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## A New Millennium: A New Society?

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**Abstract:** We are born into a world in conflict. Discussion there might be as to the identity of the main protagonists: economic classes (as per Marxism), geopolitical groups (the “First World” vs the “Second World” in competition for the allegiance of the “Third World”), the “more industrial North” vs the “more agricultural South” on the inter- and intranational level, or whether it’s more a question of gender or colour differences; the fact is, whether we realise it or not, from the moment we utter our first cry on earth, we are forced to take sides in a global battle. How truly did Matthew Arnold write, in *Dover Beach*: .

. . . we are here, as on a darkling plain,  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.  
Many of us are scarcely aware of the battle going on.

We climb into our buses (cars or rickshaws) and speed off to work or study. We get our meals and newspapers more or less on time. We are able to have our baths more or less regularly (except when the water/electric supply don’t quite collaborate) and we get our clothes nicely laundered for us.

**Keywords:** Matthew Arnold, New Society, Millennium, Economic divide

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## A New Millennium: A New Society?

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### Introduction

We are born into a world in conflict. Discussion there might be as to the identity of the main protagonists: economic classes (as per Marxism), geopolitical groups (the "First World" vs the "Second World" in competition for the allegiance of the "Third World"), the "more industrial North" vs the "more agricultural South" on the inter- and intranational level, or whether it's more a question of gender or colour differences; the fact is, whether we realise it or not, from the moment we utter our first cry on earth, we are forced to take sides in a global battle. How truly did Matthew Arnold write, in *Dover Beach*:

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Many of us are scarcely aware of the battle going on. We climb into our buses (cars or rickshaws) and speed off to work or study. We get our meals and newspapers more or less on time. We are able to have our baths more or less regularly (except when the water/electric supply don't quite collaborate) and we get our clothes nicely laundered for us. We can go for an occasional movie, party, "night out with the boys", or simply stay at home and watch TV or put on the Video. Seldom do we notice that

things aren't so easy for a sizable proportion of our "fellow-travellers on space-ship earth." Few of us realise that many of our compatriots are being forcibly deprived of their rightful share of the cake, because that would bite into the abundance that some of the privileged few have accustomed themselves to.

From Hereclitus to Karl von Clausewitz and Henry Kissinger, "war is the origin of everything", if by "everything" one understands the order or system that world dominators control by their power and their armies. We are at war – a cold war for those who wage it, a hot war for those who suffer it, a peaceful coexistence for those who manufacture arms, a bloody existence for those who are obliged to buy and use them.<sup>1</sup>

### A Brief History of Colonialism

During the first millenniums or so of recorded history, the Mediterranean emerged as the first great centre to oppress and exploit its far-flung Periphery. The Greeks and Romans believed that they were at the centre of the earth in more senses than one, and set out to take possession of the rest of the then known world. It was these pristine colonial powers who would set the trend for others to come: decide just how many rights and privileges might be allotted to the denizens of the remote, in-

consequential, “noncivilised” periphery, whose ownership they would dispute among themselves until finally Rome emerged supreme. Roman law and polity would provide the blueprint for more sophisticated colonisers of the future.

For, eventually, the “Mediterranean millennium” came to an end. Our modern era began with certain other European nations taking over where the Greco-Romans left off. And the new colonialists did their homework well. They had learned from the pioneering colonialists rule number one for any would-be successful power that would try to subjugate a far away people, often more numerous than the “mother” (?) nation: *divide et impera*, encourage divisions among the vanquished. Feed suspicions and distrust among the conquered people. For as long as a colonised people remain split into a motley crew of rival ethnic groups, the suzerainty of the foreign overlord would be left unchallenged. There were some bloody skirmishes (on colonised territory, of course, never in Europe!) between the British, the Dutch, the Portuguese, the Spaniards and the French but it was, mercifully, soon over. The Spaniards had their flag planted firmly on the South American Continent, the British were firmly esconced in Asia (with enviable footholds in Africa, North America and elsewhere), while the French, Portuguese and Dutch had to lick their wounds and settle for leftovers.

Of course, it was a bit awkward for all those intrepid European explorers and discoverers who raced about

setting foot in “New Lands” and naming rivers, mountains and forests ... for the natives and aborigines had been there long before, had already set foot on these places and had long given names to all these geographical landmarks. This embarrassment was easily dealt with. When Spanish colonialists raised the question, “Are the Amerindian human?” They were but voicing a perception of the problem common to all colonialists of whatever age. They were simply stressing the fact that since the “natives” (people of the periphery) were not Europeans (people of the centre), they could not be counted as human persons and so had no dignity, status or rights other than those which the good Europeans should bestow upon them.

And all people of the centre, ever since, have taken a similar pragmatic attitude to the people of the periphery, their lands, their possessions ... and their women. This applies equally to the high caste *brahmins* of the Centre and the *shudras* and *dalits* of the Periphery, to the urban centres and the rural peripheries, to the North Atlantic nations of today’s international centre and the rest of the world, their Periphery.

Naturally, the “ungrateful” natives of the periphery were not always too happy at their being civilised by the centrists, nor would they generally stand with awe to see their lands possessed, their forests destroyed and their wealth plundered and carted off to the “mother nation”. Efforts had to be made to get rid of these uncooperative ingrates. Bartolome de Las Casas, the early Latin American liberation thinker

summed up this reaction of the centrists all too well: "They have used two ways to extirpate these pitiable nations from the face of the earth. One is by unjust, cruel, bloody and tyrannical wars. The other is...the most violent, horrible and hateful slavery." Today the method is usually rendered a little less bloody, but the brutal results remain as ruthless as ever. Wholesale decimations and massacres of the aborigines (sometimes by the expedient of offering them poisoned meat as in Australia and New Zealand), gave way to "peace treaties" that were disregarded when pragmatic reasons required it (as in the USA), or were summarily brushed aside by deceit and treachery (as in Pizarro's conquest of Peru). Soon, the centre learned that it was not expedient to kill off all the people of the periphery: some able-bodied men, plus the women and children, could be kept on to do dirty work as slaves.

As the world became more "enlightened" and "humanised," colonialism got a bad name. Besides, historical circumstances conspired against the costly business of maintaining far-flung outposts, especially when erstwhile submissive subjects began to assimilate dangerous subversive ideas like democracy. But, as Vatican II puts it, "At no time have men had such a keen sense of freedom, only to be faced by new forms of slavery in living and thinking." (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 4) In brief, political colonialism is out; other creative versions are welcome. STAR TV and other international media provide a subtle form of cultural domination which is already emerging in more or less overt forms of pedagogical and sexual

domination. The "free" market economy and multinationals are completing the process. Thus millions of men, women and children – together with their lifestyles are being sacrificed to the newly emerging Molochs of mercantilism, immolated on the altars of the almighty dollar or the pound sterling. Colonialism – in its classical version as well as in its latter part of the twentieth century variety – has ended up recording more human sacrifices to its Supreme Beings, than the "old savages" had to their traditional gods, a practice that was deemed shocking by the civilised Christian Europeans.

History is written by conquerors and they invariably do it to whitewash their crimes and justify their excesses. So they saw to it that the "precolonial natives" were represented as uncouth, immoral brutes, with no culture, no religions worthy of the name and no real human feelings. This was a gross travesty of the facts, as any contemporary scholar of comparative religions or of history could have told them. But that was no major problem for the early colonial historian. From there, it was but a small step to the conclusion that the "white man's burden" laid on his noble shoulders by his God was to educate, civilise and Christianise these poor savages as best he could. In effect, this would naturally involve Europeanising them so as to render them humanly significant (making due allowances for their limited capacities – "How much can one expect from these savages?"). Macaulay's recommendation was that the best form of education for Indians would be to make them "brown

Britishers,” writing off, thereby, the entire cultural wealth of India (of which he was grossly ignorant). Thus, the colonial could conclude that colonialism was the best thing that could have happened to the poor devils. Indeed, the European conquerors did the nations a favour by colonising them, replacing their subhuman cultures, value systems and speculations with the language, art and religion of their liberators!

### Philosophical Presuppositions

It would seem that for the colonialists (the classical ones and their latter day variants), the old Cartesian *cogito, ergo sum* would be replaced by *conquiro, ergo sum* (I conquer, therefore I am). In other words, it would no longer be the ability to think (*cogito*) that guaranteed one the right to existence (*sum*), but the fact that one had conquered, had come out on top. Only the *conquistador* enjoyed the rights and privileges of human existence. The rest – the vanquished native – did not. He or she could be enslaved, made a concubine, thrown to the lions for support, or turned into a bonded labourer. And since these latter were nonpersons, one was not honour bound to keep one’s word with them. And, since the colonisers’ women and children had not played any active role in the conquering process, they would enjoy only very limited rights and privileges, at the discretion of the conquering males. Females would never know full rights; young males eventually could – provided that, when they came of age, they played their part in consolidating, by further conquests or by administration, what had been won. In the long run, it

was not one’s ability to think, to build up mighty civilisations (such as the Aztecs) or be courageous hunters (such as the Amerindians) or weave elaborate philosophical systems (such as the Asians): all that mattered was that one was a conquering warrior. If one did not prove himself capable of that, all his other accomplishments counted for nothing. And, just as Christians had learned to replace bloody and gory human sacrifices with the “unbloody” sacrifices of the Mass, so the now “enlightened” colonialists gave up their old crude forms of weaponry and terror for a more subtle and refined (but equally deadly) versions of the same. Of course, once in a while the bloody version did rear its ugly headnapalm, Kalashnikovs and Exocet missiles replacing the sword, spear and arrow of yesteryear – but the preferred approach would be the “free” market, “globalization”, the capturing of the media by powerful First World moghuls and cultural, linguistic and social domination would continue in the most destructive and efficacious fashion. The ultimate effect of all colonialism was assured: the humiliation – if not the total annihilation – of native identity and its replacement by the white man’s superior culture and civilisation!

Long ago, Parmenides – another white man! – had enuntiated his basic metaphysical conviction: “Being is: nonbeing is not!” The colonialists readily agreed, interpreting this to mean that only they, the conquerors, merited the title of “Being”; the vanquished native, by that very title, was nonbeing and, together with his culture, could claim no legal right to exist. Later, when “home-rule” became the order of the

day, the “local” authorities would ape the values and attitudes of their conquering lords. They, in turn, would emerge as the new conquering class and – with rare exceptions – would do all they could to ensure that only their families, tribes or clans (or “others” who would bow to the same mentality and mindset) could be admitted into the exclusive conquerors’ club. Prophetic figures might arise from time to time, to challenge all these presuppositions, but the club perfected ways and means to domesticate them, emasculate them and, if all else failed, eliminate them (with religious approval: after all, the hierarchy was part of the club!). The embarrassing part of it all was that many of these “dead and gone” personages refused to be just that: they had this disconcerting habit of “living on” in the nonentities they had fought for, “conscientising” them. Worse still, some highly respected members of the conquerors’ club got “converted”, spurned all their inherited privileges and luxuries and “went over to the natives”, adding their voices to the protests of the latter. The wheel had now gone full circle: no longer were the nonwhite native being compelled to become “brown sahibs” (or black or yellow ones for that matter): some white sahibs were freely opting to become nonbrown natives! Liberation was catching on!

But this did not upset the conquerors’ club for long: if you can’t lick ‘em, join ‘em, as they say. And so the authorities appropriated liberationist jargon and slogans. The most repressive regimes would declare themselves “Free/Democratic/People’s Republics” and generously lard their political par-

ties and action groups with such misleading epithets (how “free” is the “free” market and “free” love?). Liberation thinkers had to be wary of anyone who used liberation vocabulary a bit too effusively.

## Centres, New

The vagaries of history have concentrated the most powerful and wealthy nations in the same strategic area: all along the northern shores of the Atlantic Ocean, both sides of it! On the one side looms today’s only superpower, the United States, fortunate enough to have been able to build up its vast fund of economic and financial might by wresting a new and wholly untapped source of natural wealth from helpless natives. On the other side is the emerging European Community, flexing its newly acquired muscles, to a great extent gorged with booty and resources expropriated from excolonial southern territories. Together with the Scandinavian nations (who play a relatively minor role in the whole process), they would call the rules of the game – for all games – and the ravaged and disadvantaged South has little choice but to obey. Extermination is out, but a judicious level of undernourishment (hence dependence) was in. That would ensure subservience to the will of former masters, who still find their erstwhile vassals useful to provide performance of essential dirty work, exotic imports . . . or convenient and cheap sites for messy, polluting industries that could not be established back home without running foul of proecology laws. Out of this network of interlocking, mutually supportive decision-mak-

ers came the pattern for a more industrial North to set the standards for a more agricultural South. This same style soon came to be parodied within the very disadvantaged nations of the South, India being a very illuminating example. Leadership would invariably come from the Northern States or provinces and their language, art forms and other interests would dominate those of their Southern neighbours. And when the latter, in desperation, started regional political parties and other pressure groups to protect their cultural identity from being swallowed up by the Northern Leviathan, they were accused of being narrow, “provincialistic” or “antinational” (that is, against that which would further the interests of the North, which was identified with the nation as a whole). But in what other way could they respond? Few seem to have bothered themselves with that question. And maybe we *should* move towards a more federal, less central, form of Government after all!

### Many Worlds in the World

In what is perhaps the most insightful and provocative encyclical of his entire career, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (December 30, 1987), Pope John Paul II, made reference to the sad fact that we can speak of “different worlds within our *one world*: the First World, the Second, World, the Third World and, at times, the Fourth World.” (No. 14)<sup>2</sup> We are, more or less familiar with the first three. The former two are taken, in common parlance, to comprise the “developed” nations, the last two, the “developing” ones. The First World is more or less coextensive with the North

Atlantic nations we spoke of and assembles the so-called “free” (non-Communist) wealthy nations of the West. After the collapse of the Iron Curtain and the dismemberment of the former USSR, the “Second World” has become somewhat outdated. It was meant to sum up all those East European countries that had been “swallowed up by the Russian bear”, as well as China and those northern parts of Asian lands that has also succumbed to Communism. These latter, we now realise, were not as prosperous as the First World models (and now we know that they were a good deal worse off than they pretended to be), but claimed to be an alternative model of development, more “proletarian” than the other “capitalistic” variety. Just for the record, I mention here that, in the same encyclical, the Pope rejects both “models” of development, that of “liberal capitalism” as much as that of “Marxist collectivism” (No. 31)<sup>3</sup>, as neither of them took the total human person as its inspiration. In other words, according to Pope John Paul II, there is, at present, no nation on earth that can call itself an authentically developed nation: all nations are underdeveloped! Which brings us to the Fourth World, which, in the same section of the encyclical, we are told refers not only to the “so-called *less advanced* countries, but also and especially to the bands of great or extreme poverty in countries of medium and high income.” I would, more specifically, use the phrase to refer to those pockets of glaring poverty to be found among the wealth and opulence of First and Second World nations as also of high-unparalleled opulence and wealth



found among the poverty and squalor of the Third World.

### **Urban Centres and Rural Peripheries**

This is the setup that is “at work” in India. Decisions are made by and for the city élites, who see to it that budget outlays, plans and projects are allocated and opted for on the basis of what promotes their own self-interest, providing them with more sophisticated luxuries and toys – and not whether these would assure more basic necessities to people hovering about and below the poverty line. Thus, when the question of switching from black-and-white to colour TV came up during the Asian Games in Delhi, some years ago, there was little hesitation in approving the expense – even though the same funds could have been used to give clean drinking water facilities to villages that had been suffering immensely due to this lack. If a plague breaks out in an important urban area like Surat, the administration swings into action and ensures that the disease is dealt with swiftly and eradicated, so efficiently that the former “plague-ridden” city is now a model of hygiene and sanitation. Similar and worse problems have plagued many villages since before Independence, and they still remain. The situation has become so mockingly grim that social analysts say that we often come across refugees from *Bharat*, living in India hoping to better their prospects. India throws these refugees a few scraps, exploits their services and from time to time demolishes their hovels as part of a beautification drive. The pattern is repeated in many other Third World

nations. It is worth recalling, at this juncture, Gandhiji’s advice to Nehru when the latter had asked him what could possibly be a criterion for a worthwhile policy-decision for the entire nation. The Mahatma said, “Panditji, ask yourself just one question: will this decision benefit the poorest of the poor in India? If it does, take it!” How often have we followed this advice?

### **Big and Little Traditions**

Just as the centre has its history, art and tradition, so does the periphery. But, as in all such matters, the former dominates the latter. Indeed, it does this so effectively as to identify its culture with that of the entire nation, region or group. And “periphery culture” is brain-washed into thinking of itself as nonculture, the “culture of silence”, as Paolo Freire would say.<sup>4</sup> In other words, side by side with the very eloquent centre styles of music, dance and painting – whose development and publicity are encouraged, fostered and ensured with generous grants there is also a “little” tradition of “folk culture” which desperately struggles to keep itself alive. There is scant hope of the “centre” releasing funds for the development of “folk” dance, “folk” art and so on of our tribals and dalits. This expression of art is ignored in many nations. It falls silent and dies off. In Latin America, many ancient tribal languages are disappearing, while Spanish is rapidly displacing native languages. The same is happening in India.

Very often, our attempts at inculturation – laudable enough in themselves – are not properly geared

towards liberation. It is often the “big”, “oppressive” or brahmanic tradition that we draw upon in the liturgy. We use Sanskrit (replacing one incomprehensible dead language, Latin, with another equally dead and even more incomprehensible), the sacred language of the oppressors of the Dalits and Adivasis. In Pathardi, a mission station not far from Pune, where the local Christians are all Dalits, the priests discard the usual saffron-coloured shawl in favour of a green one. Wearing a saffron vestment would identify them with the oppressive priestly caste in the eyes of the very people whom they wish to liberate! There seems to be no dearth of

priests and religious who study and become expert in classical dance forms, or music, as well as, of course, the great brahminic philosophical traditions. How many are there who, like Wendell D’Cruz, have studied tribal (*Katkari*) art and are saving it from extinction? We should ensure that our inculturation merges with our option for the poor and seeks to inculturate the “culture of silence” into our liturgy. Thus we would also conscientise the poor and the rejects, making them aware that their art is as much art as is *Bharat natyam* and as worthy of study, even at an international level, as the more well-known Indian classical forms.

## Notes

1. Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, trsl. from the Spanish by Martinez and Morkovsky, New York: Orbis Books, 1985, p. 1. I have made use of many insights of Dussel in this chapter.
2. John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (December 30 1987), English translation by St. Paul’s Publications, Bombay, 1988, p. 23(cf. esp. footnote 31).
3. Ibid., pp. 56-57.
4. Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (trsl. Myra Bergman Ramos), Hammondsworth, Penguin Books, 1977.