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Opium Eaters: Buddhism as Revolutionary Politics

James Mark Shields

Since Asian Buddhism first appeared on the horizon of Western intellectual culture during the European Enlightenment, it has frequently faced the charge of promoting passivity, if not outright nihilism. Nineteenth-century German thinker Arthur Schopenhauer's attempt to employ Buddhist concepts, while sympathetic, only exacerbated this common charge, since Schopenhauer's own ideas of the extinction of the will faced similar criticism. And while Friedrich Nietzsche also had a soft spot for the teachings of the Buddha among the world's religions, he too concluded that the Dharma was ultimately an enervating doctrine ill-suited to 'overcoming' men of the future. Even while accepting the beauty of Buddhism's ethical ideal, prominent Scottish theologian A. B. Bruce, Nietzsche's exact contemporary but ideological opposite, picks up on the same quasi-Marxist charge against the Dharma as an *anodyne*, one that has 'produced the effect of a mild dose of opium' on the people of 'weary-hearted Asia.'¹

A similar view was common even among those who should have known better; that is, scholars of comparative religion. Max Weber famously described Buddhism as an 'anti-political status religion' rooted in 'a religious technology of wandering, intellectually-schooled mendicant monks... [whose] salvation is a solely personal act of the single individual.'² As Ian Harris notes in the Introduction to this volume, this idea—along with an explicit contrast between Buddhism and Christianity on political matters—was carried on in the twentieth century by, among others, the influential German theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923). While the flowering of sophisticated scholarship on Asian Buddhism in the mid- to late twentieth century laid to rest many of the most egregious stereotypes about Buddhism, the charge of passiveness lingers. Even with the recent emergence of 'engaged

Buddhism,' most Westerners, even or perhaps especially those sympathetic to the tradition, consider it largely if not entirely *apolitical*.

Not all of these charges are new, of course, nor are they without some historical basis. Buddhists have faced similar critiques from the very origins of the movement in ancient India, when they had to compete with the numerous religious and philosophical currents of the day, including Brahmins, Jains, materialists, and followers of numerous other sects and schools. And when the Dharma entered China some five centuries later, the pragmatically inclined Chinese intelligentsia was highly resistant to this 'Western' religious complex, with its foreign notions of asceticism and implicit rejection of hierarchical social and domestic relations. And yet, over succeeding centuries, Buddhism successfully acculturated to East Asian cultural foundations. One of the ways it did so was by adopting a largely secular, pro-state attitude. In Japan, Buddhism entered the country with the promise of state protection, and key Mahāyāna texts such as the *Lotus Sutra* were from an early period explicitly employed as vehicles for such. As a result, for most of Japanese history, Buddhist institutions were very much imbricated in political power, whether of the imperial court or the various shogunates. Rarely has Buddhism in Japan—or elsewhere in Asia—been used as a force for political critique of secular authority, despite the fact that a number of doctrines and ideas within Asian Buddhist traditions can be interpreted as having distinctly political and even critical implications.

A comprehensive historical study of Buddhism and politics, if such were possible, would reveal numerous permutations on the relation between sangha and state. Surely there is no one single answer to the question: What is or are 'Buddhist politics'? And yet, I suggest we can explore the issue by taking a slightly different tack. Rather than seek general historical trends or broad tendencies, in this chapter I will dig vertically, as it were, into the meaning and implications of the modern, Western conception of 'politics' as understood in relation to key features of Buddhist doctrine. In particular, I would like to pose the question of whether we might fruitfully conceive at least certain interpretations of Buddhism—or perhaps, of Dharma—as politics, rather than 'religion' or 'philosophy.' By way of a critical analysis of the work of two significant Buddhist theorist-activists of the early to mid-twentieth century, I argue that any typology of religion and politics must confront some vexed issues regarding the meaning and significance of both terms in a (modern) Buddhist context. As I will argue, twentieth-century progressive Buddhists Seno'o Girō (1889–1961) and B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) were not so much in *conflict* with the political as they were *engaged*

with the political, albeit in a way that undercuts the assumption—shared by most Westerners as well as modern Asian Buddhists—of a clear distinction between the political and religious realms.

Harris' sixfold typology

Let me begin by providing a brief analysis of Ian Harris' sixfold typology of Buddhism and politics (see Introduction to this volume), from the perspective of someone who researches progressive and radical Buddhist movements in modern and contemporary East Asia. As Harris rightly notes, one can find numerous historical examples of his first three categories, representing 'states of equilibrium between Buddhism and politics that might be said to abide over time.' Of these three, however, it is the second—which Harris calls *fusion*—that best exemplifies the historical relationship between sangha and state in Japan. However powerful, the *sangha* in Japan has long been fragmented (with various sects and temples frequently in violent competition with one another) and has never had the power, or perhaps even the desire, to claim authority over the state itself. At the same time, with several notable exceptions—Oda Nobunaga's 1571 destruction of the Hieizan Tendai temple complex, and the brief but traumatic persecutions of Buddhism that occurred in the years immediately following the Meiji Restoration of 1868—Buddhism in Japan has rarely felt threatened by the secular powers. Instead, the ideal relationship was one of symbiosis, whereby the state would allow the sangha freedom to control its own destiny, while the sangha would provide ritual support for the state.

Thus, even while accepting these categories as ideal types that are never actually realized in practice, I contend that it is misleading to refer to this common form of 'state protection Buddhism' as *fusion*. I suggest that a more appropriate term is *symbiosis*, since, at least in the Japanese case, there remain fairly clear lines to be drawn between secular affairs of state and ritual matters—even ones aimed at state protection.³ Kuroda Toshio's work on medieval (Heian and Kamakura-era) Buddhism in Japan sheds important light on the way this system worked, at least during the centuries when Buddhism was at the peak of its power in Japanese history. According to Kuroda, the temple-shrine complexes of Heian-period Buddhist institutions had by the tenth and eleventh centuries evolved distinctive forms of organization, deriving most of their support from their own extensive private estates. As such, these complexes emerged in this period as one of several powerful ruling factions (*kenmon*) that, taken together, made up a joint system of

governance (*kenmon taisei*). Kuroda argues that these powerful institutions joined across sectarian divisions to form a new ideological system called *kenmitsu taisei*—a fusion of esoteric ritual and exoteric doctrine that provided ‘both thaumaturgical support and religious legitimization for existing rule.’⁴

In turning to the example of Tibet, Harris speculates as to the possible influence of tantric practice—with its emphasis on empowerment and embedded ‘imperial metaphor’—on the concept of ‘fusion’ between religion and politics. But this is clearly a different case than that of Japan, which, despite having its own share of state-protecting esotericism (both Shingon and Tendai), never had anyone quite like the Dalai Lama. It may be that Japan and Tibet are best conceived as differential subsets of the larger category.

Having said that, there *is* an ideal of Buddhist-political *fusion* (as opposed to *symbiosis*) that appears as a significant minority tradition in Japanese Buddhism—one with roots not in Shingon or Tendai state-protective esotericism but rather in the *Lotus Sutra* as interpreted by Nichiren and many of his modern heirs. Building on the work of Satō Hiro’o, Jacqueline Stone argues that unlike Hōnen and other Kamakura ‘new Buddhist’ leaders

(Nichiren) was very clear about how Buddhism is related to worldly authority. In contrast to ‘old Buddhist’ discourse of the mutual dependence of Buddhism and worldly rule, Nichiren separated the two and radically relativized the latter. In his eyes it was the ruler’s duty to protect the true Dharma, and he ruled legitimately only so long as he fulfilled it.⁵

Without disputing this claim, I contend that the primary difference in Nichiren’s vision is that it is based on a fundamentally different conception of the political, one in which ‘affairs of the state’ become secondary or derivative from a radical, mutually interdependent transformation of self and society. Before moving to an analysis of Nichiren’s religio-political vision, let us attempt to clarify the various meanings of the term ‘politics,’ at least as understood in the mainstream Western-thought traditions.

The meaning of politics

The English word ‘politics,’ coined in the early Renaissance to mean ‘the science of government,’ has deep roots in classical Greek thought—in particular the work of Aristotle, whose work *Ta politika* (Politics)

established the discipline of political theory. As is well known, Aristotle thought of the human being as a *zoon politikon*, often translated as 'political animal.' In this regard, he was following in the footsteps of his teacher Plato's mentor Socrates (if not Plato himself), who taught that a fully realized human life—at least for a male, land-holding citizen of the *polis*—was a life lived in community with others.⁶ Indeed, it could be argued that for Socrates, as for Aristotle, politics was indistinguishable from ethics, itself the core of philosophy, since love of wisdom could not be sustained without a commitment to virtue, which implies a commitment to others:

Aristotle defined the human being as a *zoon politikon*, a social animal, requiring a *politikon bion* or public life so that each individual realises his or her existence to its full meaning by fully functioning within the public community. This community is the essential foundation for human flourishing. Without this public life, the individual remains confined to a level of immediacy and immaturity pursuing wants and desires in a purely private existence.⁷

Medieval European political theory was characterized by two forces: first, a recognition, following Augustine's *Civitas Dei*, of a separation of the realm of God and the realm of humanity, and second, a growing attempt to fuse the secular and religious realms via the theory of the 'divine right of kings.' This medieval synthesis would begin to break down, both in theory and practice, during the upheavals of the Renaissance and Reformation. The two figures most closely associated with the modern understanding of politics are Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) and Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), whose (very different) works, *The Prince* and *Leviathan*, arguably established the foundations for Western political theory right up until today. Machiavelli's legacy lies in his brutal realism, his complete disregard for 'virtue' as anything other than what most effectively allows a leader to gain and maintain *power* and his rejection of theological incursion into political calculation—except, of course, when it might be expedient. While Hobbes was less overtly anti-religious, he too based his theory of governance on an understanding of human nature that was resolutely anthropological, rejecting, along the way, any and all utopian speculation. For both of these men, politics was properly understood as in terms of power relations, whether negotiated (as in Hobbes) or manipulated (as in Machiavelli). It is important to note that, beyond the rejection of theology and any form of genuine religiously based ethic as part of politics, Machiavelli and Hobbes also deny the classical ideal of politics as being connected to personal

transformation or development. The public and private realms become irredeemably disconnected. Though a sense of ‘civic duty’ lingers in modern politics, it is framed as a duty or sacrifice—rather than a fundamental aspect of what it means to be a flourishing human.⁸

Marx and the liberation of species-being

By the time Karl Marx took up his pen in the 1840s, these modern assumptions about the nature of politics had largely become commonplace, despite the work of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century liberal and radical thinkers, who sought to re-inspire some measure of political idealism in their pursuit of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Marx built on the work of Enlightenment and Romantic thinkers, but took their ideas in a new, or perhaps old, direction. Though Marx is well known to be highly critical of conventional religion, I argue that his vision of human liberation can be read as the clearest and most sustained attempt since the classical Greeks to reconnect the realms of individual and communal flourishing (and also of suffering)—and in such a way that is, I suggest, palpably ‘Buddhistic.’ Marx, too, understood the potential in politics for fundamental, all-encompassing human liberation (as well as its opposite).

In his essay *On the Jewish Question* (1843–44), Marx develops his ideas of social emancipation in such a way as to push beyond merely political liberation toward full ‘human emancipation.’ He contextualizes his argument by criticizing Bruno Bauer’s call for liberating the state from religion, arguing that Bauer, as many others, had it backward: ‘religious restrictions were not a cause of secular ones, but a manifestation of them.’

In short, a purely political and therefore partial liberation is valuable and important, but it does not amount to human emancipation, for there is still a division between the civil community and the state. In the former, people live a life which is real but selfish, isolated and full of conflicting interests; the state provides them with a sphere of life which is collective, but illusory. The purpose of human emancipation is to bring it about that the collective, generic character of human life is real life, so that society itself takes on a collective character and coincides with the life of the state.⁹

For Marx, Bauer’s idea, like the fundamental premise of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, is limited and ultimately self-defeating, as it merely

solidifies a theory of rights based on monadic individualism: 'Given the separation of the two spheres, the state does not help to abolish the egoistic character of private life but merely provides it with a legal framework. Political revolution does not liberate people from religion or the rule of property, but it merely gives them the right to hold property and to profess their own religion.' In short:

The actual individual man must take the abstract citizen back into himself and, as an individual man in his empirical life, in his individual work and individual relationships, becomes a species-being; man must recognize his own forces as social forces, organize them and thus no longer separate social forces from himself in the form of political forces. Only when this has been achieved will human emancipation be completed.¹⁰

With this notion of 'an integrated human being overcoming his own division between private interest and the community,' Marx develops a conception of humanity that is, in the Western philosophical context, radical if not unprecedented. In doing so, Marx effectively displaces religion from the focus of his critique; unlike Feuerbach, Marx sees religion as one among many other manifestations of social servitude, rather than its root. The true 'recovery' of humanity comes from 'the free recognition by each individual of himself as the bearer of the community'—a task that, ironically, resonates well with a primary thrust of many of the world's religions, including Buddhism.¹¹

Although the above ideas, expressed in *On the Jewish Question* and *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, would later be dismissed by Marx himself as 'utopian'—that is, positing an imagined unity in abstract terms—we cannot so readily dismiss the fundamental insight here. Moreover, even in his later, more 'scientific' writings, the necessity of a transformation of consciousness—an awakening to social ontology as means of overcoming alienation—remains a key element. Somewhat akin to the realization of 'Buddha-nature' in some Mahāyāna texts and traditions, Marx's reformed consciousness was not simply a conscious turn toward an arbitrary ideal but a revelation and explication of something that had already been there, albeit in an implicit fashion—a conversion of 'an unconscious historical tendency into a conscious one, an objective trend into an act of will.' In other words, revolution was not about converting reality into something new, via will or obligation, but understanding reality more fully, via a transformed consciousness, though one not separated from activity.

As Leszek Kołakowski notes, contrary to common misperceptions, Marxian socialism never involved ‘the extinction of individuality or a general levelling for the sake of the “universal good”’—though this was characteristic of many previous (often monastically inspired) communist doctrines. ‘To Marx, on the other hand,’

socialism represented the full emancipation of the individual by the destruction of the web of mystification which turned community life into a world of estrangement presided over by an alienated bureaucracy. Marx’s ideal was that every man should be fully aware of his own character as a social being, but should also, for this very reason, be capable of developing his personal aptitudes in all their fullness and variety. There was no question of the individual being reduced to a universal species-being; what Marx desired to see was a community in which the sources of antagonism among individuals were done away with. This antagonism sprang, in his view, from the mutual isolation that is bound to arise when political life is divorced from civil society, while the institution of private property means that people can only assert their own individuality in opposition to others.¹²

With this Marxian conception—of the *fusion* of personal emancipation (i.e. ‘social being’) and political liberation—in mind, let us turn to the work of Nichiren, the medieval Japanese Buddhist ‘prophet’ whose legacy is intrinsically connected to political activism, particularly in the modern period.

Nichiren’s *Lotus*-inspired religio-political vision

As one of a number of popular new movements that arose during the tumultuous Kamakura period (1185–1333), the Nichiren sect developed a unique and influential interpretation of the relation between religious practice and social affairs, one that is intimately connected to the *Lotus Sutra*.¹³ Nichiren (1222–1282), the sect’s eponymous founder and ‘saint,’ was, along with many of his day, convinced that the surrounding chaos could only mean that the world had reached its ‘latter days’—in Buddhist tradition, a period known as *mappō* (lit., the end of the Dharma/Buddhist law). Rather than seek release in meditation (as in Zen) or in faith in an otherworldly savior (as in the popular Pure Land sects), Nichiren posited that ‘salvation’ could only be found within society itself—remade or rediscovered under the auspices of the *Lotus Sutra*.¹⁴ According to this understanding, it is incumbent upon visionary leaders

to work for comprehensive personal and social transformation, so that a 'Buddha land' can be realized in which there is peace and prosperity for all beings. This includes what we would today call politics, as well as economics, education, and various aspects of culture.¹⁵ The underlying premise behind Nichiren's religio-political vision, spelled out in works such as *Kanjin honzon shō* (*On the Contemplation of the Mind as the Object of Worship*), is that 'the self and society are mutually intertwined, and, together as one, shape reality. Thus, in conjunction with one's own transformation and salvation, the surrounding environment will also change and be saved, which in turn will again have an impact on one's own transformation.'¹⁶

As Jacqueline Stone notes, this sense of microcosmic-macrocosmic unity was not by any means unique to Nichiren; it was an assumption shared by most Buddhists in medieval Japan, and one that played a foundational role in the ritual praxis of the dominant Tendai and Shingon esoteric sects.¹⁷ What is distinctive, however, is Nichiren's bold claim—one implied by the sutra itself—that it was *solely* by means of faith in the *Lotus Sutra* that such a transformation could take place. This was a distinction that would come to make a huge difference in terms of socio-political attitudes. Whereas Tendai, with its doctrinal inclusivism and reliance on state patronage, was rarely involved in social conflict, Nichirenist exclusivism (and relative isolation)—based on the belief there exists a source for loyalty that transcends worldly obligations based on filial piety or traditional social hierarchies, and that those in power who decline to follow that source must be 'admonished'—provides a solid basis for social critique and resistance to authority, something that is, as Stone understates, 'rather rare in the history of Japanese Buddhism.'¹⁸ The doctrinal basis for such critique would become institutionalized in the generations after Nichiren's death, with the practice of *kokka kangyō* (lit., admonishing the state).

Stone argues that Nichiren effectively transfigured Confucian filial piety as well as traditional East Asian concepts of loyalty to one's lord and the state by raising the *Lotus Sutra* above these as the primary locus for loyalty. In practice, this meant that Nichiren's followers could (and frequently did) challenge their 'superiors' if these failed to adhere to the Dharma as expressed in the *Lotus Sutra*. The practice of *upāya* or skillful means is particularly embraced or embodied by bodhisattvas—those beings whose very marrow is compassion (*jihī*; Sk. *karuṇā*). Again, though there is debate among scholars of the *Lotus Sutra* as to whether the method of skillful means is one that can be put in practice by ordinary (unawakened) beings in daily (*samsaric*) life, Nichiren

clearly understood the text as providing ample foundation for employing means and methods of compassion that might seem unorthodox in terms of tradition but which are in fact best suited to the particular requirements of time and place.¹⁹ In short, along with many modern practitioners inspired by the *Lotus Sutra*, Nichiren found within it the grounds for an ‘*upāya* inspired ethic,’ which ‘break[s] free from the code of laws passed on through tradition and approach[es] the situation of ethical decision-making . . . armed with a revised scale of values in which *karuṇā* is predominant.’²⁰ Here we see the origins of a transgressive reading of the *Lotus Sutra*—one that seeks to reinvent and overturn the existing order, rather than support or affirm it.

Nichirenism and nationalism

Let us turn back to history as a way of fleshing out the implications of Nichirenism as a modernist fusion of religion and politics. Although Japanese rulers have never adopted the *Lotus Sutra* as the sole basis for political rule, Nichirenism in the modern period has been more often than not associated with nationalism—if not ultra-nationalism—and a more general tendency toward authoritarian political ideals. Both the modernist and nationalist interpretation of Nichiren and the *Lotus Sutra* may be traced to the work of Tanaka Chigaku (1861–1939), who, along with Honda Nisshō (1867–1931), developed *Nichirenshugi* (Nichirenism) as a lay ideology that flourished in Japan in the early decades of the twentieth century.

While rooted in the traditional teachings of Nichiren—and thus in the *Lotus Sutra*—Tanaka sought a form of Buddhist practice that was more directly engaged with society and politics. Increasingly skeptical of the institution of monasticism, he left the Nichiren priesthood at the age of nineteen and soon emerged as a vocal and controversial proponent of Buddhist restoration (Japanese: *fukko*). Tanaka consciously promoted a modernized lay Buddhism, thus laying the foundations for later Nichiren lay movements such as Reiyūkai Kyōdan (1924), Sōka Gakkai (1930), and Risshō Kōseikai (1938)—and even, despite the obvious political differences, Seno’o Girō’s Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism (1931). Where Tanaka’s views diverge from his more moderate peers—even his sometime collaborator Honda—is in his assumption that, since Japan had *already* manifested the essence of the *Lotus Sutra*, it was now up to Japan to bring peace to the world, even if by use of force. Thus, he would go on to interpret the nation’s imperialist aims as a (entirely justified) form of national *shakubuku*.²¹ This is more forcibly

expressed in Tanaka's work *Shūmon no ishin* (*Restoration of Our Sect*), published in 1901.

As many scholars have noted, the overt and often extreme nationalism of both the mainstream Nichiren institution and the lay Nichirenist movement in the prewar period had the effect of tainting Nichiren and his work in the postwar era. And yet, there are counter-examples, even in the modern period. At the other end of the political spectrum from Tanaka and the Nichirenist movement lies Seno'o Girō (1889–1961), founder of the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism (*Shinkō Bukkyō Seinen Dōmei*). The Youth League was an experiment in Nichiren-inspired Buddhist radicalism that set itself up as a vanguard of socialist protest against poverty, injustice, colonialism, and imperialism, before being suppressed by the government in 1936. While Seno'o's work does not in any way prove that Nichiren's teachings are essentially 'progressive,' their analysis sheds a new perspective on Nichiren's fusion of religion and politics by attempting to conjoin Nichiren's *Lotus* Buddhism with the doctrines of Karl Marx.

Seno'o Girō's radical Buddhism

In his late twenties, Seno'o became increasingly attracted to Tanaka and Honda's Nichirenism, and in the summer of 1918, he left his home in Okayama for Tokyo in order to put these new ideals into practice. The following year, under Honda's guidance, he established a group called the Greater Japan Nichirenist Youth Corps (Jpn: *Dainippon Nichirenshugi Seinenendan*). By the mid-1920s, however, Seno'o was beginning to entertain serious doubts about the justice of the capitalist system and began to consider socialism as a practical foundation for his thoughts on social and religious reform. In effect, socialism would become for Seno'o and his followers the new 'one vehicle' that will at long last establish the foundations for the promised attainment of Buddhahood by and for all beings.

The document that stands out as the most succinct expression of the theoretical and practical aims of the Youth League is one written in January 1932, entitled 'Shakai henkaku tojō no shinkō bukk'yō' (Revitalized Buddhism on the Road to Social Reform).²² This essay is prefaced with a statement by the Youth League indicting the present capitalist system as the principle cause of economic and political insecurity for the general public—both farmers and urbanites. This is followed by a reaffirmation of the League's conviction that Buddhism—if understood, reorganized, and practiced on the basis of modern ideas—can be

a solution to the problems unleashed by capitalism, and thus a foundation for the salvation of humankind.²³ Seno'o goes on to affirm the revolutionary character of Japanese history, citing the Taika Reforms of 645 CE, the medieval shift from imperial rule to rule by the samurai class, the rise to power of the bourgeoisie under the Meiji Restoration of 1868, and finally the emerging movements dedicated to bringing about a 'revitalized society' (*shinkō shakai*) as examples of dramatic, if not revolutionary, political upheavals in Japanese history. Further, he argues, the history of Buddhism is also marked with a revolutionary spirit—in fact Buddhism is 'nothing other than the truth of development and change.' Throughout the twenty-five centuries of Buddhist history, alterations to doctrine and practice made by sect founders have largely suited the objective reality of changing social conditions, and are thus not simply the product of their own subjective beliefs. In short, no matter how much development and change occur, Buddhism will always maintain its social value.²⁴

In the following section, Seno'o makes a link between the Youth League's quest for a 'revitalized' (*shinkō*) Buddhism, a new society, and contemporaneous movements toward revitalization in science, art, and education. Just as they have 'liquidated' the previous outdated forms from earlier times, so too must Buddhism effect the same sort of liquidation. And yet, institutional Buddhism is clearly unwilling to make this move, due to its apathy toward the concerns of the general public.²⁵ If Buddhism is to become once again 'Buddhism for society' (as opposed to 'society for Buddhism'), then modern Buddhists must recapture the spirit of their Kamakura era forebears and respond to the changing times. But what, exactly, are the demands of the times to which a modern Buddhism must adjust? Seno'o duly provides the reader with the following list:

- 1) modern science is atheist, and denies the existence of superhuman deities;
- 2) modern science is anti-spiritualist, and does not recognize an after-life;
- 3) modern people are not satisfied with fairy-tale like forms of happiness, but rather wish to enjoy a complete happiness in their workaday lives;
- 4) the modern public longs for economic stability, and thus demands reform to the capitalistic system;
- 5) enlightened people call for an end to nationalism and the birth of internationalism;

- 6) progressive Buddhists long for an end to sectarian division and the emergence of Buddhist unity.²⁶

These, in short, are the needs of the age to which a revitalized Buddhism must respond. The first three points, along with number six, also happen to align well with modernist interpretations of Buddhism that had been promoted in Japan since the 1880s. It is also of note that, with the exception of number six, there is nothing in this list that distinguishes Seno'o and the Youth League from the anti-religious vision of most mainstream socialists. And yet, this was a sticking point for Seno'o: he remained deeply committed to promoting a vision for a new society based firmly on Buddhist principles as he and his followers understood them. For Seno'o and the Youth League, just as socialism can wake Buddhists up from their dogmatic slumbers, Buddhism serves to soften the harder edges of mainstream socialist atheism and materialism—in short, Buddhism gives a humanist element that socialism sometimes, perhaps inevitably, seems to lack. At some point in his work, Seno'o seems to suggest that socialism, as it has been practiced both within and outside of Japan, falls prey to the same or similar tendencies as mainstream religions, including historical and institutional Buddhism: tendencies summed up by terms like 'idealism' (*seishinshugi*), 'abstract' (*chūshōteki*), and 'reverence' (*sūkei*). In an explicit critique of the increasingly vocal *hanshūkyō* movements of the early 1930s, Seno'o asserts the value of Buddhist teachings such as no-self to (ironically) promote individual perfection as well as social liberation.²⁷

Thus, to establish—or re-establish—an atheistic and materialistic (*yuibutsronteki*) form of Buddhism is, for Seno'o, to re-establish Buddhism as a form of humanism, based on the well-known humanist dictum (repeated by Marx): 'the supreme reality for human beings is human being.' This also means returning to the basic Buddhist teachings of the Four Noble Truths (*shitai*) and twelve-link chain of dependent arising (*jūni innen*), which, in Seno's admittedly abbreviated interpretation, amount to a teaching of human emancipation (*jinrui kaihō*) based on the practice of 'selflessness,' which is itself a necessary conclusion of the more fundamental law of cause and effect (*inga no rihō*).²⁸ All this is fairly standard Buddhism, except for Seno'o's coinage of the term *mugaizumu* (lit., 'no-self'ism) to imply a more altruistic or other-directed form of the traditional doctrine of no-self (*muga*). Also of note is his emphasis on awakening as 'human liberation,' which also adds a communal element lacking in most traditional renderings of the experience of *nirvana* or *satori*. The term *kaihō* is in fact best translated as liberation

or emancipation and is generally used to apply to social or political freedom as understood in the Western liberal tradition. In Seno'o's reading of early Buddhism—or at least the fundamental teachings of Śākyamuni—there is a decisive rejection of the existence of superhuman forces of any sort and a focus on contingency and the practice of selfless compassion for others. As in the later work of B. R. Ambedkar (see below), it is this unrelenting commitment to humanism—and ‘atheism’—that forms the bridge between Buddha and Marx and that forms a tool of critical resistance to the ‘nonsense’ of forms of Buddhism that practice reverence to superhuman buddhas and bodhisattvas, as well as to forms of Indian and Abrahamic theism. ‘Original Buddhism was not an opiate. In the end, Buddhism is atheistic. To begin with, a “revitalized Buddhism” must assume this exalted position in order to liquidate the delusions of existing forms of Buddhism and completely destroy the opiate-like role played by existing Buddhism.’²⁹

We can see from the above analysis of Seno'o's work that he affects a clear fusion not only of (Nichirenist) Buddhist doctrine and Marxist ideas but also of the very categories of politics and religion. At this point, in order to highlight a distinctive interpretation of Buddhist political *fusion*—albeit one that also relies heavily on the work of Karl Marx, I would like to turn to the work of Dr B. R. Ambedkar.

Ambedkar's socially engaged Buddhism

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956) is well known as one of the ‘fathers’ of modern India, along with Mohandas K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. A man of many talents and vocations, he has been described as a politician, activist, jurist, philosopher, economist, orator, historian, lawyer, teacher, religious leader, political reformer, and revolutionary. Born into a family of the *dalit* or ‘untouchable’ caste, Ambedkar studied Buddhism throughout his life, and on 4 October 1956 he famously led a mass conversion of a half million *dalits* to Theravāda Buddhism. His legacy remains very much alive today; in a nationwide poll of 2012, he was named India's ‘greatest person,’ largely for his political activities, and particularly his work on the Indian Constitution of 1949. Late in his life, Ambedkar turned toward Marxist socialism as a theoretical and practical framework with which to understand Buddhism. In 1956, shortly before his death, he proclaimed that ‘accepting Buddhism does not only mean getting into new religion, it means entering into new form of life where everybody has responsibility to cultivate wisdom, compassion and morality in this life moments,

buddha's dhamma is here to guide and protect humanity, what we have to do is to strive for creating a moral order.³⁰

From his anthropological and historical studies as a young man, Ambedkar came to see a link between Buddhism and untouchability—at least with respect to his own people, the Mahar. As his anti-untouchability activism grew, he became even more positively inclined toward Buddhism as a form of social and political resistance. In the early 1950s, he commenced work on *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, which was completed just three days prior to his death in 1956 and published posthumously. This work provides valuable insight into the implicit and explicit connections drawn by Ambedkar between Buddhism and politics—particularly politics of a progressive or radical sort. While an intended work on *The Buddha and Karl Marx* remained incomplete upon Ambedkar's death, a brief essay on the theme is extant, and will be explored below.

Anyone reading *The Buddha and His Dhamma* is immediately struck by the unapologetically political nature of Ambedkar's Dhamma. For this reason, those scholars who have taken Ambedkar seriously have tended to read this work—and indeed, all of his writings on Buddhism—as being fundamentally discontinuous with traditional Buddhist thought. The consensus is that he was self-consciously creating a new 'vehicle' of Buddhism, and indeed, Ambedkar himself frequently referred to his vision of Buddhism as *Navayāna*—literally, the 'new vehicle.' And yet, the assertion of novelty in this case rests on a dubious, arguably modern assumption that there is an irrevocable division between the categories of religion/the sacred and politics/the secular. In this work, however, Ambedkar asserts a fundamental fusion of these realms and interprets the Buddha's Dharma along similar lines. As Rathmore and Verma note:

The demand that a presentation of religious or philosophical material should be free of political assessments and aspirations is itself an implicit doctrinal interpretation to the effect that religion is inherently apolitical (Losonczi and Singh 2010). That is, in order to accuse Ambedkar of peppering the religious with the political, one must already hold the religious (or political) position that these two realms are not, fundamentally or even at some other level, a unity.³¹

And yet, even the sympathetic editors of *The Buddha and His Dhamma* pull back from this perceptive claim when they conclude: "This is not to say that one should be reduced to the other, or could be reduced to the other without surplus. Obviously, it makes perfect sense to speak of the

political and the theological as two discreet realms, and thus it makes sense to speak of Ambedkar as politicizing Buddha's teaching, or theologizing his own politics.¹³² But does it? As Rathmore and Verma go on to admit, if critics are justified in complaining about the 'politicization' of Buddhism, we may be equally justified in complaining of the 'depoliticization' of Buddhism by scholars, adherents, or institutions: 'Indeed, why should we assume that the Buddha's teachings were inherently apolitical?'¹³³

Even while asserting the authenticity of his *Navayāna* Buddhism, Ambedkar is not afraid to criticize even received Buddhist texts and teachings, including aspects of the traditional story of the Buddha's life, which tends toward the supernatural, and the Four Noble Truths, which are 'pessimistic.'¹³⁴ In addition, he asks a pointed question: Is the Bhikku as portrayed in the early scriptures a 'perfect man' or rather—as Ambedkar would ~~like to~~ have it—a "social servant devoting his life to service of the people and being their friend, guide, and philosopher?"¹³⁵ Ambedkar effectively avoids difficult hermeneutical questions by implying—without much evidence other than a perception of inconsistency—that the above aspects are in fact 'accretions' by monks in the centuries after the Buddha's death. He presents three 'hermeneutic principles' for deciding the authenticity of Buddha's scriptures and teachings: 1) *rationality*—'If there is anything which could be said with confidence it is: He was nothing if not rational, if not logical. Anything therefore which is rational and logical, other things being equal, may be taken to the word of the Buddha;' 2) *social benefit* — 'anything attributed to the Buddha which did not relate to man's welfare cannot be accepted to be the word of the Buddha;' 3) *degree of certainty* — 'the Buddha divided all matters into two classes: those about which he was certain, and those about which he was not certain. On matters which fell into class I, he has stated his views definitely and conclusively. On matters which fell into class II, he has expressed his views, but they are only tentative views' (185).

Leaving aside the problematic question of authenticity and the modernist and essentialist tendency toward an 'ideality of origins,' the larger issue raised by Ambedkar's polemic is the problematic—because one-sided—way in which Buddhism has been interpreted and perceived by modern scholars if not practitioners.

The question that arises is—'Did the Buddha have no Social Message?' When pressed for an answer, students of Buddhism refer to the two points. They say—'The Buddha taught Ahimsa.' 'The Buddha

taught peace!' Asked, 'Did the Buddha teach love?' 'Did the Buddha teach liberty?' 'Did the Buddha teach equality?' 'Did the Buddha teach fraternity?' 'Could the Buddha answer Karl Marx?' These questions are hardly ever raised in discussion of the Buddha's Dhamma. My answer is that the Buddha has a Social Message. He answers all these questions. But they have been buried by modern authors.³⁶

The connection between Marx and Buddhism is made explicit in Ambedkar's insistence on the pragmatic, humanist, and material focus of the Dharma—at least as properly understood and practiced. In order to save Buddhism from the charge of being simply another 'opiate of the people,' however, Ambedkar, as with Seno'o Girō, and Buddhist modernists before and after him, takes pains to highlight the distinction between Buddhist Dharma and the teachings of 'typical' religions.

All religions preach that to reach this kingdom of heaven should be the aim of man, and how to reach it is the end of all. To the questions 'What is the purpose of religion?' the Buddha's answer is very different. He did not tell people that their aim in life should be to reach some imaginary heaven. The kingdom of righteousness lies on earth, and is to be reached by man by righteous conduct. What he did was to tell people that to remove their misery, each one must learn to be righteous in his or her conduct in relation to others, and thereby make the earth the kingdom of righteousness. It is this which distinguishes his religion from all other religions.³⁷

This contrast is summarized by Ambedkar in the following phrase, reminiscent of Marx's own famous line about 'the point of philosophy': 'The purpose of Religion is to explain the origin of the world. The purpose of Dhamma is to reconstruct the world.'³⁸ And, just as in the Marxian and Nichirenist vision, this may involve the necessary use of force: 'We wage war, O disciples, therefore we are called warriors... For lofty virtues, for high endeavour, for sublime wisdom—for these things do we wage war... Where virtue is in danger do not avoid fighting, do not be mealy-mouthed.'³⁹

In a short unpublished essay entitled 'Buddha or Karl Marx,' discovered among his posthumous writings, Ambedkar enjoins Marxist thinkers, in particular, to take the Buddha seriously. After listing the most important aspects of the respective 'creeds' of the Buddha and Marx—in Ambedkar's interpretation—he highlights the following points of contact: 1) humanity and morality must be at the center of

religion/philosophy; 2) the function of religion/philosophy is to ‘reconstruct the world’ and to ‘make it happy’—rather than to ‘explain its origin or its end’; 3) the unhappiness of the world is due to conflict of interest/class conflict; 4) private ownership of property is a root cause of suffering/exploitation; 5) reconstructing society requires an investigation and transformation of the roots of suffering/conflict; 6) all humans are equal; 7) ‘everything is subject to inquiry and examination’; 8) everything has a cause and is subject to change.⁴⁰ Ambedkar is careful to note the various aspects of the Marxian creed that have *not* survived the combined scrutiny of logic and experience; here, unlike his treatment of Buddhism, he seems willing to admit that one can ‘pick and choose’ among the various elements of Marxian thought, without worrying about whether the less useful aspects are ‘original’ or later vulgarizations.

Two visions of Buddhist Marxism: Seno’o vs Ambedkar

Examining the above list of similarities, it becomes clear that, for Ambedkar, as for Seno’o, Buddhism and Marxism find mutual support at the level of critical analysis of the roots of suffering and an ensuing commitment to reconstructing society in a way that destroys inequality and exploitation and in so doing liberates all human beings from possessiveness and alienation. ‘The aim of the Noble Eight-Fold Path is to establish on earth the kingdom of righteousness, and thereby to banish sorrow and unhappiness from the face of the world.’⁴¹ Clearly, then, Ambedkar’s Buddhism is at root deeply *political*, but in such a way that, as I have argued above for Nichiren and Marx, the lines between philosophy/religion, ethics, and politics begin to break down—for better or worse. And yet, there are differences, perhaps significant, between the two visions I have outlined here. I will conclude with a brief analysis of these.

In making his case for Buddhist materialism against the pitfalls of abstract idealism, Seno’o is quick to note that the importance of ‘love’ (*ai*), which, he argues, ‘is neither a concept nor an illusion (*tan naru kannen ya gensō de wa naku*), but rather a practice (*jissen*)—and one that, when properly accompanied by objective criticism (*kyakkanteki hihan*), allows us to recognize (the problems of) ordinary life.’⁴² Here, again, Seno’o’s interpretation of Buddhist compassion is brought in to soften the otherwise hard-edged Marxist critique. Buddhist love—embodied in the practice of the (activist) bodhisattva—provides the humanist foundation for social revolution.⁴³ Seno’o echoes Ambedkar, who similarly argued that Buddhism—and *only* Buddhism—could shape a true

socio-political revolution.⁴⁴ The difference is that, whereas Ambedkar was happy to use vague terms such as ‘spiritual’ and ‘moral’ to describe the contribution of Buddhism to communism, and to assume that ‘authentic’ Buddhism provides a higher fulfillment of the Marxist goal, Seno’o was less confident that the Dharma contained all the answers.

The recognition and practice of collective society by way of social science and the path of Buddhism are not by any means identical. Here there is some room for critique of both extremes, that is, collective forms of social organization and the capitalist ones. Therefore, Buddhists must take the initiative to advocate, practice and participate in social reconstruction, and through such participation aim for personal (as well as social) purification.⁴⁵

In further elaborating on what Buddhism can bring to socialist analysis, Seno’o notes that at the root of the Buddhist world view is a fundamental conception of the interdependence of matter and mind, and of mind and form. Thus it would be a mistake to simply reduce problems of economic welfare and the need for social restructuring to material concerns. Rather, progressive Buddhists must demand a movement that allows for the development of social existence in its many facets. For Seno’o, this entails a recognition of the fuller implications of the social extension of the Buddhist doctrine of no-self—alternately rendered *mugaizumu*, *mugashugi*, or *muga-ai*.⁴⁶ This term becomes, for Seno’o, the very embodiment of the Dharma and must replace any and all attempts to find salvation by way of ‘idealistic abstractions’ such as Pure Land’s Amida, Shingon’s Dainichi, and the Eternal Buddha of the *Lotus Sutra*.⁴⁷

Ambedkar, by contrast, relies much more heavily on traditional Buddhist teachings regarding humility, abstinence, virtue, and egalitarianism, as he finds them in the Pāli *Nikāyas* and particularly as expressed in the *Dhammapāda*. He may not have been familiar with the *Lotus Sutra*; even if he was, the text clearly does not play a significant role in his socio-religious vision. As a result, Ambedkar’s Dhamma tends to be more ascetic, moralistic, and renunciatory than that of Seno’o, who—along with Marx, Nichiren, and the *Lotus Sutra* itself—is much less explicit as to what his future ideal society would be like. I contend that, due to the immense impact of Nichiren and the *Lotus Sutra* on his life and work, Seno’o is closer to the spirit of at least the early Marx, who sought the full liberation of species-being *in the very process* of social transformation. In other words, both Seno’o and Marx would question

Ambedkar's (Tolstoyan) implication that moral reform—albeit with a distinctly *political* edge—must be preliminary to social or political revolution.⁴⁸ Theirs is a fusion of politics and personal transformation that is even more inextricable than that presented by Ambedkar. It is no surprise, then, that Ambedkar's work has been more influential than that of Seno'o, since it ultimately reaffirms modern, liberal (if progressive) categories and assumptions, even while arguing for a more politically engaged form of Buddhism. Ultimately, in spite of their similarities, this is a difference between the 'radical Buddhism' of Seno'o and the 'socially engaged' Buddhism of Ambedkar and his heirs who have adopted a similar perspective.

Notes

1. Bruce, A. B. (1899) *The Moral Order of the World in Ancient and Modern Thought* (London: Hodder and Stoughton).
2. Weber, M. (1958) *The Religion of India* (New York: The Free Press), p. 206.
3. Whether this symbiosis is 'obligate'—meaning that both symbionts entirely depend on each other for survival or 'facultative'—meaning that they can, but do not have to live with the other, is a question I will not pursue here.
4. Stone, J. I. (1999) 'Placing Nichiren in the "Big Picture",' *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 26, 385.
5. Stone, 'Placing Nichiren in the 'Big Picture,' 392–93.
6. See MacIntyre, A. (1966) 'Aristotle's Ethics,' in MacIntyre (ed.) *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: Collier), p. 57: 'For the word πολιτικός does not mean precisely what we mean by political; Aristotle's word covers both what we mean by political and what we mean by social and does not discriminate between them.'
7. Critchley, P. (1995) *Aristotle and the Public Good*, p. 1. See <http://independent.academia.edu/PeterCritchley/Papers>, 1995.
8. One exception to this in the modern period may be the brief definition of politics provided by David Hume in the Abstract to his *A Treatise on Human Nature*: 'politics consider men as united in society, and dependent on each other.' While subtly dismissive of classical philosophy as showing more 'greatness of soul... than a depth of reasoning and reflection,' in one sense Hume hearkens back to a more generalized understanding of politics as 'affairs of the community' (407).
9. Cited in Kołakowski, L. (2008) *Main Currents of Marxism* (London: Norton), pp. 103–4.
10. Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, p. 104.
11. See Birnbaum, M. (1973) 'Beyond Marx in the Sociology of Religion,' in C. Glock and P. Hammond (eds.) *Beyond the Classics?* (New York: Harper & Row), p. 9. With respect to a Buddhist interpretation of 'species being' in relation to karma, see Hershock, P. (2012) *Valuing Diversity* (Albany: SUNY), p. 41.
12. Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, pp. 107–8.

13. Much of the following section has been adapted, with revisions, from Shields, J. M. (2013) 'Political Interpretations of the Lotus Sutra,' in S. Emmanuel (ed.) *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy* (London: John Wiley & Sons), pp. 516–17.
14. The *Sutra on the White Lotus of the Sublime Dharma* (Sk., *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra*; Ch., *Miàofǎ liánhuá jīng*; Jpn., *Myōhō renge kyō*), commonly known as the *Lotus Sutra*, is arguably the most influential sutra of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and certainly one of the most revered sacred texts in East Asia.
15. More controversially, it also involves a commitment to 'breaking off' the false and erroneous views of others—a practice known within the Nichiren tradition as *shakubuku*, and one for which the new religious movement and Nichiren offshoot Sōka Gakkai has been roundly criticized.
16. Machacek, D. and B. Wilson, eds. (2000) *Global Citizens* (Oxford: OUP), p. 103; see also Habito, R. (2002) 'Buddha-body Theory and the Lotus Sutra,' in G. Reeves (ed.) *A Buddhist Kaleidoscope* (Tokyo: Kōsei), p. 315; and Stone, J. (2009) 'Realizing this World as the Buddha Land,' in S. Teiser and J. Stone (eds.) *Readings of the Lotus Sutra* (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 221.
17. Stone, J. (2002) 'When Disobedience is Filial and Resistance is Loyal,' in G. Reeves (ed.) *A Buddhist Kaleidoscope*, pp. 262–63.
18. Stone, 'When Disobedience is Filial and Resistance is Loyal,' p. 280.
19. See, for example, Keown, D. (1992) *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (London: Macmillan), p. 151; Morgan, P. (2002) 'Ethics and the Lotus Sutra,' in *A Buddhist Kaleidoscope*, p. 358; Keown, (2002) 'Paternalism in the Lotus Sutra,' in *A Buddhist Kaleidoscope*, p. 377.
20. Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, p. 188.
21. It was Tanaka who came up with slogan *hakko ichiu* (All countries under one roof), adopted in 1940 by the government to support and justify its creation of the so-called Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (Dai Tō-a Kyōeiken).
22. The following section has been adapted, with revisions, from Shields, J. M. (2012) 'A Blueprint for Buddhist Revolution,' *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 39, 333–51.
23. Seno'o, G. (1975), *Seno'o Girō Shūkyō Ronshū* (Tokyo: Daizō Shuppan), p. 325.
24. Seno'o, *Seno'o Girō Shūkyō Ronshū*, p. 329.
25. Seno'o, *Seno'o Girō Shūkyō Ronshū*, p. 329.
26. Seno'o, *Seno'o Girō Shūkyō Ronshū*, pp. 330–31.
27. Seno'o, *Seno'o Girō Shūkyō Ronshū*, p. 378.
28. Seno'o, *Seno'o Girō Shūkyō Ronshū*, p. 335.
29. Seno'o, *Seno'o Girō Shūkyō Ronshū*, p. 337.
30. Atrocity News. 'Goenka Talks on Ambedkar's Dream,' <http://atrocitynews.wordpress.com/2007/05/31/goenka-talks-on-dr-ambedkar-dream/>
31. Rathmore, A. S. and Verma, A. (2011) 'Editor's Introduction,' in Rathmore and Verma (eds.) *The Buddhism and His Dhamma* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), p. xi.
32. Rathmore and Verma, 'Editor's Introduction,' p. xii.
33. Rathmore and Verma, p. xii.
34. Ambedkar, B. R. (2011) *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, p. xxxi. See Christopher Queen's commentary on this passage in (1996a), 'Dr. Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation,' in C. Queen and S. King (eds.) *Engaged*

- Buddhism* (Albany: SUNY), p. 47, and Queen's reconstruction of the Noble Truths along Ambedkarian lines, p. 62.
35. Ambedkar, B. R. 'B. R. Ambedkar's Introduction,' in A. S. Rathmore and A. Verma (eds.) *The Buddha and his Dhamma: A Critical Edition* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press) pp. xxix–xxxi.
 36. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, p. 121.
 37. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, p. 152.
 38. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, p. 171.
 39. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, p. 237; whether consciously or not, Ambedkar's 'muscular Buddhism' seems a direct response to the pointed critique of writers such as A. B. Bruce, who lamented the passivity of Buddhism (see note 1, above).
 40. Ambedkar lists twenty-five items in the 'Creed of the Buddha,' and another ten in the 'Original Creed of Karl Marx.' See Ambedkar, B. R. 'Buddha or Karl Marx,' <http://www.drarnbedkarwas.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/buddha-or-karl-marx.pdf>
 41. Ambedkar, 'Buddha or Karl Marx.'
 42. Seno'o, *Seno'o Girō Shūkyō Ronshū*, p. 363.
 43. See Seno'o, *Seno'o Girō Shūkyō Ronshū*, p. 385, where Seno'o insists the Youth League is more than simply an economic movement (*tan naru keizai undō*), but rather one that promotes a 'new idealism' (*shin risōshugi*) and a 'new humanism' (*shin jindōshugi*) in order to construct a 'pure buddha-land' (*jō-bukkokudo*) in this world.
 44. See, for example, Ambedkar, 'Buddha or Karl Marx.'
 45. Seno'o, *Seno'o Girō Shūkyō Ronshū*, p. 367.
 46. Seno'o, *Seno'o Girō Shūkyō Ronshū*, p. 367.
 47. Seno'o, *Seno'o Girō Shūkyō Ronshū*, p. 378; here Seno'o cites supporting passages from late-Meiji and Taishō era Buddhist scholars Takakusa Junjirō and Shimaji Daitō.
 48. See Mungekar, B. (2007), 'Dr. Ambedkar's Interpretation of Buddhism and Its Contemporary Relevance,' in B. Mungekar and A. S. Rathmore (eds.) *Buddhism and the Contemporary World* (New Delhi: Bookwell), p. 50.

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Chapter 11

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