The Myth of a ‘Westernized Middle Class’*

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[...]”

THE RISE AND APOGEE OF THE CONCEPT OF ‘WESTERNIZED MIDDLE CLASS’

In its most general form, the concept of ‘westernized middle class’ is simple enough. It defines those Indians who, during the colonial era, particularly since the 1820s and 1830s, acquired an education based on English language and culture. The concept itself has an illustrious pedigree, as it can be related to Thomas Babington Macaulay’s famous Minute on Education (2 February 1835) and the hopes there expressed that, through a diffusion throughout India of English language and culture, ‘a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect’ would come into being.1 By the end of the nineteenth century, the first theorists of the rising nationalist movement, especially Surendranath Banerjea, gave currency to the concept of a ‘new middle class’ which was born from the impact of western culture on Indian society and which was the carrier of ‘enlightenment, freedom, progress and prosperity’.2

It is easy to see how the use of this concept carried an obvious polemical advantage for the first Indian nationalists. As members of a modern middle class, the westernized Indians could claim that, according to key principles of the English political tradition, they were entitled to a growing role in the government of their own country, along the path already taken by the white dominions.3

On their part, the British rulers reacted strongly to the nationalists' polemical challenge. They pointed out that the westernized Indians, far from being a new class, formed an élite whose members belonged to those high castes, especially the Brahmanical castes, which traditionally filled the bureaucracies of any existing Indian state. Besides, the British claimed that, after all, the westernized Indians were not as westernized as they made themselves out to be and, anyway, not enough to be able to wield power according to adequate—namely British—standards of fairness and justice. At the same time, and rather contradictorily (but when has the strength of a polemical onslaught ever been diminished by its lack of internal consistency), the British rulers asserted that the westernized Indians, being westernized, had cut themselves off from the traditional society, namely from ‘true India’. That meant that they represented only themselves, which was not much, as in the words of that very liberal Viceroy, Lord Dufferin, the westernized middle class formed ‘a microscopic minority’.4

In spite of their deep differences when assessing the role of the westernized Indians, nationalist politicians and colonial rulers were agreed on a fundamentally important point. This was the fact that the westernized Indians formed an autonomous social group, which was internally consistent and differentiated from the other component parts of the social body. As a result, terms such as ‘westernized middle class’ or ‘westernized elite’ became, in everyday usage, interchangeable and synonymous.

Those two interpretations—the westernized Indians as coincident with a new professional and bureaucratic bourgeoisie or as members of a caste élite—were the extremes between which historians continued to move in their attempt to assess the role of the western educated Indians. The categories of ‘westernized middle class’ and ‘westernized élite’ were made use of as interchangeable terms which defined a sociological entity which, according to the convenience of the author, could be either the intersection or the sum or simply one of the two definitions elaborated by British rulers and Indian nationalists.

It goes without saying that such an unembarrassed utilization of the concept was not without ambiguities. However, even if there was some limited discussion, an in-depth debate on the subject never got started.5 A possible explanation is that, in spite of its ambiguities, or may be because of them, the concept itself appeared a methodological tool capable of producing conspicuous results. Therefore it was a
master key for interpreting the late colonial period, which was seen as dominated by the clash between the British Raj and the ‘new class’, or the ‘new elite’, bearer of the ideals of nationalism....

THE FALL OF THE CONCEPT OF ‘WESTERNIZED MIDDLE CLASS

The book which marked both the apogee in the utilization of the concept of westernized middle class and, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, its swan song was Judith Brown’s first monograph on Gandhi. Not by chance, the essay which put an end to the time when — in Eric Stoke’s ironic words—one could ‘unblushingly’ talk of the ‘modern English-educated Indian middle class’ was published as a review article of her book. The author, David Washbrook, one of the young lions of the then rising Cambridge school of Indian historians, [...] unleashed a devastating attack on her ‘extensive analysis of the structure of Indian politics between 1915 and 1922’. He argued that Brown’s analysis was ‘very wrong’ precisely because it was based on ‘such vast and unwieldy categories as Western educated presidency elites, or even their regional constituents’. In other words, . . .the category of westernized middle class/elite was unable to explain ‘the minutiae—and therefore the substance—of politics’. Accordingly it was unable to make head or tail of the peculiar phenomenon according to which, in 1920, in the Madras Presidency, the Congress broke up into three factions, each going its own separate way. [...] In Washbrook’s opinion, this was a rather peculiar outcome, as the leaders of the three different factions ‘were all Western educated lawyers, all Tamilians, all Sri Vaishnava Brahmins and, indeed, all active in the pre-1915 Congress’ The problem was, according to Washbrook, that ‘if we begin to examine the kind of people behind each leader it rapidly becomes apparent that each had a constituency which extended far beyond members of the elite.’ [...] :

The political wrangling between the three (leaders) represented not just a localized conflict within a small culturally defined group but a major clash in society, affecting an improbably wide range of connexions, over the distribution of power under the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms. There were, no doubt, senses in which the three would stand together—as lawyers, Brahmins, Tamilians, or Vaishnavites—but these were of little importance when compared to the practical differences, based on the membership of different factions and networks, which kept them apart.

Apart from this, the westernized Indians did not even enjoy a paramount position in the factions which they formally led. Washbrook points
out that, in Madras, ‘the Western educated as a group controlled relatively few means of production and hence possessed relatively little economic power in the presidency’. In Washbrook’s opinion: [

In function, the Western educated of Madras provide us with a classical example of the middle-man, essentially alike both to the British administration and to Indians with local influence, yet ultimately dependent upon being accepted by both and, individually, capable of being destroyed by the withdrawal of the confidence of either. Of course, the extraordinarily convoluted and dislocated system of government in India gave the middle-man great room for manoeuvre. [...]. But, however he came to acquire his importance, he still needed some support from above and from below and had to tailor his individual policies to these ends. A great many of the actions of Western educated politicians were, therefore, dictated not by their own wishes, [...] but by their need to gain personal support from the leader of society and from the government. Thus it makes no sense to regard them as a permanently unified category standing against the rest of society, nor indeed as an elite in the world of politics.

I have used this long quotation because it is not only the death warrant of the former master concept of the historiography of India in the age of nationalism but because in it an alternative category is forcefully put forward. The westernized middle class wanes like a nightmare at the moment of awakening and the attention of the analyst shifts to the interaction between the British and those indigenous magnates who, according to Washbrook, dominated Indian society at the local level. A by-product of this shift is the sudden disappearance of the Indian National Congress, namely the all-India organization of the westernized middle class, as a key political structure in late colonial India. In Washbrook’s own words, ‘politics is about the control and organization of power and the Congress, quite simply, was not an institution which, of itself, controlled very much power.’ Others were the institutions which exerted power in India: ‘the bureaucracy, municipalities, rural boards, temples, universities, charities, etc., which were changing and expanding rapidly from the 1880s.’ Accordingly, it is on these organizations—and not on the Congress, which was little more than an empty box which could occasionally be useful to certain notables as a stump from which to orate—that the attention of the historian must be focused.

The ideas put forward by Washbrook were taken up by Anil Seal and inserted in a brilliant article in which Seal summed up and systematized the result of the research work of some of his students and colleagues. In so doing, Seal produced what came to be regarded as the manifesto of the new Cambridge school of Indian historians.
[...] Accordingly, following Washbrook’s indications, Seal depicted the westernized Indians as clients and spokesmen of the notables who controlled Indian society, and intermediaries between the latter and the British Raj. Indeed the campaign to dispose of the old concept and to replace it with that of middleman was so effective that, by the time she wrote her second book on Gandhi, even Judith Brown had been converted. The Mahatma, seen in her first book as a kind of demonic figure who, from a politically inchoate chaos, conjured up and moulded powerful new social forces, in her second book is cut down to the rather modest size of a go-between. [...] 

OF LINGERING DOUBTS AND CONTRADICTIONS

If even Judith Brown—as Paul on his way to Damascus—had seen the light, must we conclude that Washbrook’s word had triumphed? As a matter of fact, the answer is less than an unqualified yes. Among the Cambridgeites themselves one can notice some uncertainties and contradictions when one comes to peruse closely their position on the problem. Let us take the example of John Gallagher [...] [who] although careful in not making use of such *démé* terms as ‘westernized middle class’ or ‘westernized elite’ conveniently substituting less compromising labels such as ‘the politicians of Calcutta’, the ‘oligarchs’, ‘the Hindu politicians’ — is really talking about that same political group that J.H. Broomfield called ‘the bhadralok’, namely the Bengal westernized middle class.15

Another Cambridgeite who, although cautiously and somehow tentatively, differentiates himself from David Washbrook is Christopher Bayly. In his 1973 article on Allahabad, Bayly firmly shared his colleague’s revisionist position.16 However, in his book on the same topic, published in 1975, Bayly seems to arrive at a somewhat different position. According to him, by 1920, namely at the end of the period which he analyses, the situation in Allahabad was characterized by the emergence, besides the notables who dominated the economic and social life of the city, of at least a section of westernized Indians wielding a comparable and autonomous power. This process was the by-product of ‘the general development of association, publicity, and regional organs of representation’ and the coming into being of ‘new arenas of town-wide politics associated with housing improvement, a more consolidated labour market, and new mercantile associations’. As the power of this group of ‘professional men and local publicists’ was a function of new and developing socio-political institutions and
political techniques, it is only logical to assume—as Bayly himself
does—that the importance of these men was bound to gradually rise
in the post-1920 period. Yet, the influence of this group of westernized
Indians was still ultimately dependant on their ability at playing the
role of intermediaries—although, of course, not between the notables
and the colonial authorities, but between the latter and certain sectors
of the local population, formerly controlled by the notables.17

Sharper, even if still somewhat muted, is the contrast between
Washbrook’s thesis and the conclusions reached by another
Cambridgeite, B.R. Tomlinson. [....] Tomlinson portrays the Congress
as the necessary ladder to be used by nationalist politicians to climb
the walls of the political-administrative citadel that the British—for
their own imperial reasons—were in the process of turning over to the
Indians. [....] Even more importantly for the present discussion, the
political personnel of the Congress (namely the westernized elite) is
seen as engaged in an active and autonomous role, which is not in
any way dependent on the placet by the notables. The politicians of
the Congress appear deeply involved in all-out confrontations among
themselves with the aim of taking over both the Congress organization
and the self-governing bodies created by the British. Tomlinson shows
how as a consequence, they were inevitably driven to widen their
contacts with the external world in an effort to augment their political
leverage inside the Congress, and to bring inside the Congress as wide
a range of social forces as possible.18

THE WESTERNIZED MIDDLE CLASS’S COME-BACK

So, after all, on the particular problem of the status and role of the
westernized Indians, the Cambridge school’s assessment is far from
being homogeneous. Such a situation could not but invite a rebuttal.
This has come from a brilliant Bengali scholar, himself a former pupil
of Cambridge University, Dr Rajat K. Ray.

Ray’s departing hypothesis is that the contradiction between the
picture of the Indian social system given by the Cambridgeites—based
on cross-caste and cross-class vertical structures—and that painted
by other historians—where horizontal social formations, such as the
westernized middle class, are prominent—is only apparent. Or rather
this difference is a function of the different speed of the process of
modernization in different areas of the subcontinent.19

According to Ray, the kind of social organization which Washbrook
and Baker portray as dominant in the Madras Presidency, up to the
mid-1930s, was already typical, once the necessary adjustments are made, of both the Mughal Empire and its successor states. On the basis of the work by Satish Chandra and Athar Ali on the Mughal Empire and Conn, Calkins and Leonard on the successor states, Ray claims that in all cases analysed by those scholars, the social system appears articulated in vertical structures controlled by powerful patrons. Such structures cut through castes and classes, linking together their segments. When the English took over the subcontinent, they tried to disrupt as little as possible the existing social organization and made use of it in order to administer ‘economically’—in the wider meaning of the term—their Indian Empire. However, in spite of all other similarities, there was a crucial difference between the British Raj and other Mughal successor states. This difference was the necessity on the part of the colonial state to subordinate Indian convenience to British interests.

The necessity to promote and protect these alien interests—among which Ray stresses the need to create ‘a congenial field of operation’ for British capital—was the engine behind ‘the process of administrative centralization from the late nineteenth century, which has figured so prominently in recent analysis of political change’.

In spite of the desire of the British administrators of the subcontinent not to disturb the existing social order, the colonial connection implied a dynamic made of ever-growing economic and administrative interference vis-a-vis Indian society. Cause and effect of this dynamic was the widening and thickening of the state apparatus. The result of this ‘process of structurally distorted, partial modernization’ was ‘a shift in social influence from ruling noble, chief, and warrior elements’ (namely the powerful patrons who lorded over the cross-class, cross-caste vertical structures which had hitherto been the stuff of Indian society) to ‘bureaucratic and professional communities formally tied to the ruling elements’. This was because the members of these bureaucratic and professional communities filled the ranks and files of the colonial bureaucracy.

If I am allowed a slightly unbecoming rhetorical figure, I will try to sum up Ray’s thinking by saying that the gradual unfolding of the tentacles of imperialism through the ports of Calcutta and Bombay brought about the parallel and gradual withering away of the vertical structures of social control, increasingly substituted in their functions by the widening state apparatus. In turn, this process liberated the various horizontal segments formerly linked and subordinate to a
patron and caused their coalescing in wider horizontal strata or—as Ray calls them, following Kaleki and K.N. Raj’s usage—‘intermediate strata’. According to Ray, these intermediate strata, ‘identified neither with a propertied class owning the means of production, nor with a property-less class living by physical labour’, did not have any definite class alignment.

Ray points out that the intermediate strata were subdivided into two main sectors: urban and rural. From what he says it is not difficult to realize that, behind the label of urban intermediate strata is disguised a social formation including the westernized middle class/elite plus the vernacular literati. Analogously, behind the label of rural intermediate strata appears another old warhorse of Indian historiography (and sociology), namely that social formation variously described as ‘rich peasants’ or ‘dominant peasant castes’. In sum, once again, we are regaled with the good old theory that Indian nationalism can best be explained by the anti-imperialist alliance between the westernized middle class—plus vernacular literati—and the peasantry. Any former partisan of the westernized middle class/elite as a key historiographical concept should rejoice at Ray’s bold counter-revisionist attempt.

THE FINAL DEFEAT OF THE WESTERNIZED MIDDLE CLASS

However, is Ray’s counter-revision really so well-grounded as to withstand any serious criticism? […] First of all, Ray’s two main components of the ‘intermediate strata’ can be classified under the same label only through a semantic mystification. As a matter of fact, according to Ray’s own analysis, at least in those parts of India in which the rural ‘intermediate strata’ were really an intermediate social formation, existing in between ‘sharecroppers and bonded labour’ on one side and zamindars and talukdars on the other, there was a basic contradiction between urban and rural intermediate strata. […]

Here, one could object that Ray’s analysis […] could be maintained once it is limited to its urban component. However, even by doing so, one is rapidly confronted by additional problems. The first is the evanescence of the concept of urban ‘intermediate strata’. Not only did they have no ‘defined role in the production system’ but, more important, according to Ray’s description, they were able to wield some kind of political weight only when acting in connection with other social forces: capital, labour and, in particular, the dominant peasant castes. […]
But the more substantial objection to the usefulness of Ray’s concept is, quite simply, that Washbrook’s criticism of the category of westernized elite still holds true for the urban intermediate strata. The latter was a social formation which, as soon as it had to deal with any major or minor political problem, showed an irrepressible tendency to break up into two or more warring parties or factions, call them what you will. [...]

TURNING TO A DIFFERENT CULTURAL TRADITION
At this point the fog of war has settled on the methodological battlefield. The old key reference point—the westernized middle class/elite—has disappeared from sight; the others are hazy and considered by most as untrustworthy. [...] All this has brought about a great deal of confusion and some rather queer results. We have Indian scholars who go on discussing the westernized Indians and the Congress just as if Washbrook and his colleagues had never written a single line related to these questions. On the other hand, there are British historians who, in the same essay, light-heartedly switch from the concept of westernized Indians as an autonomous social group, endowed of its own class interests, to that of westernized Indians as middlemen, apparently without realizing that the two categories are mutually exclusive.27 [...] This being the situation, a possible way out can be offered by the realization that the problem under examination, namely the role of the so-called ‘educated class’, is far from being an exclusive problem of Indian historiography. The role of this social formation has been scrutinized and solutions have been offered by other cultural traditions. It is by drawing on that peculiarly Italian version of Marxism whose author is Antonio Gramsci that I will now put forward my proposal for a new solution of the problem.28

Gramsci came to grips with the role of the ‘educated class’ as part and parcel of his reinterpretation of Italian history and cultural tradition. Gramsci put the problem of the members of the ‘educated class’, namely, the intellectuals, in its proper context by the question which opens his notes on the intellectuals. He writes: ‘Are intellectuals an autonomous and independent social group, or does every social group have its own particular specialized category of intellectuals?’29 Although claiming that the problem is a complex one, Gramsci’s answer to his own question is clear-cut: intellectuals are not an autonomous social group.
Gramsci acknowledges that historically intellectuals mostly hail from certain social classes, such as ‘the petty and middle landed bourgeoisie and certain strata of the petty and middle urban bourgeoisie’. However, the class origin of the intellectuals is irrelevant. What matters is that they, as a ‘professional category’, namely as a set of persons whose common denominator is their professional role, acquire social and political weight only by acting as theorists, organizers, strategists, and spokesmen on behalf of autonomous social groups, that is, social classes, either existing or in the process of formation. It goes without saying that these social classes are not necessarily those from which the intellectuals hail. [...]

It is the presence of [...] intellectuals, whom Gramsci calls ‘traditional intellectuals’, which has given rise to ‘that social utopia, by which the intellectuals think of themselves as “independent”, autonomous, endowed with a character of their own.’ According to Gramsci, the most typical of these categories of traditional intellectuals is that of the ecclesiastics, who, in the past, performed a crucial role by wielding the monopoly of religious ideology, education, justice, and charity. This category of intellectuals ‘had equal status juridically with the aristocracy, with which it shared the exercise of feudal ownership of land, and the use of state privileges connected with property.’ [...]

As already indicated, for Gramsci this claim is groundless. But, interestingly enough, he concedes that this pretension on the part of the traditional intellectuals ‘is not without consequences in the ideological and political field, consequences of wide-ranging import’. Gramsci is less than exhaustive in characterizing and discussing these wide-ranging consequences. However, by developing logically what he writes and drawing on the whole Marxist intellectual tradition, one can easily contend that the traditional intellectuals, both because of their tendency to consider themselves as independent of the dominant social group and their skills as political theorists and strategists, can discern more easily than most people the long-term trend of the historical process in the making. Accordingly, they may sometimes shift their allegiance to new social classes on the rise. It is precisely this shift of loyalties that, in Gramsci’s thinking, marks the turning point
in the struggle on the part of a new rising class which is developing towards dominance.34

THE WESTERNIZED INDIANS AND THE VERNACULAR LITERATI AS INTELLECTUALS

Armed with the insight offered by Gramsci, we can now return to our original problem. My contention is that the concept of ‘intellectuals’, as defined by Gramsci, has a closer correspondence to reality and, therefore, is a sharper and more useful methodological tool than either the concept of westernized middle class/elite—including its various avatars—or that of middlemen. It defines those Indians who, quite independently from their class and caste origin, were politically aware and active as theorists, strategists, organizers, and spokesmen on behalf of existing or emerging autonomous social groups. The set of persons thus defined is partially coincident with both the so-called westernized middle class/elite and Washbrook’s middlemen. However, the boundaries of the old and new categories are not identical.

When compared to Washbrook’s, the concept that I am now putting forward includes a somewhat wider group, as not all the politically aware and politically active Indians were middlemen in Washbrook’s sense. Certainly, people who performed such a crucially important political role as Dayananda and Romesh Chandra Dutt never acted as middlemen. [....] But, of course, all these people easily fit in the category of ‘intellectuals’ as defined by Gramsci.

Analogously, westernized middle class/elite and Gramsci’s intellectuals are concepts which define two overlapping but not identical sets of people. Not all the westernized Indians can be considered as Gramscian intellectuals but only those who were politically aware and politically active. On the other hand, the concept of intellectuals has the advantage of including the politically aware and politically active vernacular literati, whose great importance in the political evolution of late colonial India is now universally acknowledged.

Using Gramsci’s notes as a foil, we can better understand the shortcomings of the former key methodological concepts. Turning first to the concept of intermediaries or middlemen, the problem with Washbrook’s categorization—quite apart from his total, and quite clearly ideological, disregard for the importance of nationalist ideology—seems to originate from his chronological and geographical area of inquiry. The Madras Presidency in the decades from the 1860s up to the First World War was characterized by a stagnant society,
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where the process of change was almost non-existent. [...] In sum
this was a situation which was economically and socially static,
where the politics of the indigenous dominant classes were factional
politics, and where a racial and linguistic cleavage existed between the
people who controlled the base and those who controlled the apex of
the political system. No doubt, in this context, Indian intellectuals
acted also, or seemed to act, in the way summarized by Washbrook.
However, as soon as the winds of change started to blow, both the
situation of the indigenous notables and the role of the westernized
Indians appeared in a radically different light. In order to weather the
challenges represented by the growing interference of the colonial
state and the rise of newly-organized social groups, eager for their
share of political power and economic resources, the notables had to
organize themselves along class lines. [...] Although a limited number
of Indian politicians went on acting as freelance ambassadors between
the foreign rulers and Indian social groups, this was a limited and
diminishing role. By the early 1920s, the political stage came to
be dominated by Indian politicians who acted in the way suggested
by Gramsci. They were far from being simple go-betweens and,
accordingly, their political standing could not be destroyed by the
displeasure of the colonial rulers.

We can now discuss the crucial ambiguity which weakens the
concept of westernized middle class/elite and its various avatars, Ray’s
‘intermediate strata’ included. This ambiguity flows from the confusion
between the urban non-capitalist bourgeoisie, considered in Marxist
terms as an autonomous sort at group, and the politically aware and
politically active intellectuals hailing from this class. This confusion
has two origins. The first is, quite simply, that in the nineteenth
century, practically all the politically aware Indian intellectuals
came from the urban petty bourgeoisie. One of those social strata
specialized, according to Gramsci, in ‘producing’ intellectuals. The
second, and possibly more important, source of confusion is that in
the crucial period in which Indian nationalism took its shape—let us
say from the 1860s to the First World War—Indian intellectuals both
claimed and believed themselves to be a new middle class.

As we have seen, this attitude, far from being exceptional or
surprising, is characteristic of that group of intellectuals whom
Gramsci calls traditional intellectuals. No doubt, the westernized
Indians, who mostly hailed from a limited number of high-ranking
castes whose members traditionally served the ruling elites and often
shared their privileges, were ‘traditional’ intellectuals. In their case, the normal syndrome according to which the traditional intellectuals ‘think of themselves as “independent”, autonomous, endowed with a character of their own, etc.’ could not but be powerfully strengthened by the revolutionary intellectual upheaval brought about by the acquisition of a totally new culture against a background in which the old culture remained dominant. It is my contention that while, eventually, the new culture furnished the westernized Indians with both a keener perception of historical reality and additional tools for their political armoury, at first this change of their mental categories somewhat blurred their political perception. As a consequence, before being able to take stock of their real position, many westernized Indians tried to act as if part of an autonomous social group, and one potentially endowed with a relevant political weight of its own.

It is in this perspective that we can re-read the history of the social reform movement and its failure in the nineteenth century. Undoubtedly, many westernized intellectuals became convinced that the successful promotion of radical social reforms would be proof of the ‘modernity’ of the new class to which they claimed to belong and, implicitly, of the existence of a new class able to take the place of the European ruling class. However, in a situation in which Indian society was completely dominated by deeply conservative classes, such as the old landed aristocracy and merchant groups, the social reform policy of the westernized intellectuals was largely unrealistic and self-defeating. Of course, if a modern and politically dominant middle class had existed, the social reforms could have been implemented as an expression of the cultural outlook—Gramsci would say of the cultural hegemony—of the new dominant class. The problem was that, at that stage of the economic development of India, no modern middle class had yet taken shape, let alone staked its claim to political dominance. [...] By 1885, with the foundation of the Congress, even the most ‘progressively minded among the social reformers left the social reforms in the background in favour of a strategy aimed at political reforms’.37

This shift has usually been seen, both by contemporaries and historians, as resulting from a failure in the moral strength of the individual reformers. My contention is that, on the contrary, it was proof of realism and political maturity. [...] By espousing the cause of political reforms, the ‘microscopic minority’ which had fancied itself to be a new and crucially important social class found a way out
from the political wilderness and began to relate, or try to relate, to its potential constituencies.

THE INDIAN INTELLECTUALS AS STRATEGISTS AND ORGANIZERS

The shift of emphasis on the part of the bulk of the intellectuals from social to political reforms and the individuation of the overthrow of colonialism—sometimes seen as a short-term process, sometimes as a long-term struggle, but always as the main task ahead—came with the realization that the desired objective could be reached only by putting together a wide-ranging alliance, reuniting all the live forces present in Indian society. [...] In turn, this had three consequences. The first was the mutation of the role of the intellectuals vis-a-vis the old dominant groups. As we have already seen, by the end of the nineteenth century the main role of the traditional intellectuals became that of spokesmen, theorists, strategists, and organizers of the whole class to which the individual notables belonged.

Secondly, while the mutation of the role of the traditional intellectual vis-a-vis the old dominant classes was taking place, a part of the intellectuals—who, sometimes, were the same individuals active in the process described above—began to act as organizers of new and rising social classes or sections of social classes (the latter sometimes defined by ethnic elements, such as religion, caste, or language). Logically enough—and this could be listed as the third reason for the persistent confusion between the class origin and the political role of the westernized Indians—they first got busy in organizing the class from which they hailed, namely the non-capitalist urban bourgeoisie. However, the westernized Indians did not limit their activities, as Gramscian intellectuals, to their origin. Soon enough they began to act as organizers, theorists, and representatives for the modern entrepreneurial class, the industrial workers and, more important, certain sectors of the peasantry. The anti-partition movement in Bengal and the 1919 satyagraha movement at the all-India level exemplify both the remarkable success of the efforts of the Indian intellectuals and its limitations. [...] As a rule, they were successful only as they were able to collaborate with ‘organic’ intellectuals, namely intellectuals hailing from the new, rising social groups.

The third crucial role performed by the intellectuals was the attempt to devise a strategy which could accommodate all the organized social groups and the groups in the process of getting organized.
Certainly, it was not easy to forge and maintain a working coalition of entrepreneurs and working class, zamindars and dominant peasant castes, wealthy professionals and impoverished urban petty bourgeoisie, and so on. Yet, as anybody knows, even allowing for the major qualification that this ‘grand alliance’ was unable to encompass the bulk of the Indian Muslims, this apparently hopeless task of coalition-building was a resounding success. Of course, it could not have been attained without the remarkable political skills of the Indian nationalist intellectuals. However, it is worth stressing that the sine qua non of the ‘grand alliance’ was the fact that the colonial regime was or became inimical to the interests of all Indian social groups or, in other words, of the Indian people as a whole. [...] [A]s has most recently been shown by Tomlinson (a historian whom nobody would dare accuse of being over-sympathetic towards Indian nationalism), the imperial commitment, that is, the necessity to subordinate Indian to English interests, increasingly forced the colonial Government to siphon off Indian resources and prevented the implementation of policies favourable to Indian interests.40 This was a gradual process, which was started in the 1870s by the changing international situation and the beginning of the slow but unstoppable decline of the English economy vis-a-vis those of her main competitors: the USA and Germany.41 The British, particularly the ‘men on the spot’, namely the Indian Government, tried their best to cushion or reward their Indian collaborators. However, the imperial commitment eroded slowly but irreversibly the very bases of the colonial regime. [...] [E]ven those indigenous groups whose rise had been made possible by the pax britannica, such as the new industrial entrepreneurs, and those other groups whose conservation or power seemed strictly tied to the permanence of British rule, such as the big landlords, had to look out for alternatives to the colonial ruling class and its policies or, better, lack of policies. It was at that point that even the most politically conservative social groups accepted the lead of the nationalist intellectuals or the spokesmen and theorists of these groups espoused the cause of nationalism.

When examined in depth, the process summarized above highlights two important aspects of the role of the intellectuals. The first is that the intellectuals, although able to foresee the evolution of the political setting and plan out a strategy accordingly, were heavily conditioned by the extant political reality. [...] The second point which must be stressed is the following. As mentioned before, the early efforts of
the traditional intellectuals, grouped in the Congress, to act as the organizers and representatives of new social groups on the rise were largely fruitless. [...] Very often, the ‘organic’ intellectuals of these new groups articulated this hostility through the non-Brahman ideology, namely the scathing criticism of the social customs and social pretensions of those Brahmanical castes from which the bulk of the traditional intellectuals hailed. [...] Then in a major turning point in the history of Indian nationalism, during the 1930s most of the former constituencies of these non-Brahman movements and the organic intellectuals of these social groups radically revised their positions and entered the Congress. By doing so, they gave a powerful boost to the Congress by substantiating its long-standing claim to be the true representative of the Indian people as a whole.

This crucial political shift has sometimes been explained as being mainly the product of factional squabbles and opportunistic policies engineered by ruthless politicians who disguised their self-interest under the cloak of a high sounding nationalist rhetoric. We should be highly sceptical of such an explanation, remembering that this turn-about coincided with the devastation of the Indian economy and society made possible by the colonial government’s inability to cope with the impact of the world crisis—an inability which was the necessary by-product of the subordinate position of India in the British colonial empire. [...] 

INTELLECTUALS AND THE SOCIAL SYSTEM

As a conclusion to our discussion, we must now turn our attention to the relationship between Indian intellectuals and the social system as a whole.

First of all, let us recall the well-known fact that Indian society in the late colonial period was extremely complex, heterogeneous, and segmented. The usual contradictions, to be observed in any society in which capitalism is gradually emerging as the dominant mode of production, were compounded by divisions arising from caste, religious, and linguistic factors. A result of this situation was the absence of any single class able to exercise its hegemony over the whole Indian society. What existed was a heterogeneous cluster of dominant groups characterized by widely divergent interests and outlooks. This made easier the upward mobility of new social formations aiming at becoming part of this loose conglomerate of dominant social groups.
The lack of either a single dominant class or a homogeneous dominant social block resulted in an uneasy balance of power. [...] In this situation any important politician was the representative of an extremely wide and heterogeneous network of interests. Accordingly, his role was not only to represent these interests, but to mediate among them... Clearly, there were physical limits to the size and heterogeneity of the social following which any single politician could manage. Such limits could best be overcome by making use of political organizations. By far the most successful of these organizations was the Congress. Since its foundation, the Congress set as its goal that of representing the whole Indian people. As has already been noticed, this meant the elaboration of policies which could be seen as an acceptable compromise by all the organized and organizing social groups, no matter how heterogeneous their interests were. During the colonial era, this strategy on the part of the Congress reached its highest point in the years 1937 to 1939. [...] From that period the countdown to the end of British Empire in India began, even if the changed relationship of power between the nationalist movement and the Raj remained concealed up to the moment when the Quit India crisis revealed it suddenly and dramatically.44 However, what does matter here is that it was the presence inside the Congress of these heterogeneous interests which at the same time set the limits and opened a vast room for manoeuvre to the Congress as a political organization and to its political leadership. Men such as Mohandas Gandhi and, after him, Jawaharlal Nehru were not primarily the representatives of certain class or group interests. Nor were they simple umpires who supervised the observers of certain fixed rules of the political game and sanctioned the victory of the strongest team. They were politicians who, because of their technical skill in reconciling divergent interests and the personal prestige which they enjoyed, in part because of this ability, could wield an autonomous power and act as independent centres of power.45 So, after having begun by denying any autonomous role to the politically aware intellectuals, we have ended up by acknowledging that, within limits, they sometimes were able to play such a role. I admit that this is not fully consistent. But, as Bertrand Russell claims when speaking of Locke’s philosophy, ‘no one has yet succeeded in inventing a philosophy at once credible and self-consistent’ and ‘there is no reason to suppose that a self-consistent system contains more truth than one which ...is more or less wrong’.46 I do hope that my
methodological proposal, in spite of its rather paradoxical conclusion, might be accepted by my fellow scholars as a useful methodological tool.

NOTES


3. For two among many examples of the official way of thinking on the subject see Sir Valentine Chirol, Indian Unrest (London, 1910) and Sir Reginald Craddock, The Dilemma in India (London, 1929).

4. Dufferin’s notorious statement was delivered in his farewell speech, on the 30 November 1888. See John R. McLane, Indian Nationalism and the Early Congress (Princeton, 1977), pp. 116–17. For Dufferin’s conviction that Indian society was horizontally divided between ‘the educated Babus, and the uneducated masses’ see Biplabi Chandra, Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India (New Delhi, 1979), pp. 275 ff.


9. Ibid., p. 110.

10. Ibid. (emphasis added)

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.
13. By now, the term ‘Cambridge school’ has become part of the jargon of Indian historians. However, there is considerable confusion about who belongs to that school, what are its distinctive features, or even if that school has ever existed (a fact which is denied by some of its members). Throughout this article, when speaking of ‘Cambridge school’, I designate those scholars whose research, one way or another, went to building and developing the interpretative model whose main features were summed up by Anil Seal in the essay ‘Imperialism and Nationalism in India’, which opened the monographic issue of *Modern Asian Studies*, 7, 3, (1973) later reprinted as John Gallagher, Gordon Johnson and Anil Seal (eds), *Locality, Province and Nation: Essays on Indian Politics*, 1870 to 1940 (Cambridge, 1973).


21. Ray makes the important point that in pre-colonial Indian society not only class solidarity but also caste and community ties did not have an existence of their own at the super-local level. Accordingly, ‘the activation not only of class forces but also of caste sentiments and communal passions in the twentieth-century mass politics must be sought in a relatively modern process of social and political change.’ Ray, ‘Political Change’, p. 500. My own research on Surat in the second half of the eighteenth century shows that caste and religious ties were as often elements of solidarity as factors of division among the members of any given religious/caste community. Accordingly, even at the local level, communal solidarity cannot be considered as an important factor of social mobilization. See my ‘Surat during the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century. What Kind of Social Order?— A Rejoinder to Lakshmi Subramanian’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 21, 4 (1987).


The Middle Class in Colonial India


28. The striking analogies between the Italian Risorgimento and the Indian nationalist era have first been remarked on by Sumit Sarkar. As far as I know, Sarkar is the first Indian historian to point out the potential usefulness of Gramsci’s reflections on Italian history in general and the Risorgimento in particular as a methodological compass which could be employed in analysing Indian history during the nationalist era. See the conclusion of his *The Swadeshi Movement*. Since then, several historians, either contributing to the publication of Ranajit Guha (ed.) *Subaltern Studies* (Delhi: Vol. I, 1982, Vol. II, 1983, Vol. III, 1984) or working under the leadership of Professor Bipan Chandra (see his ‘Presidential Address: The Long-Term Dynamics of the Indian National Congress, Indian History Congress’: Forty-Sixth Session, Amritsar, 1985) have made large use of Gramscian categories. In my own case, the stimulus to make use of Gramscian concepts is a natural result of my own Italian cultural background.


30. Hoare and Smith, *Selections from...Gramsci*, p. 11.
31. Ibid., p.7.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.

34. Ibid., p. 10. See also ‘Bellettristica storica’ in Antonio Gramsci, *Passato e presente* (Torino, 1951), pp. 29–32.

35. Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru can be pointed out as one of the few examples of Indian politicians who, in the 1920s and 1930s, while limiting their political role to that of go-between, were nevertheless able to exercise some influence on the unfolding of the events.

36. So, for example, Gandhi’s defeat and eclipse at the end of the civil disobedience movement of 1930–4 was not the result of the unwillingness of part of the Raj to accept him as a go-between but the outcome of the heavy disproportion of strength then existing between the colonial state and the nationalist movement. After all, that was still the time when the Raj, in the words of B.N. Gupta, who was just then beginning his career as a future Congress boss, ‘filled the sky’ like a giant. See the interview with B.N. Gupta quoted in James Manor, ‘Anomie in Indian Politics’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Annual Number: (January 1983), p. 725.

37. Of course, some individual intellectuals went on working mainly as social reformers. But, by doing so, they cut themselves off from the mainstream of Indian politics. On the whole question of the social reform movement see Charles H. Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform* (Princeton, 1964). See also Sudhir Chandra, ‘Hindu Conservatism in the Nineteenth Century’ in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 12 December 1970, and
The Myth of a ‘Westernized Middle Class’


38. On this point see Bipan Chandra’s stimulating remarks in his ‘Presidential Address: The Long-Term Dynamics of the Indian National Congress’.


41. On the initial phase of this process and India’s role in cushioning British economy against its adverse effects see Marcello De Cecco, *Economia e finanza internazionale dal 1890 al 1914* (Bari, 1971), chs II & IV.

42. For a description of this process in Maharashtra, see O’Hanlon, ‘Acts of appropriation’...


45. Of course even powerful leaders such as Gandhi and Nehru could not hope to take on the whole party victoriously by themselves. But, within limits, they had the strength to push through policies which were judged superfluous or even harmful by influential sectors of the party and the social groups which they represented. My contention is that the same was true at the lower levels of the party organization in the case of provincial/state or local leaders. In other words, the politicians, although conditioned in their actions by their following, could come to enjoy a substantial room for autonomous action. All the story of Nehru’s partially successful attempt at planned economic development can be seen in this light.