Tales of Liberty: Interrogating the Internalization of Modern Politics

Natália Maria Félix de Souza¹
IRI/PUC-Rio

Introduction

The problem of freedom has always constituted one of the greatest concerns of Western political thought, having certainly acquired a very distinctive and renewed importance for modernity². It is in the name of some sort of qualified freedom that the modern state finds most of its legitimacy, and that claims to nationalism come to meet most of their support. It was an ardent desire for freedom that ignited most of the colonial struggles against colonialism, translating it into a strong claim for self-government and national self-determination. The postcolonial literature would again turn towards this untiring claim, this time to understand what had gone wrong in its much desired quest for freedom, coming to realize that some profound and powerful links connected colonialism to modernity, which they were then decided to unravel in order to emancipate the subaltern “other” from the self-righteous Western “self”.

This paper engages the problem of freedom in order to investigate how it comes to acquire such a distinctive place in the modern imaginary, both for those arguing in favor of a universal, modernizing reason and for those who intend to counter-play it. It will first turn to John Stuart Mill’s text “On Liberty” trying to understand what is at stake in his adamant defense of individual liberty, and how it speaks to the way freedom has become such a central value in the political imaginary of our time. The paper will then move to Max Weber’s text on the profession and vocation of politics, to see how this claim for individual liberty has been accommodated inside one of the most powerful

¹ PhD Candidate at IRI/PUC-Rio. E-mail: nataliamfsouza@gmail.com
² This work does not concern itself with a strict definition of what came to be called modernity or, for that matter, with its “starting point”. For the purposes of our argument, modernity and modern politics will be interchangeably used to refer to the way politics came to be conceived of in a desacralized world of statist political communities.
defenses of nationalism. This analysis will indicate how modern politics, despite of its claims for rationalism and freedom, has nonetheless been possible only under conditions of irrationality and necessity. The text finally engages Ashis Nandy’s claim against a politics of escape. In his text “The Intimate Enemy”, Nandy addresses a very sharp but still indirect critique of most de-colonial and post-colonial claims that appeal to some sort of dualism between “self” and “other” as a way to emancipate or otherwise set the postcolonial subject free from a rational, modern, conscious Western self. I will try to read Nandy against the backdrop delineated by the liberalism and nationalism of Mill and Weber, trying to indicate the difficulties of thinking an alternative politics, as becomes clear in his attempts to develop a psycho-political strategy for decentralizing – which is a way of recovering – the West’s self, destabilizing its grand narratives and reimagining the possibility of having forms of not-already-captured dissent.

In that sense, the argument will take a twofold task at hand. First, through a closer investigation of Mill and Weber, it will attempt to make a claim that the centrality of the concept of freedom – both individual and national – for modern political thought is not to be ascribed to any intrinsic value it might contain, as much as to the contradictions and impossibilities it conceals under the weight of its grand narratives. By doing that, it will then turn to an investigation of the possibility of having some sort of postcolonial politics that does not fall prey to the very concepts and narratives it tries to criticize.

**Mill and the internalization of liberty**

John Stuart Mill saw the permanent tension between individual and society as the most central problem of his time, one that was part of the great struggle of the Western world to find an accommodation between liberty and authority\(^3\). According to Mill, the rise of Democratic Republics, rather than creating the possibilities for self-government, had only accentuated the problem of the illegitimate authority of society over the individual, since it created a form of tyranny of the majority over each individual: it operated not only through legal penalties, but also through the moral coercion by the public opinion. (Mill, 1991)

---

\(^3\) Liberty, for Mill, had been conceived as a negative category, as the limitation of, and therefore protection against, the tyrannical power of the political rulers; political rights and constitutional checks were the means to achieve such freedom.
Faced with this problem, Mill (1991) articulated one of the most influential defenses of individual liberty of the 19th century as a way to enable men to approach their human nature. Man should be free to choose whatever he thought fit for his life and his happiness, as long as it did not interfere negatively with other people’s lives. For man, he would argue, is sovereign over his mind and body, and society must not be legitimately entitled to interfere with his ideas and practices in what they concern only the individual himself, under the claim to provide him good and well-being. According to Mill, “[...] the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection.” (Mill, 1991, p. 30)

The idea of individual liberty Mill advocates for is mainly concerned with the liberty of thought and discussion and the free development of individuality; these are supposed to be two inalienable rights of individuals, without which they cannot fully enjoy their humanity, being thus unable to search for happiness and well-being. “The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it.” (Mill, 1991, pp. 23-4). Mill vehemently asserts the right of people to be different – to think and act according to differential opinions and principles, which should not be curtailed by any appeal to a higher authority, capable of deciding what is best for each of its subjects. In this sense, he becomes profoundly suspicious of an excessive reliance on customs, for they represent the interests and feelings of an ascendant class inside a society, with very particular opinions on what should constitute the limits of authority. In the absence of any ultimate authority to decide a question for all of mankind, the power of coercion against divergent voices becomes in itself illegitimate, robbing an individual from his human race by attempting to silence the expression of his opinion.

For Mill, men cannot assume their infallibility, for the only way of approaching truth is by letting it be confronted with all sorts of opinions and modes of life, no matter how much error and misjudgments they might carry. “Complete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion, is the very condition which justifies us in assuming its truth for purposes of action; and on no other terms can a being with human faculties have any rational assurance of being right.” (Mill, 1991, p.39) In this sense, he argues that it is only through the continual confrontation between half-truths – which keeps each
“within the limits of reason and sanity” (Mill, 1991, p. 61) – that the improvement of mankind takes place.

In this sense, Mill makes a plea for originality, asserting that innovative, “bold, vigorous, independent train of thought” becomes the only assurance against “low, abject, servile” characters. For this reason, opinions must be translated into different experiments of living, as a way for individuality to assert itself. The free development of individuality implicates one’s capacity to make its own choices – a capacity that is revealing of his worth as a human being. “Where, not the person’s own character, but the traditions or customs of other people are the rule of conduct, there is wanting one of the principal ingredients of human happiness, and quite the chief ingredient of individual and social progress.” (Mill, 1991, p.73).

Mill’s assertion of the absolute need to guarantee individual liberty has been interpreted as carrying an ultimate impossibility for his enterprise, in the sense of not being able to reconcile his liberalism with his utilitarianism. Nevertheless, I understand that the contradictions kept inside Mill’s thought go much deeper than this sort of criticism seems to be willing to apprehend. Something in his analysis deserves an even more urgent and careful look, for it concerns the limits – the conditions of (im)possibility – of his conception of freedom; limits that are both implicit and explicit in his text – or, we could say, that are made explicit precisely for being implicit. This concerns his conception of reason – and therefore the idea of modernization as rationalization – as well as the underlying understanding of irrationality it conveys, which gives the final discriminatory tone of his celebrated value-pluralist idea of liberty.

Throughout his entire narrative there is the assumption that it is in the name of reason that the supremacy of individual liberty can be asserted. This assumption is presented more as a recognition of a fact than as some defense of the intrinsic value of

---

4 According to Isaiah Berlin (1991), there is a crucial incompatibility between his commitment to a welfarist utilitarianism, in which individual liberty stands as an instrumental value, and his adamant moral defense of the intrinsic values of individuality, human choice, freedom of thought and action, no matter how much they might impact on the individual – and consequently on the general – welfare. His recognition of human subjectivity, and therefore, his defense of the diversity of values would be, according to such criticism, significantly at odds with the utilitarian maxim that human beings are driven strictly by their compensation systems, in search of pleasure and avoiding pain.

5 Mill’s ideas have been greatly influenced by the utilitarianism of his father, James Mill, and of Jeremy Bentham, who were responsible for his education. Along with them, John Stuart came to represent one of the most prominent utilitarian thinkers. Nevertheless, his utilitarianism was significantly impacted by his liberalism, which distances him from his mentors.
freedom. Differently from the utilitarian emphasis on the need of rationality in order to achieve the supreme value of happiness, Mill highlights the diversity in modes of life; by doing this, he is not so much dismissing the centrality of reason, as much as taking it from granted, as the only obvious achievement once individual liberty is in place.

And it is because he takes reason and the rationalizing process for granted, that Mill finds it “hardly necessary” to remark that his doctrine “is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties”. Children and young people under legal age must be protected from both external and self-inflicted injuries;

For the same reason, we may leave out of consideration those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage. […] Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end. Liberty, as a principle, has no application to any state of things anterior to the time when mankind have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion. (Mill, 1991, p.31, emphasis added)

But even this becomes subject to his unconditional faith that reason and civilization will triumph: he further explains that there is no need for society to suppress irrational ideas and opinions through physical or moral coercion, neither in the individual nor in a barbarian community.

If civilization has got the better of barbarism when barbarism had the world to itself, it is too much to profess to be afraid lest barbarism, after having been fairly got under, should revive and conquer civilization. A civilization that can thus succumb to its vanquished enemy, must first have become so degenerate, that neither its appointed priests and teachers, nor anybody else, has the capacity, or will take the trouble, to stand up for it. (Mill, 1991, p. 107)

This contradiction, rather than undermining his argument, becomes source of much of its power: in the one hand, he manages to exclude a parcel of humanity – those who still live in a nonage, outside of history – from his system, which can then be internalized into the trope of freedom as an all-encompassing principle, that must not only accept, but actually promote, the greatest amount of diversity in experiences of living; on the other hand, he justifies the domination of civilization over barbarism not through the appeal to violence, but based in its intrinsic superiority, which makes violence itself dispensable.
In this sense, his conception of liberty remains deeply elitist, and what is worse, profoundly racist. First, because his plea for liberty does not derive from the belief that its protection will assure a society of free man, as much as it is intended to promote a society of free man as the only means of fostering a “small minority” of great thinkers – fully-developed human beings that will even improve the lives of the underdeveloped ones. As he puts it, “persons of genius, it is true, are, and are always likely to be, a small minority; but in order to have them, it is necessary to preserve the soil in which they grow. Genius can only breathe freely in an atmosphere of freedom.” (Mill, 1991, p. 80).

Therefore, if his conception of the diversity of human nature and of happiness does not see progress as the mass manufacture of one type of human being, it nonetheless carries a profound developmental and historical dimension. In what concerns his conception of happiness, the historical dimension appears rather implicitly on the claim that certain general cultural achievements are indispensable for the full accomplishment of happiness. This dimension becomes further recognizable by his understanding that individual and social development progresses through several distinct phases, leading to the improvement of man’s diverse excellences, and the approach of his developed nature that is somewhere in need of discovery.

Weber and the internalization of (national) necessity

A very elegant narrative that allows us to further look into how the problem of liberty came to constitute one of the central pillars of modern politics is Max Weber’s “The vocation of politics”. Weber shows a greater awareness of the conditions of possibility of individual liberty, which is evident in the way he couples liberalism with a deep conviction on the need to build a strong national character. In that sense, he explores some of the very same tensions that were being played out on Mill’s text, but he does it with a much greater grasp of their dialectical relationship, and of the impossibilities involved in any attempt to escape it under a strictly “rational” or “logical” statement.

---

6 In this sense, Mill understands that a democracy, being ruled by the public opinion, cannot “rise above mediocrity, except in so far as the sovereign Many have let themselves be guided (which in their best times they always have done) by the counsels and influence of a more highly gifted and instructed One or Few”. Individuality is the origin of all wise or noble things, and “the honour and glory of the average man is that he is capable of following that initiative”. (Mill, 1991, p. 82)
As Mill, Weber also takes universal rationalization for granted; this means that his account of politics does not take a stand on promoting the intrinsic values of reason and the benefits of rationalization as modernization, as much as he acknowledges them as a matter of fact of political life. He can thus move on to try and tackle some of the side effects of what he assumes to be an inexorable process of rationalization. This leads him to try and deal with that question, which was also putting Mill’s thoughts in motion, of how to accommodate individual freedom under the regime of mass democracies, since the latter represented an attack on the principles of traditional liberalism. His concern, then, comes out of a specific diagnosis of the character of modern Western society, according to which the growing rationalization of life was leading to a “disenchantment of the world”, creating a scenario of increased bureaucratization and a consequent suppression of genuine political leadership.

But, against Mill, Weber’s awareness of the permanent conflict between individual liberty and the needs of the political community could not be solved by dislocating the tension in favor of one of its sides, as to put faith on the inevitable rationalizing path of such an option. Rationalization, for this matter, is not so much a solution, as it creates a whole series of new difficulties that cannot be dealt with by the mere option for individual liberty. This is not to say that Mill did not have this in mind, for he saw that increasing rationalization could lead to a disincentive on the spirit of freedom needed for the emergence of people of genius. Nonetheless, Weber seems to think that such acknowledgement has to be further pursued instead of being left to rest on the assumption that even more emphasis on individual freedom will enhance the chances of these difficulties being circumvented.

This, in fact, becomes for Weber one of the greatest contradictions to be tackled by post-Bismarckian Germany, where bureaucratization had taken a definitive stand into political life, causing a deeply problematic elimination of true political leadership, in favor of rule by a professionalized officialdom, which was reflected in German disastrous foreign policy. This is also the contradiction that prompts his liberal

---

7 According to Weber, the bureaucratic state order was the most specific form of the modern state, comprised of an administrative staff deprived of the means of rule and therefore bound to the ruler by the expectation of material reward and social honor. These professional politicians came to live from politics, entering the service of political lords and having no ambition of becoming lords themselves. They were not material for genuine political leadership.
nationalism, which shows an intricate understanding of the impossibilities of (what we could call) Mill’s (naïve) liberalism, but in itself cannot stand without its own tensions.

Another element worthy of note, and which puts Weber in a somewhat different-but-similar relationship to Mill, is that, by taking the rationalization process for granted, Weber offers a deep critique of other people and distant cultures, as well as an appeal for rationalization as modernization to happen all over the world. Even if both of them stress the particularities of their claims – Mill through the professed acknowledgement of diversity of modes of life, and Weber through the immediate concern with the fate of Germany as a state and a nation – they still consecrate some sort of grand narrative precisely by accepting modernization as a fact, which means turning it into history – a conflictual, open-ended history, that is nonetheless inexorably developmental.

As Goethe says, and Weber quotes, “the devil is old, so become old if you want to understand him” (Weber, 1994b, p.367). This is certainly the highlight of Weber’s narrative, and it is the moment of the most acute performance of his grand historical narrative. His whole argumentation is minimally and elegantly designed to conduct the addressee to that specific moment, the moment in which it all comes to a halt, for the lesson has been taught and it becomes a matter of realizing how important the task is, sooner rather than later. Genuine political activity is not for everyone: one has to make a pact with the means of violence, and, for that matter, will live “in a state of inner tension with the god of love, […] a tension that may erupt at any moment into irresolvable conflict” (Weber, 1994b, p. 366). Politics is conflict, so political leadership is needed for leading the (German) nation into taking responsibility for its own fate, in order to establish itself as a world power.

Weber neither opposes nor welcomes industrialization, or the capitalist economy; he just accepts them as the only future path for German development, with all of the consequences it brings to the pattern of social relations. His concerns are not properly with economy, but with the consequences its development brings to the interests of the nation. In this sense, he goes on to explain that the reason why one has to master the state is to promote national power, which is much more than just power politics, for it requires a deep commitment to a “cause”. Germany had no other choice than to take responsibility before history; if it was to become a powerful nation state amongst others, it had to face up to the “diabolical character of power” – for modern politics and the modern state is not about the content of its activities, but about the specific means it
employs, physical violence. To understand this was to cope with the idea that a political leader must be prepared to take decisions and acts which go against traditional ethics.

Nonetheless, Weber refuses to destitute the politician of ethics – after all, he will be fighting for a cause, and the cause itself will give meaning and purpose to his actions, that would otherwise fall into “emptiness and absurdity” (Weber, 1994b, p. 354). He thus distinguishes ethics from morality, showing that the ethos of politics is guaranteed by an ultimate devotion to a cause.

He [the politician] can serve a national goal or the whole of humanity or social and ethical goals, or goals which are cultural, inner-worldly or religious; he may be sustained by a strong faith in ‘progress’ (however this is understood), or he may coolly reject this kind of faith; he can claim to be the servant of an ‘idea’ or, rejecting on principle any such aspirations, he may claim to serve external goals of everyday life – but some kind of belief must always be present. Otherwise (and there can be no denying this) even political achievements which, outwardly, are supremely successful will be cursed with the nullity of all mortal undertakings. (Weber, 1994b, p. 355)

Weber’s discussion on the twofold possibility of ethically oriented activity appears, then, as an attempt to cope with the ‘needs’ of politics in a modern, disenchanted world that has been deprived of an absolute authority to decide for the ultimate values and moral principles to guide man in his activities. Man’s individuality has, thus, to be affirmed through a conscious and responsible commitment to a cause, that can never be proved by intellectual means, but that will be the only way of filling the void of an inner conviction essential for genuine political conduct. So, although he first states that an ethic of principled conviction is “irreconcilably opposed” to an ethic of responsibility, and that the latter should offer the only basis for a genuine political leadership, his narrative ends up acknowledging that in fact they are “complementary to one another”.

This apparent contradiction is precisely what renders his argument so elegant and so powerful. It is also a crucial move in which it becomes clear that Weber was aware of

---

8 Those who subscribe to the ethic of conviction are the ones who act guided exclusively by the supremacy of the moral ends they are seeking to promote through their actions – as if the end sanctified the means. Unable to cope with “the ethical irrationality of the world”, they act out of pure conviction and, therefore, take no responsibility for their actions. On the other hand, those subscribing to an ethic of responsibility have “no right to presuppose goodness and perfection in human beings”, and therefore bear the responsibility for every one of their actions. But according to Weber, “no ethics in the world can get round the fact that the achievement of ‘good’ ends is in many cases tied to the necessity of employing morally suspect or at least morally dangerous means, and that one must reckon with the possibility or even the likelihood of evil side-effects. Nor can any ethic in the world determine when and to what extent the ethically good end ‘sanctifies’ the ethically dangerous means and side-effects.” (Weber, 1994b, p. 360)
the conditions of (im)possibility of modern politics understood as a very specific set of discriminatory relations, which are mutually productive rather than dualistic. The modern, mature – which is also great an noble – human being – the only one capable of having a ‘vocation for politics’ – has to be a man capable of mastering the rational, bureaucratic, modern state machine, precisely by recapturing some of the irrationality that was left outside of this machine. That is why, in the absence of a supreme ethical authority, a true politician must gather three very important characteristics if he is to succeed: a passionate commitment to a cause, that gives meaning to his conduct in a world that is increasingly disenchanted; a deep sense of responsibility for that cause as the only basis of action; which, for its turn, requires the “decisive psychological quality” of judgment, in order to maintain “one’s inner composure and calm while being receptive to realities” (Weber, 1994b, p. 353).

This explains why Weber puts his hopes of a genuine politician neither in the traditional ruler, nor in the rational one: rather, he sticks with the charismatic leader, with personal qualities capable of organizing the differing interests of his party and to reach the masses – i.e. mastering the rational apparatus while giving a purpose for the whole system to exist. The demagogue was the representation of such a figure inside democracies: different from the officials, they were able to take exclusive, personal responsibility for their actions. Those concerned with a purely principled conviction, who sought the salvation of their or other people’s souls, were not fit for politics – which implied “employing the means of violence and acting on the basis of an ethic of responsibility”. Therefore, “the ‘salvation of the soul’ is endangered” every time a political objective is in place – be it the ‘native city’, the ‘Fatherland’, ‘the future of socialism’, ‘the achievement of international peace’, or, for our purposes, decolonization and national self-determination. In this way, Weber affirms with discriminatory precision what are the limits of legitimate politics, and therefore what one must become in order to be fit for participating in it – “The devil is old, so become old if you want to understand him’.” (Weber, 1994b, p. 367)

**Freedom and its discontents**

So far I have attempted to lay out the grounds under which it becomes possible to understand what is at stake in some of the most powerful claims about liberalism and nationalism that helped us to minimally visualize how these values became centerpieces
in the delineation of modern politics. I tried to emphasize not only ideas that were explicitly laid out by Mill and Weber in some of their most seminal political texts, but we made an even bigger effort in trying to destabilize their narratives, attempting to grasp what remains otherwise concealed under apparently clear-cut definitions of what politics is about. In this sense, my analysis has been interested in opening a few doors through which it might become possible to understand how the values of freedom and nationalism have become so foundational for thinking modern politics, especially through the way they have been articulated with – promoting and at the same time been promoted by – the idea of an inescapable rationalizing process.

I now turn to the text of Ashis Nandy, “The intimate enemy”, for it offers a very powerful interpellation of the modernizing moves that are put forward by the previous authors. This might allow an initial confrontation with the possibilities – and also impossibilities – of thinking about freedom and nationalism in the post-colony. Nandy, in this sense, becomes an interesting author to start such an investigation for he offers, through a psychological strategy, a kind of critique that does not content itself with an easy refusal of the modernizing tropes carried out by Western reason, showing a much bolder and eloquent grasp of the impossibilities of a politics of escape.

According to Nandy, the reason why colonialism became such a devastating practical reality is because it found shelter inside people’s minds. Both colonizers and colonized had to identify with their roles in order for the specific pattern of colonial relations to take place. Therefore, he starts with the premise that the West has itself become a pervasive part of the non-West – since these very categories acquired their meaning only through the colonial experience – to try and articulate the possibility of thinking resistance without being captured inside “official modes of dissent”. According to him, “it is possible today to be anti-colonial in a way which is specified and promoted by the modern world view as ‘proper’, ‘sane’ and ‘rational’. Even when in opposition, that dissent remains predictable and controlled.” (Nandy, 1983, p. xii).

The possibility he devises for breaking with this pattern – which is precisely the pattern he identifies in most of the decolonization and self-determination struggles of the 20th century – is a psychological strategy that, influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis, tries to decentralize the colonial subject, amounting to a destabilization of the conventional understanding about the colonial relations – as based in a friend/enemy, oppressor/oppressed, self/other, perpetrator/victim set of dualisms.
Through such a strategy, Nandy believes it becomes possible to rearticulate resistance out of an exclusively confrontational framework, which he sees as feeding into rather than breaking with the colonial imaginary.

His psycho-political strategy is twofold. In the one hand, it attempts to show how colonialism came to be constituted as a psychological state of mind through the affirmation of shared codes (approaching two otherwise incommensurable cultures), and the actualization of reward systems and categories that offered the conditions of possibility for thought and action, which created a sort of mechanism of management of dissent. This allows him to interrogate two of the central categories that organized the colonial relations between Britain and India – sex and age – and to suggest the manner in which this represented the production of both colonizers and colonized, not so much as oppressors and oppressed, but as two different sets of victims. This attempt at capturing the West’s other self, according to the non-West experiences of suffering, allows him, on the other hand, to investigate some categories, concepts and defenses of mind that help turning the West into a manageable vector; this puts him in a position to suggest forms of resistance in the non-West that refuse to relate to the West as players or counter-players of some already established game. A refusal that allows them to abandon their self-identification as victims to become participants (both consciously and by default) in a political move against oppression, being able to construct a non-dominant West with which they are able to live.

Ultimately, modern oppression, as opposed to the traditional oppression, is not an encounter between the self and the enemy, the rulers and the ruled, or the gods and the demons. It is a battle between de-humanized self and the objectified enemy, the technologized bureaucrat and his reified victim, pseudo-rulers and their fearsome other selves projected on to their ‘subjects’. (Nandy, 1983, p. xvi)

In that sense, Nandy argues for the need of post-colonial India to understand its colonial legacy through a language that, while incorporates that of the modern world, tries at the same time to remain outside it. The way for India to be captured as India – and not as the non-West – cannot, therefore, be found by underplaying the recessive characteristics in the West or, inversely, by appealing to some romantic Indianness. This sort of conflictual politics only amounts to an even more permanent association with the West. One has to be aware that
[...] colonialism created a domain of discourse where the standard mode of transgressing such stereotypes was to reverse them [...] No colonialism could be complete unless it ‘universalized’ and enriched its ethnic stereotypes by appropriating the language of defiance of its victims. That was why the cry of the victims of colonialism was ultimately the cry to be heard in another language – unknown to the colonizer and to the anti-colonial movements that he had bred and then domesticated.” (Nandy, 1983, p. 72-3)

In the case of India, Nandy understands that colonialism began when a homology was established between sexual and political dominance, moment in which British-Indian political relations began to ascribe cultural meanings to the British domination. This was done through the categorization of the relation between sexes and the ascription of the most depreciated sex (femininity-in-masculinity) to the colonized: this was a way of rendering legitimate and even naturalizing colonial domination. This could only be achieved by producing a cultural consensus, through the identification with the aggressor and with his role, not only on the side of the colonizer, but also and decisively by the colonized. Whereas the ruler was bound by the imaginary that saw colonial exploitation as a necessary step “of a philosophy of life that was in harmony with superior forms of political and economic organization” (Nandy, 1983, p. 10), the ruled justified colonialism by accepting the ideology of the system, acting as either its players or its counter-players. The Indian’s decision of fighting the British through those categories that were supposed to characterize the superiority of masculinity became itself a way of further legitimizing the aggressor’s values.

In the colonial culture, identification with the aggressor bound the rulers and the ruled in an unbreakable dyadic relationship. The Raj saw Indians as crypto-barbarians who needed to further civilize themselves. It saw British rule as an agent of progress and as a mission. Many Indians in turn saw their salvation in becoming more like the British, in friendship or in enmity. (Nandy, 1983, p. 7)

The same was processed by the establishment of a homology between childhood and the state of being colonized. Legitimacy in such case was achieved by undervaluing aspects of a culture while overvaluing those of the other: education was needed to bring development and progress to those in need of it. Through this narrative, history becomes a form of morality able to redeem the immorality of colonialism through progress; this indicates how modern history – which is in fact a modernizing history – becomes profoundly complicit with the colonial imaginary, precisely by accepting the cultural
superiority of the modern values that were to be spread through modernization – of which colonialism was an inevitable step.

This takes us back to Mill’s narrative: as we indicated, his claim, while all-cognizant of (legitimate) diversity, is nonetheless intimately tied to a profoundly discriminatory political move that rendered illegitimate any appeals for liberty coming from human beings that were not yet “in the maturity of their faculties”, which included not only children and young persons under legal age, but also “those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage”. Consideration that allowed Mill’s liberalism to render despotism a “legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians”, since liberty could have “no application to any state of things anterior to the time when mankind have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion” (Nandy, 1983, p. 31). This stands as an indication of the impossibility of modern freedom to be accomplished outside of equality.

Under the colonial imaginary – which was not the imaginary of the colonizers more than it was of the colonized – this aspect of Mill’s narrative could hardly be set against his own liberal argument. The coupling of history and rationality offered the key to legitimizing the equation between colonialism and modernization, by putting them in a teleological path. It is precisely for this reason that Nandy insists on the need to abandon the view of colonialism as a one way street, or a zero-sum game, for this view is complicit with colonialism’s ideology. It is paramount to understand that the colonizing experience was at least as much significant for the colonizer culture as it was to the colonized one.

Once again, this offers a very sharp insight on what is at stake on the narratives presented by both Mill and Weber. This pathology to which Nandy refers is what we tried to identify in both thinkers as their need to legitimize the belief in a profoundly rationalist modern world through some sort of irrational move. Mill has to deploy a profound discriminatory move at the edge of modernity in order to legitimize his unconditional faith in individual liberty. This means that, in order for his idea of freedom to be able to promote diversity, it had to be coupled with some sort of equality; for that reason, some form of un-freedom and irrationality had to be made illegitimate. Without the previous exclusion of those groups of people that are under age, or in a nonage – whose consequent immaturity had to be bound by necessity – he could not be able to enforce the idea that everyone was equally entitled to be free in what concerned
their own minds and bodies. In this case, irrationality and un-freedom become constitutive of the modern world precisely by being excluded from it.

Weber, for his turn, is less compelled by the task of disguising the irrational grounds of modern rationalism, which makes it easier to identify the pathology Nandy refers to. His nationalism is the key for his pathology: there is no way of coping with the irrationalities of a modernizing project without a considerable dose of irrationality itself; which means, there’s no point in being a (formal) state without being a (substantive) nation; no point in being (rationally) responsible without having a(n) (irrational) conviction; no point in having (modern) politics without a (spiritual, material, empirical, transcendental, moral or otherwise purposeful) cause.

This analysis may allow us to understand how such powerful and apparently good ideologies such as freedom and nationalism became deeply complicit with the atrocities of the colonial experience – in all of their victims. It also might allow us to understand how they became so efficient as to provide an entire frame of reference, both for action and for counter-action, by relying on the (irrational) promises of history and reason. But Nandy (1983) argues for a form of psychological resistance capable of breaking with these grand narratives, not by opposing them – which would be another way of endorsing their presuppositions – but by recognizing their instability, in order to recover the multiplicity of – both Western and non-Western – “selves” that will otherwise remain lost and unmanageable.

According to Nandy (1983), the most creative response to the pathologies of Western culture came in the figure of Gandhi. He did this by trying to be a living symbol of the West’s other, which is another parcel of the West’s self: the intimate enemy of the dominant – modern, rational, free, but also chauvinist, violent, racist – West. In that sense, he took no more interest in Indian liberation from colonialism than in Britain’s. And he did it by refusing to play the game in the dominant West’s terms.

In what concerns the sexual homology, his idea of non-violence represented a way of meeting the non-masculine self of man that had been obliterated by the Western self-concept. Also, having been depicted from the Christian Sermon of the Mount, his ideology of non-violence did not stand as the affirmation of a one-sided morality in favor of the Hinduism of the non-West. By not trying to reject the West altogether, but
to find the other Western self, lost in the dominant narrative of politics as violence, it managed to stand as a form of alternative dissent.  

In what concerned the colonial homology between childhood and political subjugation, Gandhi affirmed the primacy of myths over history: “he thereby circumvented the unilinear pathway from primitivism to modernity, and from political immaturity to political adulthood, which the ideology of colonialism would have the subject society and the ‘child races’ walk” (Nandy, 1983, p. 55). This allowed turning history into a permanent present, for even if past can be made an authority, the nature of its authority is “shifting, amorphous and amenable to intervention”. (Nandy, 1983, p.57) 

Nandy’s approach to Gandhi works as a very serious critique into the many versions of Indian nationalism that had relied on the absolutization of the differences between the East and the West, rendering them as natural cultural antipodes. By doing that, they only reinforced “the cultural arrogance of post-Enlightenment Europe” that had come to define a ‘true’ West a ‘true’ East” (Nandy, 1983, p. 74), accentuating their differences in a way that legitimized the ideology of colonialism that interpreted it as affecting one culture more than the other. In this sense, Nandy’s claim to recover the lost selves of both India and the West appears as a negation of the possibility of stabilizing these identities into a homogenous culture, which might offer a powerful and progressive critique of the modernizing tropes that carry the strongest forms of legitimation of colonialism. This allows retrieving an India that is neither pre-modern nor anti-modern, but just non-modern.

This century has shown that in every situation of organized oppression the true antonyms are always the exclusive part versus the inclusive whole – not masculinity versus femininity but either of them versus androgyny, not the past versus the present but either of them versus the timelessness in which the past is the present and the present is the past, no the oppressor versus the oppressed but both of them versus the rationality which turns them into co-victims. (Nandy, 1983, p. 99)

---

9 By doing that, Gandhi refused the premises that might lead one to be captured inside the irresistible Weberian narrative that delineates the limits of legitimate political activity, and therefore of what constitutes a genuine-because-responsible politician.

10 By doing this, Nandy shows once again an acute awareness of how history itself is a myth, which might be a significant insight if one wants to understand the powerful foundational myths of modern society – such as the Hobbesian narrative on the originary social contract that inaugurates modernity as the possibility of freedom inside the Leviathan.
Therefore, it becomes noteworthy that Nandy’s project of recovering the “self” that was lost under colonialism does not amount to a reestablishment of a “self” that is whole but, and this comes from his Freudian roots, it implicates precisely the opposite: the recovery of the “self” is an acknowledgement of the impossibility of the centralized “self” – being, therefore, a loss of the “self” as it appears in most of the post-colonial narratives that emphasize the relationship between the “self” and the “other”. It is only when confronted with its intimate enemy – with that which was put aside in order to guarantee a stabilized identity – that the “self” stops being some other self’s “other” to become only a self-realization-in-being.

Conclusion

As Gandhi was to so clearly formulate through his own life, freedom is indivisible, not only in the popular sense that the oppressed of the world are one but also in the unpopular sense that the oppressor too is caught in the culture of oppression. (Nandy, 1983, p. 63)

This investigation was a way of questioning the possibility of retaining some idea of freedom that could uphold a form of alternative politics. In this sense, it is an attempt at coping with how freedom internalizes and is internalized by modern politics, with its appeals to sovereign subjectivities and its – now too familiar – promises of rationalization, modernization, development, autonomy. Much of the concern behind this effort comes from an understanding that most of the attempts that have been made in order to question the grand narratives of modernity – amongst which the “post-colonial critique” has become one of the most powerful challenges to the status of modern rationality, by showing how it is deeply complicit with colonialism and cannot represent a solution too it – have themselves been somehow caught up in their tropes, freedom and nationalism being perhaps the greatest representatives among of them.

The liberal narrative of Mill has been inquired not so much in order to understand the substance of freedom – for actually, freedom retains a still very negative aspect in his narrative, as the protection against external authority, and therefore, is introduced more for its formal promises than for any substantive meaning – as to come to terms with what had to be externalized in order for freedom to be internalized. My argument, in this sense, tried to account for the insoluble contradictions that are kept inside his
narrative, and how they are responsible for much of its force. It was possible to suggest, in this manner, that modern freedom and rationality have been possible only under strictly discriminatory conditions; such conditions, by attempting to delineate modern civilization as the realm where reason and freedom could be contained and therefore promoted, have nonetheless been unable to keep irrationalism and necessity completely at bay.

We have then explored how Weber was himself aware of this impossibility of modern politics to keep with the rational and with the liberal, having then articulated a much bolder and compelling argument in favor of national politics, which requires a great deal of substantive purpose to cope with the side-effects of the strict formalism of the rational state. While Mill had included irrationality and necessity by excluding them, Weber seems to be deploying an opposite-but-complementary move of exclusion by inclusion. He includes irrationality and necessity – which means that he acknowledges the need of a fierce conviction in the part of the responsible politician that has to claim “here I stand, I can do no other” – as a way to tackle the irrationality and necessities caused by the inexorable rationalization and disenchantment of the world.

Having opened this double route to claim that modern politics is itself constituted out of the impossibility of having the rational without the irrational, and of having freedom without equality, the paper then turned to Nandy’s attempt to evade some sort of dualistic understanding of politics in order to be able to account for the possibility of having a form of dissent that does not get trapped inside the grand political narratives by default. Rather than claiming the success of Nandy’s enterprise, this paper tries to indicate the great awareness he demonstrates of the high stakes involved into his endeavor.

His sharp understanding of the central role assumed by history and science (Western reason) for legitimating those grand narratives – which we tried to indicate in the analysis of Mill and Weber – coupled with his refusal to deploy a confrontational politics of players and counter-players certainly amounts to the proposition of possible routes that might evade being captured or run over by the trains of history. Which is not to say that his “authentic innocence” remains completely immune from all of the great modern political ambitions. After all, by attempting to find alternative forms of dissent,
he also keeps alive the hope for thinking about freedom in some non-liberal, non-nationalist way.

Thus, the victim may become aware that, under oppression, the parochial could protect some forms of universalism more successfully than does conventional universalism; the spiritualism of the weak may articulate or keep alive the values of a non-oppressive world better than the ultra-materialism of those who live in vision-less worlds; and that the non-achieving and the insane may often have a higher chance of achieving their civilizational goal of freedom and autonomy without mortgaging their sanity. I imply that these paradoxes are inevitable because the dominant idea of rationality is the first strand of consciousness to be co-opted by any successful structure of institutionalized oppression. When such co-optation has taken place, resistance as well as survival demands some access to the larger whole, howsoever self-defeating that process may seem in the light of conventional reason and day-to-day politics. (Nandy, 1983, p. 113)

At this point we leave the sound provocations brought by Nandy ringing. They might suggest some serious possibility of thinking about an alternative politics; or they might lead to another dead end in which the hopes for some sort of “dissent” and “freedom” are all coopted by the elegant and effective modern narratives. This paper did not take the stand of a judge for such a profoundly difficult political question. It accepts its humble role of posing as many possible questions, even if it leaves many of them unanswered, suggesting possible roads for future investigations.
Bibliography


