwhelmed by the fear of freedom." This fear "grows rankly in the atmosphere of a medieval culture which made no room for the concept of individual freedom."³⁴ This "medieval culture" was uninterrupted by a transformation akin to the Renaissance, Reformation, or Enlightenment, and was therefore allowed to remain in the grip of an unexamined, unreasoned religiosity. Roy describes "the Indian masses" as caught in a cultural trap: "the central theme of that culture was submission of man—either to the will of God or to his own *karma*."³⁵ It is this tendency in Hinduism, and particularly a Hinduism unchanged since the "medieval age,"³⁶ that predisposes the Indian people to accept the regime of a saintly leader such as Gandhi, in whom the confusion between the urge for freedom and the fear of freedom is embodied. It is this fusion of the singular leadership Roy sees in Gandhi's hands and the mechanism of religious control that is the "cultural" basis of Gandhian fascism, according to Roy.

The "social basis" for Gandhian authoritarianism was the urban middle-class, "which felt the social crisis to some extent consciously."³⁷ The urban middle-class was tied to the agrarian economy for its economic position but was formed in order

³³ Ibid., 12.

³⁴ Ibid., 14.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Despite the immense diversity in religious belief and practice covered by the term "Hinduism," Roy uses it to denote the "indigenous" religiosity he believes to be the particular yoke of the Indian people. He appears to use the term interchangeably with "religion."

³⁷ Roy, Preface, 14.

to “man the governmental machinery”—it was a colonial creation.³⁸ This urban middle-class was first unmoored from traditional agrarian forms of employment, and then from employment within the colonial administration; for when its role in the machinery of the colonial government began to stagnate at the beginning of the twentieth century, “the old tie was gone but there was no future.” “Modern education and economic position at least partially outside the traditional patterns of the social organization” meant that there was a “slight advance towards the concept of individual freedom,” while the prospect of the further unmooring that such freedom entailed meant that this desire sent the ‘middle class’ directly from comfort in tradition to comfort in authoritarianism. Gandhi emerged as the “typical member of this class, which constituted the social basis of authoritarianism.”³⁹ Roy credits Gandhi’s “lonesomeness and helplessness” during his sojourn in Britain and his legal practice in South Africa with driving him towards his faith in God, and this “lonesome individual, frightened by the specter of freedom, found refuge in submission to an authority [God].”⁴⁰ Roy thus attributes the religious character of Gandhianism to Gandhi’s own turn to religion after his disillusionment with the British legal and political establishment. With an urban ‘middle class’ caught between tradition and the uncertainty of modern futurity and a wider public under the thrall of religion, an authoritarianism with a figurehead who embodied both these positions had emerged as the regime-in-waiting, conjured up by the Indian subconscious.

The psychoanalysis in *The Problem of Freedom* vacillates between diagnosing the leaders of the nationalist movement, and diagnosing the “masses.” This dimension of fascism’s appeal in India is not systematically considered separately from the cultural, social, or historical elements outlined above; rather, each of these aspects forms a part of a sociological explanation for the conditions of fascism’s complete ascension, above which psychoanalysis looms as a mechanism for both how society and nationalist leadership reinforce one another, and how an observer (and Roy’s reader) might understand this bond. For instance, Roy narrates the uninterrupted existence of Hindu society in India (a historical inaccuracy) until the changes of the early twentieth century, and then declares: “the religiosity of Gandhi is the psychological mainstay of authoritarianism.”⁴¹ A kind of determinism permeates this reading of the Indian political situation, in which

³⁸ When Roy refers to “the masses,” he tends to speak in psychoanalytic terms i.e. with reference to the psychology of the masses; otherwise he is referring to “society.” This distinction between “masses” used as a class category and in the two ways stated previously becomes critical when we consider the culpability Roy affords to the “urban middle class” above; the latter is a class category, articulated in clearly material and geographic terms, and is therefore set up in an implicit contrast with the working class, agrarian class, etc. It would appear that when speaking in psychoanalytic and societal terms, “the masses” include the “urban middle class,” and refers to the larger polity that Roy views as under the sway of Indian fascism.

³⁹ Roy, Preface, 14.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 15.

⁴¹ Roy, Preface, 12.

subconscious desire, cultural backwardness, and a fear of uncertainty in the face of an imminent but unclear future make the rise of a fascist leader inevitable:

The influence of any doctrine is proportionate to the degree to which it appeals to the psychic needs of those to whom it is preached. In other words, there is a large element of historical truth in the saying that a people gets the kind of leader it deserves. Only, it is not a matter of conscious desire, but of an automatic conformity with subconscious cultural urges. The personality of a leader, his conscious behavior—physical as well as mental, including emotional—is determined by the given social environment and the cultural background, which are equally operative for the entire human group of which he is an individual member. An authoritarian leadership can be established only when there is a mass psychology of predisposition towards submission.⁴²

There is a great deal of contempt and pity in Roy's attitude towards the Indian population. For instance, they "could not as yet think in terms of freedom" despite the "vague feeling of revolt" that took hold at the end of the First World War.⁴³ The great mass of Indian society is described as overwhelmingly orthodox in its Hinduism and in its outlook, attitude, and anxieties, as demonstrated by its submission to the notion of "karma" for example, which even though it operates at the level of the individual, robs the individual of the agency required to harness real political will because the sins of a past life are thought to govern the trajectory of the present. Roy alludes to a similar effect on European society brought about by Luther and Calvin, as mentioned above, but the relative advancement of seventeenth century European society compared to twentieth century India explains, for Roy, why alternate political configurations were possible for Europe even after this submission of the individual to predestination, but the analogous open-endedness is not possible in India.

Enzo Traverso has synthesized prominent treatments of the concept of fascism by George L. Mosse, Zeev Sternhell, and Emilio Gentile into a fourfold notion. For these historians, who for Traverso hold an "outstanding place" in the interpretation of fascism in recent decades, "fascism was at the same time a revolution, an ideology, a *Weltanschauung*, and a culture."⁴⁴ The historians under Traverso's scrutiny studied European fascism as it emerged as a movement, carried out a successful revolution (evidenced by its realization as a regime), articulated an outlook, and enacted, in social and aesthetic forms, a culture of its own. Elements of their criteria for evaluating fascism are present in Roy's reading. For instance, Mosse's identification of fascism's political style with the secularization

⁴² *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Enzo Traverso, "Interpreting Fascism: Mosse, Sternhell and Gentile in Comparative Perspective." *Constellations* 15, no. 3 (2008): 304.

of sacredness and its new belief in the ‘nation,’ with its need for its own liturgy, is similar to the role that religion plays in Roy’s account as the font from which Gandhian nationalism is able to access its vast, psychic hold on the public. Also resonant is Sternhell’s interpretation of fascism as “a total rejection of the vision of man and society elaborated from Hobbes to Kant, from the English Revolution of the seventeenth century to the American and French Revolutions” and as “an exacerbated form of the tradition of the counter-Enlightenment.”⁴⁵

In *The Problem of Freedom*, cultural nationalism, the foundation of fascism, is a totalitarian concept because it draws culture towards a specific source and erases the individual: “Cultural values being universal, national culture is bound to be a counterfeit.”⁴⁶ Subjugation by a foreign power is the most fertile condition for the growth of this notion, and here Roy draws an explicit comparison between India and Germany (subjugated by the victorious powers via the Treaty of Versailles). In a long discussion of Fichte and Schelling, he elaborates on the relationship between the elevation of one’s own national character and the denigration of that of one’s neighbors. The Indian analog for the origins of German Romanticism are in Hindu mythology:

The “Ramraj” [reign of King Rama, avatar of Lord Vishnu, as told in the Sanskrit epic *Ramayana*] or the “Vikram era” of the Indian nationalist’s imagination is reminiscent of the “Verlorene Heimat” (the lost home) of the German Romanticists of the early nineteenth century. Spiritual perfection and complete oneness of life was believed to have been attained by the extraordinarily gifted people who inhabited the country along the Rhine, which became the Ganges of German cultural nationalism. Myths and legends were re-written as history...Nationalism finding its crassest expression in Germany declared war on the spirit of the Enlightenment.⁴⁷

Roy warns: “these experiences of history should dispel the illusion that Nationalism, developing in India remarkably on the classical German pattern, can lead to any different result.”⁴⁸ And so the classical origins of Indian nationalism are paired with those of German Romanticism, and the trajectory to the realization of a fascist regime based on these cultural foundations is laid out for the reader.

Roy uses the term ‘fascist’ as a charge against Gandhi and the Indian National Congress, and as a warning against supporting the vision of the mainstream of the Indian nationalist movement. Traverso summarizes the prominent interpretations of fascism as concept with four attributes: it is anti-liberal, anti-Marxist, spiritu-

⁴⁵ Zeen Sternhell, “Le concept de fascism,” in *Naissance de l’ideologie fasciste* (Paris: Fayard, 1989), 28–29, and Sternhell, *Les anti-Lumières. Du XVIIIe siècle à la guerre froide* (Paris: Fayard, 2006), 578, both quoted in Traverso, “Interpreting Fascism”.

⁴⁶ Roy, 76.

⁴⁷ Roy, 77–8.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

alist, and communitarian.⁴⁹ Roy's Indian fascism is fascist despite being liberal (liberalism is its guise), and it is certainly anti-Marxist. Crucially, its fascist nature comes from the combination of spiritualism and communitarianism that establishes a cult of personality around the saintly figure of Gandhi and his strikingly modern deputy Nehru. It appropriates the religious culture of the Indian masses in order to keep them in thrall. It requires the submission of the individual in service of all this, in order to hold the Indian nation suspended between tradition and a truly liberated future. The charge of 'fascist' in 1945 was powerful because European fascism was on the verge of defeat, and indeed, upon publication in December, had been defeated. One way to read this accusation by Roy is to understand it as an instrumentalization of the stain of fascism against what he sees as bourgeois Indian nationalism. The latter was a movement that maintained moral superiority and public support not only by using the language of liberal democracy, but by undermining the British claim to power in the colonies through contrasting its liberatory role in occupied Europe with its domination of native peoples abroad. In this reading, *The Problem of Freedom* becomes an extended metaphor, with fascism and the language of psychoanalysis standing in for domination by Roy's political enemies, against which he hopes to galvanize his reading audience. If, however, we take seriously the charge of 'fascism' levied by Roy against Gandhi and the Indian National Congress, then the concept itself undergoes a kind of metamorphosis.

How does Roy marry what he sees as Gandhian authoritarianism with the concept of fascism? The four elements outlined by Traverso in his overview of the interpretations of fascism are helpful here, not least because they allow us to construct four zones in which fascism and anti-imperialism interacted in 1945. The relationship between anti-imperialism and anti-fascism has received considerable attention, but usually in terms of the synergy of the two movements in the inter-war period among the Left in Europe, or in terms of the war effort and the allegiances that bore fruit at that time. The twinning of fascism with imperialism and anti-fascism with anti-imperialism was powerful in 1945 and remains powerful in historiographies of resistance, even as the relationship is complicated, and opposition to one or both is nuanced.⁵⁰ The one does not always go with the other, however. The European powers with colonial possessions that opposed European fascism during the war were anti-fascist imperialists, and Roy notes the tension between opposing an anti-fascist Britain in the colonies and those elements of Indian nationalism that favored Hitler's Germany before the war.

⁴⁹ Traverso, 304.

⁵⁰ For an examination of the relationship between anti-fascism and anti-imperialism in Britain and France and their colonies in the period immediately leading to this moment, see Tom Buchanan, "'The Dark Millions in the Colonies are Unavenged': Anti-Fascism and Anti-Imperialism in the 1930s." *Contemporary European History* 25, no. 4 (2016).

TABLE 1

Anti-fascist anti-imperialists e.g. M.N. Roy	Fascist anti-imperialists e.g. Gandhi
Antifascist imperialists e.g. Britain	Fascist imperialists e.g. NaziGermany

The affinity of Congress leaders with German and Italian fascism is marshaled as secondary, yet nonetheless significant, evidence of the fascist nature of Gandhian nationalism. Most of *The Problem of Freedom* is concerned with identifying the latter's fascist nature and explaining how it came to be; this occurs at the level of the concept, treating both Gandhian nationalism and fascism as ideologies. In the following instance however, it is fascism's successful revolution in Germany and Italy, and the cultural and *realpolitik* advantages that the INC saw in those regimes, that Roy uses to support his argument:

[T]he most powerful leaders of the Congress...did not make any secret of their admiration for "great men" like Hitler and Mussolini; they also believed that India needed "national unity" (totalitarianism) on the pattern of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany...Fascism was regarded as the fullest expression of nationalism, and as such naturally captivated the imagination and commanded the sympathy of nationalists, proud of cultural traditionalism and therefore, willing victims of the authoritarian psychology. As a matter of fact, the Fascist cult of Aryanism and Hitler's denunciation of Marxist materialism were acclaimed by the average nationalist as a vindication of ancient Indian culture—as a triumph of Eastern Spiritualism over Western Materialism. It was a cherished belief among nationalists that the doctrines of Fascism were formulated by German Sanskrit scholars, who had drunk deep in the wisdom of the *Vedas*.⁵¹

Besides another striking articulation of the affinity of ancient Indian culture and European fascism, this is also an attempt by Roy to draw attention to the hypocrisy on the part of Congress leaders who in 1945 were trying to embody the best of liberal, bourgeois governmentality. This tension is explained not as a contradiction, but rather as an expression of the enmeshed tradition of cooperation between the two political currents.

Roy argues that the "problem of freedom" is uniquely manifested in India due to it being part of the civilized world, yet backward in certain respects. Since it participates in civilization, it is not exempt from "this conflict between the urge for freedom and the fear of freedom;" however, the "degree of the differentiation of social forces and [India's] cultural state" are such that the urge for freedom

⁵¹ Roy, 19–20.

and the fear of freedom have become confused, creating the social conditions for authoritarianism, which is then hailed as the “champion of freedom.”⁵² Here Roy is alluding to the inability of the Indian masses to view the political distinction between freedom and servitude, which particularly endangers a society that is both civilized and backwards. Indian society is thus particularly susceptible to the modern authoritarian threat by way of its existence in the same time-space of ‘Civilization’ and yet at a different stage of progress.

How does this picture of Roy as an anti-fascist fit into how historians have recently understood him? Michael Goebel and Kris Manjapra have provided the two most prominent accounts of Roy’s political career in the last decade. In these accounts, Roy serves to demonstrate the existence of transnational networks of anticolonial resistance and of India’s de-territorial nationalism, respectively. *The Problem of Freedom* disrupts both narratives. Sure enough, Roy’s position in Communist and nationalist circles shifted in the final decades of his life. His turn to radical humanism was a rejection of the kinds of collectivities that orthodox Marxism and nationalism presuppose. To read Roy as an anti-imperialist in 1945 one must reckon with, for instance, a declaration such as this one:

Reactionary Nationalism in the colonial countries has of late been embellished by the pseudo-Marxist theory of anti-Imperialism. The latter theory is believed to have a social foundation: the colonial people’s struggle for national freedom is an integral part of the proletarian world revolution. Experience, however, has belied the elaborately constructed theory. Triumphant or semi-successful nationalist movements in the colonial countries, or in countries which are believed to have been kept in backwardness by modern Imperialism, have invariably turned towards Fascism, instead of showing the least inclination to be honest allies of Democracy, not to mention proletarian world revolution. [...] The pseudo-Marxist theory of anti-Imperialism (anything purely negative is always sterile) panders to the base sentiment of race hatred, and consequently plays into the hands of social reaction. The doctrine of a united anti-Imperialist Front divorces the political practice from the context of social conflicts, and making it an expression of racial animosity, helps the upper-class minority to use the people as a pawn in the game of power politics.⁵³

It would appear that the “theory” of anti-imperialism (of any *anti-* movement!) is anathema to the kind of universalist revolutionary change Roy sees for India. But his associations with the Comintern, with both the Mexican and Indian Communist Parties, and with networks of transnational anti-imperialists are the very basis for historiographical interest in Roy in the first place. Is reading Roy as an anti-imperialist justified in political or historical terms, but simply incorrect at the

⁵² Roy, 12.

⁵³ Roy, 84–5.

level of the concept? Or is what he did more important than what he thought and wrote?

What we are left with is an alternate reading of both anticolonial resistance and decolonization. In Roy's understanding, anticolonial resistance in India is not the struggle between the British government and Indian nationalists such as Gandhi and Nehru (and indeed, the entire slate of nationalist bourgeois leaders that they represent in this text). It is also not revolution in Marxist-Leninist terms, brought about by world revolution through class struggle and resulting in the dictatorship of the proletariat. For Roy, framing the struggle as such is an obfuscation of the *true* struggle between "the urge for freedom and the fear of freedom" as understood in psychoanalytic terms. Crucially, freedom itself is *not* self-determination, or native rule, or the overthrow of European domination, but is understood instead in terms of an opposition to fascism. The struggle against fascism in Europe is thus not only the backdrop of Roy's understanding of what it means to be free, but forms the very vocabulary in which freedom is articulated. Or, inversely, the definition of fascism that emerged from the struggle in Europe is expanded and appropriated for use in an Indian context—just as Lenin's approach to revolution is applied to the colonial situation in 1920—and the language of anti-fascist resistance mobilized for an anti-Congress polemic by a man who, in 1945, had few friends in the Comintern and fewer still in the mainstream of Indian nationalist politics.

Even more striking is the fact that this understanding of fascism, as both a phenomenon of mass psychology and having germinated in the modern nation-state before being transmitted to India, are both notions prominent in the work of German thinkers, particularly Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Roy's collaboration with the Frankfurt School has not yet been fully studied, and is only mentioned briefly in Manjapra's biography as an example of his cosmopolitanism and interstitiality.⁵⁴ What could be learned from a reading of this exchange at the level of the concept, not merely as symptom of the transnational 1920s and 1930s? If conceptual history has indeed "since its inception...contributed to destabilizing what felt like an intuitive knowledge"⁵⁵ then it is a fitting methodology with which to parse the shifting meaning and stakes of terms/concepts such as 'freedom' and 'fascism.'

To the extent that concepts such as freedom or fascism are ideas as well as empirical conditions under investigation by historians—and furthermore, represent the goals of historical actors—tracing the concept across time and place, or as in this case, in a single text, can yield insight into this three-fold role. Let us return to Koselleck and his criterion for modern concepts, which is that they mark

⁵⁴ Manjapra, xiii. On the contributions of Critical Theory to the understanding of fascism in this period, see: Stefan Breuer, "The Truth of Modern Society? Critical Theory and Fascism," *New German Critique* 44, no. 2 (2017).

⁵⁵ Pernau and Sachsenmaier, 14.

the dissolution of the old world and the emergence of the new. The architects of decolonization considered their project to be no less than such a transformation, and historians have echoed the period's sense of its own gravity in narratives of anticolonial struggle and national independence. Reading a text such as *The Problem of Freedom* with the criteria of conceptual history requires coupling the conceptual and political weight of fascism with all that is at stake in the re-making of the world. It is possible, of course, that Roy merely used the concept of fascism in order to shock his readers; what better comparison to draw with one's political adversary in 1945 when actually-existing-fascism in Europe was close to defeat, and widely acknowledged in left and liberal circles as an existential threat requiring eradication? It was, no doubt, a helpful metaphor, and close at hand in both political reality and imagination. I have here attempted to read it in another way, as Roy's sincere attempt to delineate a European concept with European origins in the Indian context, predicated on the belief that within the modern Indian nation-state, just as it was beginning to take root via negotiations between Indian nationalists and the British government, was a European transplantation containing the germ of that most European threat.