Title: The Twentieth Century: The Ambivalent Homecoming of Homo Psychologicus

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Citation: Hitotsubashi journal of social studies, 33(1): 21-33

Issue Date: 2001-07

Type: Departmental Bulletin Paper

Text Version: publisher

URL: http://doi.org/10.15057/8309
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY:
THE AMBIVALENT HOMECOMING OF HOMO PSYCHOLOGICUS

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There are many twentieth centuries. For one person's century need not be that of another. However, some twentieth centuries are more equal than others, and I shall be less than honest if I do not express my fear that, in another few decades, some of them will move closer to being more authoritative twentieth centuries than others. There is nothing particularly wrong with this, unless they tend to become the official, hegemonic twentieth century and the others have to survive as recessive strains—as myths, legends, folk memories, grandparents' tales, even sometimes as nightmares about the century. I do not expect this essay to gatecrash into official or academic history. But I hope it would retain some touch with the world of the myths and the legends that the defeated and the marginalised learn to protect in the interstices of the global culture of commonsense, defying the global idea of public life.

At this point I must also warn those unacquainted with my earlier work—and my persistent prejudices—that I do not rue that history is not the only way of constructing the past. The past that lives and the past with which most people still live, at least in societies not dominated by the historical consciousness, are often dependent on shared and private memories that bypass the historical mode of reasoning. What look like bogus fantasies, maudlin morality tales or fundamentalist claptrap are often ways of constructing the past where human emotions and ethics have legitimate places. They are often attempts to cope with problems that we have learnt to see as opportunities. If we are not 'in touch' and do not construct pasts to cope with human subjectivity, personal and cultural norms, others would. And we would then be left to lament the gullibility and the vulnerability of the people who buy such pasts from the traders in hate and easy, readymade cures. In that sense, too, the twentieth century will live in one way in the textbooks of history, in another way in public memories in the backwaters of the world. I only hope that this essay on the last century will have some access to the second kind of construction of the past and establish a dialogue with those who like to handle their memories and experiences without assistance from the professional historians.

Finally, I hope that my construction of the twentieth century will also grant the dignity of those who have been usually seen in the official history of the century as either passive victims or as unwitting, unself-conscious agents of larger social forces of which they know little. For it is during the last century that we have learnt to carefully defend ourselves against the awareness that people shape their destinies partly independently of our favourite academic categories and the tacit frames they use to do so are not often accessible to us. The more that awareness threatens to break into our consciousness, the more desperate become our defensive manoeuvres.
There are two ways of marking the beginning of the twentieth century and I am tempted to use both. One way is to consider 1898, the year Sigmund Freud published his *Interpretation of Dreams*, as the beginning of a century that was to be defined by unprecedented expansion of human self-awareness. The other is to identify 1914, the year of World War I began, as the end of the nineteenth century and its innocent concept of war as a legitimate means of state policy and diplomacy. The war shattered Europe's naïve belief that the violence exported by Europe to the farthest corners of the globe through imperial wars of conquests, would not affect Europe itself and serve only the larger purposes of history. I believe that the century ended quite precisely, if unceremoniously in 1989, when the last great bastion of nineteenth-century social evolutionism—that so lovingly nurtured twentieth century's dispassionate, technicised, instrumental, assembly-line violence—collapsed in the Soviet Union.1 One creaky, slightly comical, Oriental version of that evolutionism continues to ghost-walk in China, but that is more out of habit and sheer greed for power than out of any deep conviction or idealism. Slobodan Milosevic too, it now seems, chose the right century but the wrong decade to keep that idea of progress alive.

If we see the twentieth century as hemmed in by these dates, it begins to look in retrospect a century that saw an ambivalent victory of Homo psychologicus. The most consequential feature of that victory was not the ravages of the two world wars or the myriad new technological marvels—from aeroplanes to antibiotics to computers—but the new style of violence symbolised by nuclear weapons and concentration camps. Our greatest victories and defeats have not been in institutions and technologies but in the domain of human subjectivity—in what we have done to ourselves. This lecture is a quick attempt to profile these triumphs and defeats, and to identify their implications.

### I. One Hundred Years of Violence

The nodal issue that has come to define our passage from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century is violence—violence as it has defined contemporary ideas of identity and individuality. It is my suspicion that future generations will see the twentieth century mainly as a century of total wars, terrorism, ethnic cleansing, and successful or attempted genocide. Even during the so-called war-free period after World War II, ensured by mutually assured nuclear destruction, at least 45 wars have been fought and their casualties have run into millions. On a conservative estimate, we killed more than 200 million in the last century to set a new track record in human violence. Even more important, we brought to the violence new institutional, technological and psychological skills and immense creativity. In fact, we reordered our entire existence to acquire better capacities to kill. The defence budgets of many countries overtook their welfare budgets and, on the last count a decade ago, more than 60 per cent of all scientists in the world were into defence research, directly or indirectly.

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The earlier centuries had seen mass violence, but there were in it always some passion and fervour. On the face of it, that did not make much of difference to the victims, but the presence of passion meant an indirect admission of the human status of the others. In the twentieth century that passion mostly went out of mass violence. Such violence became more organised, impersonal, technically sophisticated, and psychologically framed by distance and denial. Even during World War I, there was an instance when on Christmas Eve German and British soldiers stopped fighting and fraternised spontaneously. Something like that would not have been possible during World War II, though only twenty years separated the two wars. It would have been certainly inconceivable in the US-Iraq War. The killings in the twentieth century were associated with an attitude similar to that of a farmer who uses pesticides in his fields. The farmer is not angry at the pests or passionate about his job; he does his duty like any professional, modern agriculturist.

Years ago, I met a scientist at a conference in Berlin who had the unique honour of being an inmate of both Nazi and Soviet concentration camps. When I asked him the obvious question, he said that he found the Soviet camp slightly less intolerable. At least, the Soviet guards and officers thought the inmates to be inveterate scoundrels and ill-treated them. In the Nazi camps, the prisoners were treated as things and denied any human status. He gave the example of how the German army once tested new shoes for the soldiers in his camp. A circle was drawn with a chalk in an abandoned industrial shade. Then the prisoners were made to wear the new shoes and walk along the chalked line till one by one they collapsed. The moment a prisoner collapsed, he or she was dragged away and another prisoner was made to wear shoes and walk. The officialdom wanted to measure, as quickly as possible, the longevity of the shoes.

That is the kind of violence in which the twentieth century specialised. I am not the first one to say so. A galaxy of sensitive writers and thinkers of the century—from Hannah Arendt to Robert J. Lifton and Zigmunt Bauman—have ventured the same proposal. Even before them, in the early days of aerial warfare, the poet Rabindranath Tagore drew attention to the same change in the quality of human violence. I have always wished Daniel Goldhagen, who argues that the Germans killed the Jews because they hated the Jews and wanted to kill them, to be proved right, not Arendt and Bauman. For such direct causal links make understanding and resistance easier. But I am afraid, most sensitive empirical studies of mass violence do not allow us the luxury to believe in Goldhagen's innocent formulation. The role of passion in mass murders has declined and we have shown what we can do by merely pushing files in our offices, pressing a machine switch or clicking a computer mouse. The century of Homo psychologicus may have seen stupendous expansion of psychological sensitivities, but it has also seen serious constriction of ego functioning and cultivated abridgement of the human self.

The classical psychoanalyst, accustomed to talk about the violence resulting from the demands of an oppressive superego, might find such cultivation and release of fully rational but psychopathic ego forces disorienting. After all, Freud had hoped that the ego would be where the id was, whereas by the end of the last century the id seems to have found a strange ally in the ego to ensure that only the ego would be where the superego once was. What we have gained in one sector we might have lost in another.

The style of violence in which the century specialised had been first tried out in the tropics by the colonial powers. So massive was its scale in the South that it changed the composition of the world population radically. Two white continents were created overnight and hundreds of cultures and traditions of knowledge were wiped out as obsolete or redundant. Finally, the twentieth century managed to do the unthinkable. Thanks to German thoroughness and drive for self-consistency, it imported that distinctive new style of extermination into Europe itself. In a Euro-American century, that was a cultural betrayal and, predictably, it opened up enormous fissures in the self-definition of the European civilisation. One result has been an ornate edifice of psychological defences, built to protect the dominant cultures in the world and the dominant modes of global public activism from any awareness of a connection between the Nazi genocide and its antecedents in Europe's record in the savage world. The use of terms like primitivism, irrationality and escape from freedom, so frequently used in connection with the holocaust, are designed to link the experience of the violence with the religious feuds and ethnic blood baths that seem to characterise the South.

In most studies of the holocaust there is also a desperate denial that there is anything radically wrong with the Enlightenment vision and the priorities that vision has set for our public life. Few notice the absence of any built-in concept of nonviolence or any serious critique of violence in the vision and in the epistemologies it has sired. The vision encourages the belief that the modern systems of knowledge are value-neutral and the roots of violence lie in unreason. Naturally, in the last century, most concepts of nonviolence and critiques of violence found congenial location outside modern natural and social sciences—in philosophy and arts, 'romantic' returns to traditions, religion or the pre-industrial world, and in 'eccentric' rejections of modernity. Only in recent decades have some scholars broken through a psychological barrier to acknowledge the sanctions that exist in modern knowledge for technicisation, objectification and assembly-line delivery systems that have characterised twentieth-century's death factories. This is one meaning of the movement from Erich Fromm, Victor Frankl and Bruno Bettelheim to Arendt, Lifton, and Bauman.

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The first major setback for the empire of violence during the century was the demise of colonialism. Modern colonialism was the first serious effort to globalise the world and sell the global as the only valid version of the universal. Until the eighteenth century, usually religious

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6 For instance, Sven Lindquist, “Exterminate All the Brutes”: One Man’s Odyssey into the European Genocide tr. Joan Tate (New York: New Press, 1997).
7 Erich Fromm, Escape From Freedom (New York: Rinehart, 1941); Bruno Bettelheim, Surviving and Other Essays (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979); Victor Frankl, From Death-Camp to Existentialism (New York: Beacon Press, 1959); Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem; Lifton, Nazi Doctors; Bauman, Modernity and the Holocaust.
creeds and schools of philosophy claimed universality, not political systems or economic arrangements. Some conquerors dreamt and spoke of global dominance, but that in retrospect seems to have been metaphoric flourish. For even those who lamented that there were no more worlds to win, knew that they had not conquered even one-tenth of the known world. Only in the nineteenth century began a determined search for a single global order organised around the idea of the white man's burden. And the search was a success. Unlike the thousand-year Reich, which lasted a paltry twelve years, that first global order lasted a full hundred years. The two world wars that broke the back of the colonial order were also actually the climax of the globalisation that came through colonialism. For the two wars were more global than almost anything before them.

However, the wars also spawned widespread scepticism about Europe's civilising mission and the 'superiority' of modern technology, popularly seen as the ultimate western magic. As the empires crumbled towards the middle of the twentieth century, the differences between the global and the universal too became clearer. Indeed, the anti-imperialist movements, sometimes armed with cultural categories the colonial rulers knew nothing about, often looked more universal than anything that was being vended at the citadels of the western knowledge industry.

Today, nearly forty years after the demise of the empires, with some decline in the glitter of the urban-industrial vision in the developed world, hard questions are again being asked about the complicity of our favourite ideas and categories with organised violence. More so, because the last hundred years have also witnessed, perhaps as a reaction to the growing scale of violence, an unprecedented range of new ideas and initiatives and strategies designed to resist violence. If the twentieth century has been particularly innovative in its style and scale of violence, it has also been so in its response to the problem of violence. Ideas and movements committed to nonviolence have broken out like tropical epidemics in the most unlikely places—in authoritarian South Africa at the beginning of the century, in Nazi Germany at the height of its glory, and in southern United States when racism there looked invulnerable. This has given enormous confidence to peace activists and others fighting institutionalised violence. Film director Satyajit Ray once claimed that the best anti-war movies were made during the inter-war years; they did not stop World War II. He may be right. But since Freud in the wake of World War I declared aggression to be a basic human instinct, there have been spirited efforts to cope with human destructiveness. It probably culminated in Gandhi's theory of militant non-violence escaping from the prison house of its cultural geography and history to become a global potentiality.

Today, if Gandhi looks like an esoteric presence in the distant tropics, others have exposed the hollowness and fragility of a whole range of death machines and oppressive systems. The past century also has some exciting stories to tell about the triumph of the human spirit over oppressive and violent systems. Martin Luther King's militant non-violence brought about the collapse of institutionalised racism in North America and peace activists like Andrei Sakharov and nonviolent movements like the Solidarity hastened the unceremonious, almost

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8 The only one among the three instances that is likely to raise eyebrows is Nazi Germany. See, however, Nathan Stoltzfus, *Resistance of the Heart: Intermarriage and the Rosenstrasse Protest in Nazi Germany* (New York: Norton, 1996). It is also important to remind those who believe that Gandhi could have succeeded only against an opponent steeped in British liberalism that he forged his technology of nonviolence in South Africa, then a proper racist and authoritarian state, and not in British India.
pathetic demise of the Soviet empire. Towards the end of the century, the Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela and Aung San Suu Kyi challenged hollow tyrannies to enter the global public imagination and keep alive the Gandhian heritage of militant non-violence outside a nuclearised Indian state. Actually, Gandhi seems to survive in them better than even in his home state, Gujarat, afflicted with religious and ethnic violence and presided over by the rhetoric of hate.

II. The Consumption of Violence

Despite these symbols of hope, the centrality given to violence in public life for such a long stretch of time has given it certain institutional autonomy. The powerful global culture of violence has rewritten the mainstream public culture to serve its own purposes. Violence is seen as natural; nonviolence has to be justified in terms of the results it yielded. As if violence always succeeded!

As new forms of machine violence get associated with severe constriction of emotions and overuse of the ego defences of isolation and denial, in a parallel development the much vaunted individual of classical liberalism is showing signs of being reduced to a narcissistic, politically passive, non-intervening consumer of messages. Such a withdrawn, self-absorbed spectator can be particularly vulnerable to the ‘numbing’ of sensitivities when manipulated by determined political leaders, though probably not exactly in the way Robert J. Lifton proposes. For mass communication now allows consumers to choose to expose themselves to violence according to their inner needs, levels of tolerance, whimsy or convenience. In the process, real-life violence becomes a distant item of disturbing news or, as in the case of the Gulf War, a televised spectacle serving as a serialised thriller. The experience of violence is being privatised and individualised and, thus, reified and distanced. The twentieth century was expected to signal the triumph of individualism. It has done so, but the individual that has triumphed is not the one that the nineteenth century celebrated.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, to judge by surveys of time use in the United States, a huge majority of all communication was one-way (such as a person witnessing a play, reading, or listening to music). Not only was one-way communication less common, because of its scarcity, it was valued and used as a marker of artistic, educational and spiritual pursuits and attainments. The lonely, socially withdrawn poet or philosopher was a valued imagery in many cultures. By the end of the century, a majority of all communications has become one-way. The more determined ones can immerse themselves in their own virtual societies or cyberworlds during work or in round-the-clock, one-way entertainment during leisure. Naturally, there is now a premium on interactive communications. The growing range of one-way communication, especially its new power acquired through information technology, has ensured a revaluation of old priorities. Already automatic accounting machines that speak out the prices of the items purchased by the buyers in a laboured simulation of human communication is common in North American grocery stores. The machines are supposed to give a

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9 Even the processes of globalisation and some of the postmodern structures of thought can be read as attempted denial of the world that has seen Auschwitz, Hiroshima and other genocides. Dean MacCannell, 'Cannibal Tours', Lucien Taylor (ed.), Visualizing Theory: Selected Essays from VAR 1990-1994 (Routledge, 1994), pp. 99-114; see p. 100.
touch of sociality to the otherwise drab, lonely world of triumphant individualism.

'We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human,' says David Abrams.10 If so, we seem to be caught in a rather messy situation when we are not even fully in touch with the human. This cultural shift has been underwritten by major myth-making industries, dependent on media that are often very nearly 'total'. They leave the audience with a narrower range of fantasy life and a lesser scope for creative imagination. Not having a visual component, a novel allows the reader much more scope for visual fantasies than for instance does the cinema. Reading a novel can be much more of a private, interactive voyage than seeing a movie. Cinema in the twentieth century might have been a major medium of creativity but, combined with by television and multimedia, it has become at the end of the century part of a syndrome of total media in the developed societies and in massified sections of the developing societies. Already sections of the citizenry in every democracy fear being infantilised as passive receivers of messages. They sense their diminishing capacity to be anything but passive spectators of public life, who have the right to be briefly active every fourth or fifth year at the time of elections and be in a state of supine, somnolent inactivity the rest of the time. Previously, despotic regimes infantilised the population through a patriarchal style of governance or some version of the ideology of 'bread and circus'. In the psephocratic democracies today, the media has taken over from where the state left off.11

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The combination of these two social forces—tranquilising mass communications and a passive citizenry—offers limited scope for either resisting violence or building a movement for peace. (Indeed, it is remarkable how the likes of Mandela and Suu Kyi have captured public imagination despite these barriers. And they do not even have the advantage of being religious leaders or philosophers as the Dalai Lama has.) These social forces ensure that a large part of the citizenry remains preoccupied with a different set of social ills and their remedies. The last

11 As the average citizen faces infantilisation in large parts of the world, paradoxically there is a shrinkage and devaluation of childhood as a state of human life cycle. The nineteenth century had already redefined childhood as a preparatory stage of adulthood. The twentieth century took that redefinition to its logical conclusion. Today, all over the world, children are being pushed into adult roles—in battlefields, brothels and even in schools—at an increasingly younger age. In the southern world, one of its most tragic expressions of the process has been the wide deployment of child soldiers by terrorist regimes or revolutionary movements. Child prostitution, too, has become common in a number of southern countries. (Teenage crime and pregnancy are the rich world's versions of the same pathology.) It is ironical that many countries that have seen the worst forms of child abuse have an entirely different tradition of childhood. In some of them the concept of the divine is still closely linked to that of childhood and that link is institutionalised in their religious beliefs and practices. In India, for instance, Lord Krishna is more divine as Balakrishna, the child-god, than as the god-king of the Mahabharata. But then, the association between childhood innocence and divinity in Christianity has not protected European and North American children from abuse in the past. It is unlikely India will automatically rediscover the idea that childhood can be an end itself and need not be captive to any principle of productivity and social evolutionism that insists on viewing childhood as imperfect adulthood or as only a preparatory stage of adulthood. See Ashis Nandy, 'Reconstructing Childhood: A Critique of the Ideology of Adulthood', in Traditions, Tyranny and Utopia: Essays in the Politics of Awareness (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 56-76.
century has already given us an inkling of both the nature of the diagnosis and the style of treatment.

The prototypical healers that the twentieth century has bequeathed us are the psychotherapist and the management expert. The former heals persons, but has the larger ambition of remodelling the society after the psychotherapist’s clinic. The other heals groups, but in practice has the narrower ambition of healing corporate structures. They came into their own at the end of World War II and, since then, have never looked back. The growing violence, combined with the growing passivity and depoliticisation of the citizen, has given them a new sense of power and self-confidence. Neither usually deals directly with the main problem of the century, collective violence, but both believe they can handle the problems of living that plague the ordinary citizens, bypassing larger issues of political culture. While some psychotherapists have rebelled against the culture of their discipline in this respect, the world of management has not been so fortunate.

In a sense, the triumph of Homo psychologicus has itself ensured the triumph of the psychotherapist and the professionalisation and medicalisation of everyday problems of living. The image of the bearded, bespectacled psychoanalyst modelled on Sigmund Freud remained till the inter-war years a strange, new kind of healer who seemed to defy the Victorian social norms and conventions. But the doctor of the soul gradually began to encroach upon the nineteenth-century idea of the family doctor, usually a general practitioner who looked after the general wellbeing of his wards, including their occasional discontents of the soul. The personal analyst offered a wider repertoire that included a professionalised version of what the traditional gurus and the elders in the family once did.

The myth of that larger than life self may no longer be that central to the social life of modern societies, but it frames now our ways of thinking about society itself. The therapeutic model has escaped from the clinic to colour the dominant ideas of public life and public service. The final triumph of the Homo psychologicus lies not in the unbridled individualism of the consumer society, but in a political culture that views every citizen as a potential psychological case.

It is not clear why the idea of management became such a rage after World War II. It is possible that it replicated at the level of the corporation, the beleaguered individual seeking clinical guidance. But it is also possible that in a society of atomised individuals, confidence in interpersonal skills decline and, in any complex interpersonal situation, specialists are expected to do what was once considered part of normal social capabilities. Whatever the reasons, the new status and success of the therapist and the management consultant have radically changed our expectations from public life. The problems of governance involving basic social issues are being read as problems of management. In a therapeutic society and a managerial state, the rebellious worker has become a maladjusted employee and the defiant student a neurotic teenager or youth.

In the process, we are being constantly pushed towards a single concept of normality, health, sanity, rationality, development and growth. The recent efforts to legitimise cultural diversity in the knowledge industry have not helped matters; they have only brought diversity within the frame of managerial ethics. Even the mainstream concepts of dissent and diversity are now framed by an increasingly homogenous set of ideas that define human welfare and wellbeing, and what is acceptable, sane and rational. The conceptual ranges of human potentialities and happiness have shrunk. While consumerism may have widened our choices
in trivial matters, conformity has narrowed our choices in more vital areas of life. We have more shampoos and cuisines to choose from; we have lesser options in matters like visions of a good society and healthy person. Our journey through the twentieth-century has now created the conditions for drastic abridgement of our ideas of dissent and diversity too.

In such a world, it is not surprising that certain forms of despair have grown dramatically during the last hundred years. When rebellion gets redefined as insanity and dissent becomes a problem of management, despair cannot but become the voice of the desperate. The despair of guilt that Friedrich Nietzsche writes of or the despair associated with the creative insanity of Van Gogh are no longer the dominant forms of despair. The prototypical despair the twentieth century has bequeathed us is usually of two kinds. One kind afflicted pop stars like Marilyn Monroe and Sylvia Plath, the other kind has led to the suicide of Indian farmers in recent years, caught in the wheels of the mega-machine called modern agronomy. The former is a product of loneliness and fear of meaninglessness, the latter is the fate of marginal, traumatised communities that have lost control over their fate.¹²

This brings us to the new forms of voicelessness in the last hundred years. Every age has its distinctive silences. They include anxieties and fears that are never fully articulated but haunt the public consciousness and, sometimes, trigger a counterphobic, passionate affair with the sources of discomfort. One of the murderous passions of the twentieth century has been the cocktail of ethnocentrism, theory of progress and scientific objectivity (the kind that perpetually flirts with objectification). Everyone admits that ethnocentrism by itself can turn violent, but few admit that as a part of the triad it acquires especial resilience and sanction—as a form of exuberant nationalism or impassioned resistance against the vandals waiting outside city doors. The triad is not a new discovery, but only in the twentieth century has it served as a prescription for genocide. However, to acknowledge that is to own up some of the radical critiques of modernity and modern science and to admit that the modern forms of ethnocentrism can be more dangerous than their nonmodern editions. That admission can be painful and powerful psychological defences have been mobilised to protect us from it.

Not surprisingly, some of the contemporary intellectual manoeuvres designed to work against ethnocentrism have served more as defensive shields. They protect one against any cultural encounter that threatens to become an experience in mutual learning. For instance, the resistance against the global structures of violence could have come from cultural strains that have remained outside the mainstream and not worked with the triad. But the rapid expansion of the media and its globalisation has domesticated multiculturalism itself into a means of managing mainly issues of corporate relations and citizenship rather than those of violence.

Human beings always had cultural exchanges. One cannot discuss, for instance, Arab sciences, South Asian cuisines and European philosophies without acknowledging the cultural exchanges traditionally associated with them. These exchanges for centuries left enough scope

¹² See for instance, Kai Erikson. A New Species of Trouble: The Human Experience of Modern Disasters (New York: Norton, 1994); and Humanscape, November 2000, 7(11), theme issue on 'Poverty and Suicide.'
for local creativity, innovations, adjustments and re-creations. Novel, an European concoction, has not remained the same when exported to Asia, South America and Africa. Anyone who reads Gabriel García Márquez, Chinua Achebe and Salman Rushdie will vouch for that. The Chinese rice ball is almost unrecognisable in its incarnation as idli in South and Southeast Asia. The Mexican chilli is now more associated with Indian cuisine than Mexican.

For various reasons, the cultural exchanges in the twentieth century, particularly after World War II, have begun to offer lesser scope for such cultural 'transcreations'. The emphasis has shifted to forms exported to other cultures relatively intact, forms that change minimally during the process of transit. Cola drinks, blue denims, or hamburgers do not undergo much alteration when crossing national and cultural barriers. Indeed, they lose out when they change too much. For twenty years India experimented with locally made cola drinks, many of them close to the original stuff in looks and in taste. Some of the products tried innovative variations, such as a touch of cardamom, to appeal to Indian taste. But none of them found full acceptance. Their brand names doomed them.

The spread of such artefacts, the ones that do not allow much cultural tinkering, do not mark the expansion of universalism. They indicate a form of mechanical globalisation that stresses, in the language of Arjun Appadurai, the export of hard as opposed to soft cultural forms. Such hard forms not only reduce the range of human creativity but also actually abridge the universal in the name of the global. The novel is much more universal than cola drinks, whereas the latter can only claim to be more global. Coca-Cola does not destroy cultures. Cultures are usually resilient stuff; those that are destroyed by the introduction of a few consumer items are probably destined to die in any case. But, it is my suspicion that the hard cultural forms as a genre do weaken diversity after a point.14

We now live in a multiverse of cultures or at least love to believe that we do so. No educational or business exercise is legitimate at the beginning of the new century without some pretension of crosscultural relevance or representation. Many West European and North American universities take enormous pride in declaring themselves global in scope and multicultural in philosophy.

This rediscovery of culture, too, has been mixed blessing. On the one hand we hear much of multiculturalism and are told that many European and North American societies have already turned multiethnic. On the other, we sense a deep fear of cultures and ethnicity in the political cultures of these very societies. The fear is that the game of multiculturalism may be played in a language not fully transparent to the participants in the dominant systems of knowledge. Culture is all right, but not other worldviews that claim to be universal and not relativistic micro-cosmosologies humbly seeking protection. Cultures live in incommensurable worlds, a number of contemporary theorists insist, but I suspect that even these theorists would be a trifle demoralised if they are taken too seriously and the idea of cultures—or of

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14 In such contexts it is customary to give examples of marginal cultures threatened by integration. I prefer to give the example of the United States where, after years of sustained advertisement and promotion, aerated drinks have at long last overtaken natural water as the most preferred drink of the people. The United States has obviously crossed a cultural watershed to become the first country in human history where water is not the first drink. I leave it to the listeners to judge whether in the process the country has radically redefined its own cultural self or not.
culturally-rooted knowledge systems—as autonomous entities is pushed too far.

We have rediscovered culture to mainly tame it. In its 'raw' form, we see culture as a disruptive, subversive defiance of the dominant motif of public life. More so when various forms of cultural chauvinism are flooding the global culture of democracy. We want culture in a manageable form, so that the managerial state can continue to do its job unhindered. We want cultures that will not pose a threat to our worldview, political economy or favourite categories of knowledge.

III. Dissent by Default

The twentieth century, I have tried to show, did not have dreams that were exploded by reality. It acted out in real life and on a global scale nineteenth century Europe's provincial social theories and utopias and found what people had already found, in other times and at other places. Namely, that a realised utopia is another name for terror. Yet, many see the last century as a story of dreams that have gone sour. They have become, therefore, resistant to the idea of dreaming itself, particularly when it comes to politics. All dreams are at a discount in public life today. They are sources of amusement when politicians vend them and targets of suspicion when intellectuals recommend them. The only acceptable dreams are the ones manufactured by the dream factories of the audio-visual media, which themselves proclaim their products to be pure entertainment. Otherwise, a dreamless world now threatens to throttle all alternatives visions of a desirable society and world order and invites us to appreciate the beauties of the end of history.

In such a world, alternative visions cannot but frequently take the shape of negation and absurdity. That negation can come in many forms. The students' movement in the late 1960s found one of its major spokespersons in Herbert Marcuse who had an articulate theory of radical negation. But usually such negation has taken more indirect forms—the rejection of mega-technology, overdone communitarianism, withdrawal into mysticism and spiritualism, and aggressive celebration of the 'natural', the pastoral, the vernacular, and the 'convivial.' However romantic, hair-brained or unrealistic such positions may look to the mainstream academics and politicians, such dissenting visions cannot but return in regular intervals in the present global culture of politics and they cannot but be attractive to a large proportion of the intellectually alert and the morally sensitive.

Fortunately, an important cultural-psychological contribution of the twentieth century has been the space it has allowed for the absurd and surreal. I use these two terms not in the technical sense in which art critics and art historians use them, but in more generic ways. Earlier, the absurd and the surreal survived in the interstices of world of the creative—among esoteric poets, painters, mystics, even musicians in some cases. Mainstream art in the twentieth century for the first time tried to integrate the absurd and the surreal within the classical. The two surrealist manifestos of André Breton, the works of Salvador Dali and André Warhol, the institutionalisation of atonality in Western classical music by the likes of Arnold Schoenberg and magic realism in literature—they all may look like yesterday's fashions. No longer

accompanied by media hype and public outcry that greeted them when they first made their appearance, they have ceased to shock. But they are markers of a trend that has broadened the range of human creativity. Not merely because the absurd and the surreal should have a place in creative endeavours, but because in a multiethnic, multicultural world, they can act as bridges among the more incommensurable worlds. In a confederational global order of cultures, one's normal is always someone else's absurd and someone else's surreal is one's reality. Frequently, powerful critiques of the violence of the century have come from individual eccentricities or from inscrutable, allegedly nonreplicable cultural responses.

It is, of course, true that the picture is not as clear as my formulation suggests. Even the absurd has to be stylised to qualify as 'properly' or artistically absurd. All dominant cultures seek to format dissent by setting up criteria for what they believe to be genuine dissent and push these criteria to the bitter end. In recent times we have witnessed, for instance, how some Latin American and South Asian writers have reincarnated themselves as magic realists for the sake of the mainstream knowledge industry, even though in South Asia at least such fiction has hoary traditions. Nonetheless, they have opened up the possibility of other 'strange' forms of stylisation finding acceptance in the future from a larger cross-section of the global community.

What has widened the space for the absurd in contemporary consciousness? The answer partly lies in a cultural dialectics that sharpened during the last century. I have already said that the twentieth century, all said, acted out the dreams of the nineteenth. From the various schools of liberalism and socialism to the major ideologies that sanctioned modern despotism and Satanism, most of the century's influential idea systems had their origins in the nineteenth century. These systems were usually mechanomorphic, proudly at the beginning, more apologetically later. 'Their nature is reflected in still surviving in terms like social engineering, objective history and growth models.' They gave a sense of control over social and personal processes to those using the systems. And gaining such control was seen as a legitimate goal of scientific rationality and a byproduct of progress. In the second half of the twentieth century, this mechanomorphism reached the heart of the mainstream culture of public life. Understandably, protest or rebellion against the mainstream culture, self-conscious or otherwise, began to take the shape of the absurd, the surreal, the unrealistic and the trans-real.

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Articulate protest is not everything. Like other centuries, the twentieth century too has its distinctive silences and stilled voices, its unspoken fears and inarticulate rebelliousness. Perhaps because of its spectacular performance in areas such as racism and ethnic cleansing, the last hundred years have immeasurably sharpened our sensitivity to questions about the nature of the silences and the nature of voices that have become audible or have been lost, found, rediscovered, redefined or re-articulated. No other century was so concerned with the hermeneutics of silence and audibility in everyday life, arts and politics. At the end of the century, the social knowledge industry and even some art forms like novels and cinema are shot through with open or tacit debates about who have been silenced and who have acquired voice. There are even debates about who should be given voice and how much voice. Are the voices of the indigenous peoples being drowned by the voices of the professional anthropolo-
gists located in famous universities? Do notorious serial killers or torturers have the right to reach large audiences through mass-circulation newspapers, journals or on television? Does conscientising the oppressed and the violated mean giving voice to them or does it mean silencing authentic, multivocal voices of the victims? Can the psychologically troubled, when flooded with problems of living, claim to speak on their own behalf and do their sufferings get reified when classified by psychiatrists or psychotherapists into formal diagnostic categories.

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, the theory and practice of speaking for the oppressed has come under severe scrutiny. It has been argued that the activist-scholar's job is not to speak on behalf of the deprived or the victimised, but to create the political conditions under which the victims can speak on their own behalf. Whether the argument is correct or wrong, the decline of colonial culture has, by the end of the century, created some limited space for the silenced majority of the world, including some of its older civilisations, to articulate their demands for a voice in the global culture. It is unlikely that they will allow their benefactors, either in the West or the East, whether in respected newspapers or journals or in prestigious universities, to speak on their behalf. This is as much a diagnosis as a hope.

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