

# *Lost in Anti-Imperialist Translation: The Universal Contexts of M. N. Roy (1887–1954)*

LEONIE WOLTERS

Leibniz-Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung Potsdam

Decades before Thomas Friedman wrote that the world is flat,<sup>1</sup> the Indian anticolonial revolutionary, international communist, and humanist thinker M. N. Roy (1887–1954) made an international career out of arguing that there were no meaningful cultural or political differences between Asia, North America, and Europe. Assuaging historians' fears about the disappearance of context from intellectual history when it goes global,<sup>2</sup> Roy's assertions of equivalence between places both geographically and temporally disparate bring contexts back into view in two ways. First, they draw attention to what I call contingent contexts, consisting of both texts and situational factors, such as political and personal circumstances, that can explain an actor's arguments when operating between cultural spheres.<sup>3</sup> Their contingency emphasises the tactical nature of such contexts created by actors moving in and out of them, who were often forced to improvise.<sup>4</sup> I argue that such contingent contexts help to explain Roy's bold assertions of equivalence that at first glance strike the reader as unlikely, and that they are in general more suitable for global intellectual history than the national contexts intellectual historians have often operated within.<sup>5</sup>

Second, the essay draws on translation studies in order to argue that contexts were at stake in the arguments made by historical actors such as Roy. This means that context is placed on the actor's level, where it does not do the work of explaining their

---

<sup>1</sup> THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> See the introduction to this thematic section: LUC WODZICKI and SEBASTIAN CONRAD, 'Introduction: Analytical Concepts for Transcultural Settings. Pathways in Global Intellectual History,' *Cromohs: Cyber Review of Modern Historiography* 26 (2023): 72–75.

<sup>3</sup> In my book, I refer to similar contexts as cosmopolitan because they were largely comprised of actors self-consciously operating between places and interested in the differences between them. LEONIE WOLTERS, *Cosmopolitan Elites and the Making of Globality* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024).

<sup>4</sup> Whereas strategies have an institutional base, or a proper place, to operate from, tactics are improvised in the moment, dependent on surroundings, and located between the self and the other, not properly belonging to either one: '[...] because it does not have a place, tactic depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized "on the wing."' MICHEL DE CERTEAU, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), xix.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Hill has cautioned against 'adding together' national contexts in order to conceive of a global intellectual field, not in the least because national contexts were not actually separate, and the very vocabulary with which to think about the relationship between them was created in their interaction. CHRISTOPHER HILL, 'Conceptual Universalisation in the Transnational Nineteenth Century,' in *Global Intellectual History*, eds SAMUEL MOYN and ANDREW SARTORI (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 134–58 (153).

arguments, but rather functions as a resource that they were able to offer to their audiences. The feat of offering large, diffuse contexts such as ‘India’ to audiences presumably unfamiliar with them was a key aspect of the role played by Roy during his global career, most famously as a member of the Communist International in the 1920s when he often spoke, not merely for India, but for the colonised world in general.<sup>6</sup> Roy’s speaking for such large contexts can only be understood with reference to his contingent contexts, where both are co-created in argument. In bringing both together, the essay uses a productive tension between the universal claims made by Roy,<sup>7</sup> and the attention to detail and specificity inherent in the context concept.<sup>8</sup> Context itself was implicated in universalist arguments, both in their argumentative content as well as the circumstances of their enunciation.

Roy has become quite a familiar figure in global history as both an itinerant individual and as a prime example of a universalist thinker who came to adopt European Enlightenment values as valid everywhere.<sup>9</sup> Because he moved between different universalist idioms, historians have debated which of these was most fundamental to Roy’s thought. His biographer Kris Manjapra has referred to the Bengali practice of ‘Brahmo exegesis,’ which also allowed the Bengali philosopher Rammohun Roy (1774–1833) to argue about the equivalence of the religious texts of Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam.<sup>10</sup> The other obvious universal thought system Roy engaged with was dialectical materialism. About his Marxist writings, it has been argued that Roy was a highly ‘schematic’ thinker, more universalist than even Lenin,<sup>11</sup> who simply ‘asserted’ that Marxist economic models described the situation in India<sup>12</sup> rather than arguing their finer points.<sup>13</sup> According to Roy himself, it ultimately was the ‘quest

---

<sup>6</sup> See for example NICOLA POZZA, ‘Le monde en révolutions ou le parcours désorientant de M. N. Roy,’ *Études de lettres* 2–3 (2014): 343–66; BRIGITTE STUDER, *Reisende der Weltrevolution: Eine Globalgeschichte der Kommunistischen Internationale* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> According to Duncan Bell, such claims are the proper subject of global intellectual history, since it focuses ‘[...] on enunciations of universality, on attempts to cognitively encompass a given world (of whatever physical scale).’ DUNCAN BELL, ‘Making and Taking Worlds,’ in *Global Intellectual History*, eds MOYN and SARTORI, 254–79 (257).

<sup>8</sup> PETER BURKE, ‘Context in Context,’ *Common Knowledge* 28, no. 1 (2022): 157–64.

<sup>9</sup> In fact, Roy featured in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s standard work on the perils of universalism as an example of an Indian thinker who embraced European Enlightenment values as universal. DIPESH CHAKRABARTY, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 4.

<sup>10</sup> KRIS MANJAPRA, *M. N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010), 13.

<sup>11</sup> SANJAY SETH, *Marxist Theory and Nationalist Politics: The Case of Colonial India* (New Delhi: Sage, 1995), 62, 99, 102.

<sup>12</sup> SUDIPTA KAVIRAJ, ‘The Heteronomous Radicalism of M.N. Roy,’ in *Political Thought in Modern India*, eds THOMAS PANTHAM and KENNETH L. DEUTSCH (New Delhi: Sage, 1986), 209–35 (232).

<sup>13</sup> Similarly and much more recently, Vivek Chibber has attempted to undermine the foundations of Subaltern Studies, or Postcolonial Theory more generally, by arguing that the development of capitalism did not take fundamentally different courses in Europe and in India, thereby destabilising claims of irreducible differences between them. VIVEK CHIBBER, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London: Verso, 2013).

for freedom' that motivated his actions throughout his life.<sup>14</sup> Since the nineteenth century, there had been a rich Bengali tradition of comparative thought between India and Europe, where many thinkers formulated theories of universal knowledge that saw Indian modes as more universal than European counterparts, or at least pushed back against colonial assumptions of the universal validity of European thought.<sup>15</sup>

The goal of this essay is not to decide which of the universalist thought systems Roy operated with was the most fundamental to his thinking, or to biographically address how Roy came to swap out one universalist belief system for another.<sup>16</sup> Rather, Roy's ability to use conceptions of contexts, claiming and then leveraging an underlying layer of common meaning, highlights the dynamic and situational nature of his universalist approach. As a thinker, he is particularly suited not only to bring out the contingent contexts that actors in transcultural settings found themselves operating in, but also to show how they operated between contexts, in the same way that translators operate between languages. Moreover, they could offer full contexts 'in translation'—even if part of their argument was that these contexts were, in fact, not different at all.

Roy's assertion of equivalences did not emerge in a vacuum. His peer group, Indian revolutionaries who left British India during the early twentieth century to fight for independence abroad, were confronted with assertions of Western universality and Indian particularity at every step of their way, most obviously when it came to racial discrimination.<sup>17</sup> Questioning or mocking their interlocutors' assumptions of Indian difference was an anti-imperialist practice in its own right, and an activity engaged in by many Indian revolutionaries abroad.<sup>18</sup> After all, a key element of the imperialist mindset was that the authority to decide the dividing lines of difference from an ostensibly neutral outside point of view was largely reserved for white men.<sup>19</sup> Roy went beyond the making of comparisons and habitually found instances that were, in

---

<sup>14</sup> Roy's student, friend and biographer Sibnarayan Ray titled his five-volume biography of Roy 'In Freedom's Quest.' See for example SIBNARAYAN RAY, *In Freedom's Quest: A Study of the Life and Works of M. N. Roy*, 5 vols, vol. 1, (1887-1922) (Calcutta: Minerva Associates, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> WILHELM HALBFASS, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 419–33; DAVID KOPF, *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 60.

<sup>16</sup> Beyond Manjapra's biography, this has been addressed in several biographical essays, for example ISABEL HUACUJA ALONSO, 'M.N. Roy and the Mexican Revolution: How a Militant Indian Nationalist Became an International Communist,' *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 40, no. 3 (2017): 517–30; MICHAEL GOEBEL, 'Geopolitics, Transnational Solidarity or Diaspora Nationalism? The Global Career of M.N. Roy, 1915–1930,' *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 21, no. 4 (2014): 485–99; CHRISTOPHER BALCOM, 'From Communist Internationalism to a 'New Humanism': On M.N. Roy's Confrontation with Fascism,' *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 46, no. 2 (2023): 353–69.

<sup>17</sup> ADAM MCKEOWN, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); RENISA MAWANI, 'From Migrants to Revolutionaries: The Komagata Maru's 1914 "Middle Passage",' in *Viapolitics: Borders, Migration, and the Power of Locomotion*, eds WILLIAM WALTERS, CHARLES HELLER, and LORENZO PEZZANI (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 58–83 (60–61).

<sup>18</sup> See for example CLEMENS SIX, 'Challenging the Grammar of Difference: Benoy Kumar Sarkar, Global Mobility and Anti-Imperialism Around the First World War,' *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 25, no. 3–4 (2018): 431–49.

<sup>19</sup> MANU GOSWAMI, 'Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms,' *The American Historical Review* 117, no. 5 (2012): 1461–1485 (1484).

separate times and places, expressions of the same underlying phenomenon. In an example from the early 1930s, when Roy was stuck in a colonial Indian prison, his close friend, the German communist and orientalist August Thalheimer (1884–1948), inquired about Indian philosophy and logic. Roy responded that he needed to be set straight: ‘I don’t quite see what he means by “the special form of Indian logic.”’ In my view, there has been much imagination in this respect on the part of the Sanskritists and Orientalists of Europe.<sup>20</sup> Asserting the equivalences would become an almost kneejerk response to the assumptions of difference Roy was faced with.

To capture how Roy’s assertions made use of context, this essay employs the concept of translation metaphorically. Instead of translating between natural languages, Roy translated between contexts that appeared distinct. His assertions of equivalence between, for example, ancient India and contemporary Latin America, had argumentative power only because his audiences could be reasonably assumed to expect that there were in fact meaningful differences between them. With his equivalences, then, Roy created a context, such as India, in a particularly accessible way that only he was able to offer to his audience. In doing so, he did not transform specific concepts, but contexts in full. Widening our view of translation in this way allows us to capture equivalences that were so universalist they eschewed the serious usage of non-European languages at all. The hierarchy between languages was obviously shaped by colonial power differentials,<sup>21</sup> and would become a part of Roy’s universalist attitude to the extent that, towards the end of his life, he would ask a befriended poet why he would write in a ‘patois’ like Bengali.<sup>22</sup> His decisions when not to use languages were as much part of the contexts used and created by Roy as his decisions to use them and to resort to more literal translation.

Broadly conceived, translation is at hand when equivalences are coined, supported by some universality of meaning or value underlying assumptions about and encounters with difference.<sup>23</sup> Lydia Liu has stressed that translation is not a process involving the search for neatly fitting and mutually operational equivalences across two languages, but rather involves the creation of such equivalences by translators.<sup>24</sup> As Philip Balboni and Henry Clements have recently theorised, translation in its metaphorical sense is a process that emphasises its own continuous necessity; just as a translator dissolves the difference between contexts and yet maintains the necessity for

---

<sup>20</sup> M. N. ROY, *Letters from Jail* (Dehradun: Renaissance, 1943), 25.

<sup>21</sup> EINAR WIGEN, *State of Translation: Turkey in Interlingual Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 11.

<sup>22</sup> RAY, *In Freedom’s Quest*, vol. 4, part 2, *From Anti-Fascist War to Radical Humanism (1947-1954)* (Calcutta: Minerva Associates, 2007), 389–90.

<sup>23</sup> LYDIA H. LIU, ‘The Question of Meaning-Value in the Political Economy of the Sign,’ in *Tokens of Exchange; The Problem of Translation in Global Circulations*, eds LYDIA H. LIU, STANLEY FISH, and FREDRIC JAMESON (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 1–19.

<sup>24</sup> LYDIA H. LIU, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity. China, 1900-1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 16.

translation between them,<sup>25</sup> Roy argued for sameness and yet assumed a heightened ability to diagnose it. Because Roy and his writings have mainly been historicised as communist, this essay uses examples of his translations from beyond his communist period. The first considers his work on race and culture in ancient India, written in Mexico the late 1910s, while the second is concerned with writings on the psychology of fascism from the 1940s.

### Anti-Imperialist Talent

Roy's first writings contained an assertion of equivalence that helped him to find a new patron when he and his first wife Evelyn Trent (Roy/Jones, 1892–1970) found themselves at a loose end in Mexico City between 1917 and 1919. Their revolutionary work for an independent India had been sponsored by imperial Germany in hopes of weakening the British Empire, but this source of support dried up after Germany lost the First World War. Luckily, the anti-US Mexican government was 'looking for talent' among the Roys' circles of United States socialists and bohemians who had come to Mexico in order to escape being drafted into the war.<sup>26</sup> Among his Mexican writings, Roy's book *La India: su pasado, su presente, y su porvenir* (1918) has often gone unmentioned,<sup>27</sup> or is swiftly dealt with as either 'an encyclopaedia entry of sorts'<sup>28</sup> or a publication 'denouncing British colonialism in India.'<sup>29</sup> Yet, contextualised in the limited sphere of anti-US cultural activity in Mexico City and specifically relating to the interests of the Mexican politician and intellectual José Vasconcelos (1889–1959), the book's relevance becomes quite clear.

Vasconcelos was central to the little cosmos in Mexico City that the Roys inhabited. He was active in the field of education, moved between the US and Mexico, and is now mainly remembered as the author of *La raza cósmica: misión de la raza iberoamericana* (1925).<sup>30</sup> This book argued that racial mixing was '[...] providential, progressive, and beneficial for Mexico and Spanish America.'<sup>31</sup> In 1919, Vasconcelos was working on a book called *Estudios indostánicos* (1920), in which he engaged with the ideas of Rammohun Roy, Swami Vivekananda, and Rabindranath Tagore.<sup>32</sup> Laura Torres has written that *Estudios indostánicos* formed a key touchstone on the way to Vasconcelos' race conception in *La raza cósmica*, since it was in India that Vasconcelos found his '[...] racial model in keeping with his plan of a "brown" utopia for Latin

<sup>25</sup> PHILIP BALBONI and HENRY CLEMENTS, 'Modern Translations,' *History of the Present. A Journal of Critical History* 12, no. 2 (2022): 241–69 (262–63).

<sup>26</sup> DAN LA BOTZ, 'American "Slackers" in the Mexican Revolution: International Proletarian Politics in the Midst of a National Revolution,' *The Americas* 62, no. 4 (2006): 563–90 (584).

<sup>27</sup> It is, for example, not discussed in the biography by Kris Manjappa.

<sup>28</sup> HUACUJA ALONSO, 'M.N. Roy and the Mexican Revolution,' 524.

<sup>29</sup> GOEBEL, 'Geopolitics, Transnational Solidarity or Diaspora Nationalism,' 488.

<sup>30</sup> ILAN STAVANS, *José Vasconcelos: The Prophet of Race* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 115–17.

<sup>31</sup> MARILYN GRACE MILLER, *Rise and Fall of the Cosmic Race: The Cult of Mestizaje in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 27–30.

<sup>32</sup> LAURA J. TORRES-RODRÍGUEZ, 'Orientalizing Mexico: *Estudios indostánicos* and the Place of India in José Vasconcelos's *La raza cósmica*,' *Revista Hispánica Moderna* 68, no. 1 (2015): 77–91 (85).

America.<sup>33</sup> This article argues that it was Roy who offered a key element for Vasconcelos' theories.

The India Roy described was as diverse as Latin America, both in terms of climatic zones as well as peoples. The latter had been created through the mixing of conquering races—notably Greeks and Muslims—with an original population.<sup>34</sup> The mixing of Dravidians and Aryans in particular had given India its particular genius, wrote Roy: 'From the virility of the Aryans and the mental energy of the Dravidians originated the great family of Indo-Aryans, who gave birth to the universal philosophy of Vedanta.'<sup>35</sup> The version of Hinduism propagated by Swami Vivekananda, *Vedanta*, already had adherents all over the world, including in Mexico City, by the time Roy was there, and thus formed a discourse he could tap into.<sup>36</sup> By tracing the origins of *Vedanta* to racial mixing, Roy addressed the interests of Mexican readers interested in *Vedanta* and India. Yet, rather than serving exotic difference, he offered a suggestion of familiarity. His translation, in other words, offered the Indian past as being very close to the Latin American present. This had appeal to an audience positively interested in *Vedanta* because it allowed them to imagine that Latin America too could be the birthplace of an equally powerful philosophy.

It is quite clear that Roy's version of racial mixing as a force for good was written for a Latin American audience. While the idea of Aryanism was a part of orientalist knowledge, claiming a common descent for Northern Indians and Europeans, it generally excluded South Indians or Dravidians and Muslims, although there were different variations.<sup>37</sup> Roy's version, where the non-Aryans contributed the more noble elements to a shared, highly developed civilisation, was quite unusual.<sup>38</sup> In tracing the origins of *Vedanta* to the combination of Aryan and Dravidian ingredients, Roy made the case that all Aryans, both Asian and European, were excessively aggressive people, and it was only due to their mixing with Dravidians that India had known this superior philosophy since 'approximately ten centuries before Jesus Christ.'<sup>39</sup> Because Aryans outside of India had not mixed with other races, they had lost none of their aggressiveness and had been unable to gain the same level of insight into the nature of reality.<sup>40</sup> The mixed-race sages of ancient India, however, had been able to create *Vedanta* for the good of all of humanity. Roy's view of racial hierarchy, where unmixed Aryan populations were considered inferior to mixed ones, corresponded to a Mexico that saw its white Northern neighbour as obsessed with racial purity as well as being

---

<sup>33</sup> TORRES-RODRÍGUEZ, 'Orientalizing Mexico,' 82.

<sup>34</sup> M. N. ROY, *La India, su pasado, su presente y su porvenir* (Mexico City, n. p., 1918), vii.

<sup>35</sup> ROY, *La India*, xiii.

<sup>36</sup> TORRES-RODRÍGUEZ, 'Orientalizing Mexico,' 85.

<sup>37</sup> TONY BALLANTYNE, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 18–55; 169–87.

<sup>38</sup> More commonly, the non-Aryan was seen as the 'primitive within.' PRATHAMA BANERJEE, *Politics of Time: 'Primitives' and History-writing in a Colonial Society* (Oxford; New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 8–9.

<sup>39</sup> ROY, *La India*, xvi.

<sup>40</sup> ROY, *La India*, iii.

militarily aggressive. The notion of *mestizaje*, or the idea that the mixing of races was a positively distinguishing feature of Latin American societies, had been put forward by several thinkers there. In the revolutionary years between 1910 and 1917, the ideal of a mestizo Mexican identity also served to distinguish the present from pre-revolutionary times, when Mexico was seen as being ruled in the interest of Europeans.<sup>41</sup> *Mestizaje*, then, had been in the air for some time before Roy wrote about it and made it a part of *Vedanta's* genesis.

Even though Roy was not mentioned by name in Vasconcelos' work, it seems inevitable that his presence and work had an effect on *Estudios indostánicos*. Like in Roy's book, *Estudios indostánicos* held that the spiritual genius of India was shaped by the mixing of its original inhabitants, the Dravidians, with their Aryan conquerors. Where the Dravidians supplied elements more valued by Vasconcelos, such as 'ideas about the immortality of the soul, transmigration and the omnipresence of Brahma,' the Aryans brought rather technical additions to the table, notably Sanskrit and the caste system.<sup>42</sup> For Vasconcelos, the mixing itself was what became the positive force in history, in a way that could be abstracted from an Indian context. He focused on the climates conducive to mixing—which he held to be temperate ones, like those that could be found in Mexico—as well as the skin colour of mixed populations: in this book as well as later works, Vasconcelos' 'cosmic' race was meant to be brown-skinned.<sup>43</sup> This made Vasconcelos' ideal into the opposite of the North American and British Anglo-Saxon space, where racial mixing was prohibited and white supremacy the norm.<sup>44</sup> It is significant that it was in India that Vasconcelos found his '[...] racial model in keeping with his plan of a "brown" utopia for Latin America.'<sup>45</sup> Roy's bold assertion of the equivalence of racial mixing in India's past and Latin America's present argued that both were positive processes, with brown skin a distinguishing feature of its outcome, white skin marking those people who had missed out on its benefits. This assertion only comes into its own when placed into the narrow context of Mexican orientalist, or even just of Vasconcelos as a potential reader.

The contingent context of Roy's arguments about racial mixing went beyond the textual. It was also formed of the joint presence of Roy and Evelyn Trent in Mexico City, which would have made a strong impression: 'A young U.S. woman (Trent) and a handsome Indian (Roy), both radicals, appeared as a sort of avant-garde canvas of what new notions of beauty and social solidarity ought to be. It was *mestizaje* at its best.'<sup>46</sup> Significantly, Evelyn signed the articles she published in Mexico City Evelyn

---

<sup>41</sup> STAVANS, *José Vasconcelos*, 5.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in TORRES-RODRÍGUEZ, 'Orientalizing Mexico,' 82.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in TORRES-RODRÍGUEZ, 'Orientalizing Mexico,' 81–82.

<sup>44</sup> His celebration of racial mixing did not mean Vasconcelos did not adhere to any sense of hierarchy between races at all—his ideas have been described as insisting on a 'whitening' of Latin American populations, and excluding the continent's Black population. MILLER, *Rise and Fall of the Cosmic Race*, 30, 44.

<sup>45</sup> TORRES-RODRÍGUEZ, 'Orientalizing Mexico,' 82.

<sup>46</sup> MAURICIO TENORIO-TRILLO, *I Speak of the City: Mexico City at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 277.

Trent-Roy, which, among the readership of the English-language pages of *El Heraldo de México* where her writing appeared in serialised form, clearly associated her with one of the few Indians in town. The articles' content also addressed racial mixing. Evelyn described it as an essential feature of contemporary Mexican life, but also used it to address her own status as a foreigner there. In *Mexico and her People* (1919), she wrote that the 'real Mexican' was middle-class and mestizo, 'of swarthy skin and hazel eyes,' separated both from the Indian peasants as well as the aristocracy (representing imperialist interests) who, if they had any mixed blood, would be sure to hide it.<sup>47</sup> About most foreigners in Mexico, she wrote that they remained aloof from this eclectic Mexican life,<sup>48</sup> for a simple reason that set them apart from herself and her kind of foreigners:

At bottom of this ill-concealed intolerance is racial prejudice, which makes the European and North American feel in his heart that the Mexicans, not being altogether of the godlike Aryan race, are destined to be the hewers of wood and drawers of water for those that unquestionably are.<sup>49</sup>

It was precisely in the absence of racial prejudice, and therefore an openness to cultural and racial mixing, that Evelyn diagnosed the dividing line between true and false Mexicans, as well as between friendly and pernicious foreigners.

In these contingent contexts of intellectuals and readers in Mexico City, Roy and Evelyn self-consciously operated between contexts, working with the ways in which these could be assumed to be different. In the case of Roy, something he could specifically offer was a context assumed to be distant and exotic, yet desirable—ancient India. The transformative potential of his arguments, and thereby their role as translations, lay in offering this context as more familiar than it might appear at first sight. Paradoxically, his authority to make this offer relied in part on his own foreignness, or even exoticism, in Mexico City, which his assertions of equivalence could destabilise but not erase. Because Roy had offered ancient India as a context where racial mixing had taken place in certain ways, Vasconcelos could draw on this for his further theories of the benefits of *mestizaje* in Latin America, allowing for a much wider picture of inferior, racially pure societies versus superior, mixed ones. In global encounters, contexts do not merely explain, but they also form a part of that which was at stake in intellectual arguments.

### **Fascists Everywhere**

Roy's equivalences both predated his engagement with doctrinaire communism and outlasted it. It was during the 1940s, while grappling with the brutal phenomenon of fascism, that Roy made some of his boldest claims of equivalence. These claims can be illuminated by Roy's contingent context, as well as showing how he continued to

---

<sup>47</sup> EVELYN TRENT-ROY, 'Mexico and her People Chapter I,' *El Heraldo de México*, 22 September 1919, n.p.; EVELYN TRENT-ROY, 'Mexico and her People Chapter III,' *El Heraldo de México*, 6 October 1919, n.p.

<sup>48</sup> EVELYN TRENT-ROY, 'Mexico and her People Chapter VII,' *El Heraldo de México*, November 3 1919, n.p.

<sup>49</sup> TRENT-ROY, 'Mexico and her People Chapter VII.'



assert equivalences between contexts that his audiences would have thought of as different, destabilising the dividing lines between them. While the suitability of the concept of fascism for some branches of Hindu nationalist thought and practice has been made plausible by historians,<sup>50</sup> Roy's assertions about the Indian nationalist movement as fascist—and Gandhi and Nehru as individual fascists—are far outside the scope of how historians have characterised either movement.<sup>51</sup> Roy asserted that European fascisms and Indian nationalism were equivalent at a time when his political influence was waning. He had been a member of the Indian National Congress, but he was expelled in 1940 for wanting India to support Britain in the Second World War, in opposition to the then still neutrally positioned leadership.<sup>52</sup> Outside India too, Roy's networks had dwindled because he had become too oppositional for the doctrinaire communists of the day, and the war meant that those alternative communists he was in contact with had '[...] perished or been scattered to the four ends of the world.'<sup>53</sup> Roy's diagnosis of Indian nationalism and European fascisms as equivalent allowed him to interpret his own marginalisation positively—if it was fascist, being excluded from the nationalist mainstream placed him on the right side of history.

Roy's thinking about fascism as a global force has drawn more attention in recent years,<sup>54</sup> but his use of the theories of the German Jewish humanist-Marxist psychoanalyst Erich Fromm (1900–1980) in an Indian context has not been explored. In 1945, with European fascism on the brink of defeat, Roy published several texts explaining how Hindu nationalism and European fascisms were all expressions of the same human psychological problem: the fear of freedom. This idea stems from the work of Fromm, with whom Roy shared a social circle in 1920s Berlin, which included several members of the Frankfurt School.<sup>55</sup> Fromm's 1941 bestseller *Escape from Freedom* had argued that authoritarian regimes, such as those in Germany and Italy, had acquired their popularity because they provided a refuge from individual freedom and responsibility in modern societies, where people no longer relied on received structures and belief systems but had to make their own sense of life.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, Fromm saw a link to the authoritarianism engendered by Protestant doctrines of predestination,

---

<sup>50</sup> Particularly for Italian fascism and Indian intellectuals, see MARZIA CASOLARI, *In the Shadow of the Swastika: The Relationships between Indian Radical Nationalism, Italian Fascism and Nazism* (London: Routledge, 2020). On psychology and practice, see BENJAMIN ZACHARIAH, 'Rethinking (the Absence of) Fascism in India, c. 1922–1945,' in *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas*, eds SUGATA BOSE and KRIS MANJAPRA (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 182–98.

<sup>51</sup> For a methodical refutation, see MICHAEL ORTIZ, "'Disown Gandhi or Be Damned': M.N. Roy, Gandhi and Fascism," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 21, no. 3 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1353/cch.2020.0033>.

<sup>52</sup> By 1942, the Indian National Congress would assume an anti-war stance. MANJAPRA, *M. N. Roy*, 129.

<sup>53</sup> New Delhi, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), Catalogue 70: M. N. Roy Papers Section 1, Bertram Wolfe Correspondence, Letter from Bertram Wolfe to M. N. Roy, 5 April 1949.

<sup>54</sup> ORTIZ, "'Disown Gandhi or Be Damned'"; BALCOM, 'From Communist Internationalism to a 'New Humanism''; DISHA KARNAD JANI, 'The Concept of Fascism in Colonial India: M.N. Roy and The Problem of Freedom,' *Global Histories* 3, no. 2 (2017): 121–38.

<sup>55</sup> MANJAPRA, *M. N. Roy*, 70; RAY, *In Freedom's Quest*, vol. 4, part 2, 326.

<sup>56</sup> LAWRENCE J. FRIEDMAN, *The Lives of Erich Fromm: Love's Prophet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 65, 104–106, 118.

which asked individuals to completely give up their sense of individual choice. The step to fascism was only small, as individuals gave up their freedom of choice just as unquestioningly under that system to follow a strong leader.<sup>57</sup> Fromm's universalist account of human psychology and development would receive criticism from anthropologists,<sup>58</sup> but for Roy, it provided a universal psychological idiom for a theory of Indian nationalism that painted his adversaries in a shocking light.

In two publications, *The Problem of Freedom* (1945) and *Jawaharlal Nehru* (1945), Roy set out to diagnose the Indian masses with the thoroughly modern condition of a 'fear of freedom,' while at the same time maintaining castigations for their backwardness. One opening for doing so had been provided by Fromm's direct link between the authoritarianism of European Reformation thought, demanding absolute submission to God, and that of the contemporary Nazi movement, demanding obedience to the leader. Roy then diagnosed a similarity between Reformation-era Europe and contemporary India.<sup>59</sup> India's present, Roy argued, was like Europe's past in all the bad ways—only worse—while the fear of freedom described by Fromm as a particularly modern phenomenon could also be found there. While in Fromm's work, the fear of freedom was an essential attribute of modern, individualistic people who resented the responsibility that came with their emancipation, in Roy's text it was an aspect of an unchanging Hinduism that guided the majority in the past as much as in the present.<sup>60</sup>

But Roy wanted both the sixteenth- as well as the twentieth-century aspects of Fromm's theory for India's present. Within a picture of stasis for the majority, Roy added a note of dynamism for the middle classes, as Fromm had identified the lower middle class as particularly prone to Nazism.<sup>61</sup> Roy saw the Indian urban middle classes as the 'social basis' for an Indian form of fascism. It was among these classes that an unmooring from 'traditional' roles and patterns had occurred when they moved to emerging cities, enjoyed new forms of education, and manned the colonial government machinery. These changes entailed a 'slight advance toward the concept of individual freedom.' When their employment prospects dimmed at the beginning of the twentieth century, 'the old tie was gone but there was no future,' and the only way to escape from new-found freedom was into older cultural certainties.<sup>62</sup> In Roy's hands, neither tradition nor modernity could serve as a bulwark against the fear of freedom.

Apart from his diagnosis of the masses, Roy included near identical psychological portraits of both Gandhi and Nehru that shed light on the ways in which his assertions created a need for his own role and the insights he could offer. According to Roy, both Gandhi and Nehru were precisely the kind of figures, from classes whose

---

<sup>57</sup> FRIEDMAN, *The Lives of Erich Fromm*, 105–106.

<sup>58</sup> FRIEDMAN, *The Lives of Erich Fromm*, 118.

<sup>59</sup> M. N. ROY, *The Problem of Freedom* (Calcutta: Renaissance, 1945), 12.

<sup>60</sup> ROY, *The Problem of Freedom*, 14.

<sup>61</sup> FRIEDMAN, *The Lives of Erich Fromm*, 113.

<sup>62</sup> ROY, *The Problem of Freedom*, 14.

lives had been profoundly changed in recent years, who might succumb to the modern type of fear of freedom identified by Fromm. He identified Gandhi's 'uprootedness' with his having lived in Britain and South Africa, where he had become a 'lonesome individual, frightened by the specter of freedom, [who] found refuge in submission to an authority [...]'.<sup>63</sup> Roy cast Gandhi's appeal to religious values as a response to modernity rather than as traditional. Furthermore, he implied that Gandhi had been unable to embrace the freedom of living an uprooted life—unlike Roy himself.

In order to cast Nehru in a similar role, Roy had to take a different tack. After all, Nehru's leftist ideas and more secular style were closer to Roy's own. There was something modern about Nehru, but Roy argued that this came with the same problem as Gandhi's modernity; neither Nehru nor Gandhi were able to bear the weight of their personal responsibility for their lives and beliefs. As such, their espousal of any ideology was suspect—including those closer to Roy's heart, such as socialism or communism—having been adopted for the wrong reasons and thereby compromising their very nature. '[Nehru's] apparent advance towards Socialism and Marxism was the typical groping of the lonesome individual of the twentieth century' or 'the modern man's search for God, who is eventually found in Fascism.'<sup>64</sup> What held all of these ideas together, whether they were meant to describe the masses, Gandhi, or Nehru, was their opposition to how Roy saw himself: as a 'modern' individual, strong enough to bear the weight of his own freedom. It was as such an individual, asserting the authority to assess which instances from past and present were like others, easily creating order in a large and chaotic world, that Roy positioned himself.

There were specific instances of Roy trying to find new audiences with his arguments about fascism. Around 1945, Roy and some of his political colleagues in the minor party he was then leading got in touch with the British Labour Party to advance their own design for a constitution for soon-to-be independent India. In a letter, Roy and his colleagues urged British Labourites to '[...]consider it for your upcoming meeting with [viceroy] Wavell.'<sup>65</sup> Part of this campaign was an article of Roy's, in which Gandhi's Congress party came in for heavy-duty accusations of fascist politics; here, the equivalence was between Wavell's support for Gandhi and that of general Paul von Hindenburg for Hitler—the common element being a lack of majority vote, as there had been no universal franchise at the time of the 1937 provincial elections.<sup>66</sup> In the article, Gandhi was not just a typical modern individual, fearful of his new freedoms; he was as dangerous as Hitler. As an attempt to gain a foothold in a party to whom Roy and his associates were unknown, this was an attention-grabbing, if unsuccessful, move.

---

<sup>63</sup> ROY, *The Problem of Freedom*, 15.

<sup>64</sup> ROY, *The Problem of Freedom*, 41.

<sup>65</sup> Manchester, People's History Museum (PHM), Labour Party, International Department, India, Letter from Tarkunde to Phillips, LP/ID/IND/2/37i.

<sup>66</sup> PHM, Labour Party, International Department, India, 'Lord Wavell Playing the Hindenburg of India? – Subtle Plan to Perpetuate Exploitation of Indian People – Indian National Congress Playing with Distributed Cards' LP/ID/IND/2/23ii.

In the post-Second World War international humanist realm, Roy's engagement with psychology was conducive to new contacts, yet the version of 'India' he had to offer was not what interlocutors in Europe were generally looking for. To begin with, engaging with Fromm's ideas had placed Roy into a wider international conversation and ensured his future work was noticed and appreciatively cited by Fromm himself.<sup>67</sup> Beyond Fromm, Roy corresponded with and published the work of French intellectuals, such as Raymond Aron (1905–1983) and the Christian humanist André Brissaud (1920–1996). While Brissaud had an interest in Indian humanism, it proved to be quite different from that which Roy's universalist psychology had to offer, as Brissaud planned on travelling to India to record a documentary named 'The Meaning of the Divine.'<sup>68</sup> In 1953, Roy's Indian humanist organisation became a founding member of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, even though Roy was not able to attend the inaugural congress.<sup>69</sup> At the founding congress, British eugenicist and biologist Julian Huxley (1887–1975) spoke of the hopes he had for a contribution to a humanist religion from South Asia, in the shape of '[...] communicable techniques for attaining satisfying kinds of mystical experience, such as are recorded for Yoga [...].'<sup>70</sup> Little could have been further from Roy's humanist ideas, which drew quite exclusively on European intellectual history and considered Hinduism anathema. The India he had to offer to European humanist audiences did not correspond to their expectations of difference, but Roy continued assuming the role of confounding such expectations, and destabilising the lines of division between contexts.

### Conclusion

Just as the perspective from an aeroplane, and the bird's eye view it provides, was the privilege of extremely few people in this period, possessing the confident authority to claim the ability to see the key similarities across widely ranging contexts was a similarly rare commodity.<sup>71</sup> Roy assumed such a perspective to the extent that the intellectual field where he felt comfortable moving approached the elusive thing that historians sometimes refer to as a 'global context.' Analytically, such a context would be much too unwieldy or even impossible to work with, and the notion has rightfully confounded intellectual historians. Yet, when turning the spotlight back on an actor ostensibly operating in such a context, the utter specificity of the ways in which he did so, and the opportunities this created for him, become clear. The example of M. N. Roy and his equivalences offer context to his political and personal circumstances,

---

<sup>67</sup> Fromm cited Roy's *Reason, Romanticism, and Revolution* (1952) in his 1955 book *The Same Society* as 'a thorough and brilliant analysis' of what he conceptualised as the problem of 'rootedness.' INNIAIAH NARISSETTI, 'Introduction,' in *M. N. Roy: Radical Humanist. Selected Writings*, ed. INNIAIAH NARISSETTI (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004), 2.

<sup>68</sup> NMML, Catalogue 70: M. N. Roy Papers Section 1, Brissaud Correspondence, Letter from André Brissaud to M. N. Roy, 29 April 1949.

<sup>69</sup> HANS VAN DEUKEREN, 'From theory to practice—a history of IHEU 1952-2002,' in *International Humanist and Ethical Union 1952-2002; Past, present and future*, eds BERT GASENBEEK and BABU GOGINENI (Utrecht: De Tijdstroom, 2002), 15–104 (18).

<sup>70</sup> VAN DEUKEREN, 'From theory to practice,' 20.

<sup>71</sup> See PETER ADEY, *Aerial Life: Spaces, Mobilities, Affects* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 1–11.

which he used in his arguments to interest new audiences, across a variegated life in which new opportunities were generally welcome and occasionally indispensable. This contingent context involved bodily presence in a specific space just as much as the intellectuals and texts they were engaging with. In fact, such limited contexts did not pre-date the arguments they now illuminate, but were created with them.

Without insights from translation studies, the shifting sands of context in global intellectual history, and the role it played in transcultural encounters as they were made, would remain invisible. The analytical use of translation yields the insight that context in global intellectual history can never be a given entity, and that it relies on and recreates notions of different contexts—and the differences between them. The making of such equivalences is easily overlooked, especially in thought as universalist as Roy's, because he posits the pre-existence of these instances of sameness. When their assertion is nevertheless considered as an act of creation, we can appreciate the transformative power they potentially had on the assumptions of difference among their audiences. In the case of Roy, whose interlocutors often, like himself, self-consciously operated between contexts, his writings tried to shift where they assumed the dividing lines of difference between contexts were. A global context, then, ceases to be something approaching the whole world, but rather pertains to the ways in which universal arguments were made credible, mobilising not only the personal authority to present evidence from different parts of the world, but also the differences between them.