

# The View from the Future: Aurobindo Ghose's Anticolonial Darwinism

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**D**arwinism and evolutionary theory have a bad track record in political theory, given their entanglements with fin-de-siècle militarist imperialisms, racialized hierarchies, and eugenic reformism. In colonial contexts, however, Darwinism had an entirely different afterlife as anticolonialists marshaled evolutionist frameworks to contest the parameters of colonial rule. This article exhumes just such an evolutionary anticolonialism in the political thought of Aurobindo Ghose, radical firebrand of the early Indian independence movement. I argue that Ghose drew on a nuanced reform Darwinism to criticize British imperialism and advance an alternative grounded in the Indian polity's mutualism. Evolutionism formed a conceptual ecosystem framing his understanding of progress—national, civilizational, and spiritual—and reformulating the temporal and conceptual coordinates of the liberal empire he resisted. The article thus exposes the constructiveness of anticolonial politics, the hybridity of South Asian intellectual history, and the surprising critical potential of Darwinism in colonial settings.

## INTRODUCTION


**I**n 1919, in a concentrated meditation on India's relation to external influence, Aurobindo Ghose—onetime nationalist firebrand, intellectual lightning rod of the so-called “extremist” faction of Congress, and mystic of Pondicherry—proclaims his commitments to “social and political liberty, equality and democracy.” “If I accept any of these ideas,” he goes on,

it is not because they are modern or European... but because they are human [and] of the greatest importance in the future development of the life of man... [T]he effective idea of democracy—present as an element in ancient Indian as in ancient European polity and society—is... a necessity of our growth... [W]e must not take it crudely in the European forms, but must go back to whatever corresponds to it, illumines its sense, justifies its highest purpose in our own spiritual conception of life and existence ... [A] living organism, which grows not by accretion, but by self-development and assimilation, must recast the things it takes in to suit the law and form and characteristic action of its biological or psychological body. (Ghose 1997e, 47–8)

The tract is remarkable in several respects. First, it offers a glimpse into anticolonialism's constructiveness, predicated on an endogenous Indian democracy connecting past and future practices. The West, Ghose sees, had no particular claim to the ideal of self-determination. More broadly, its scope evinces the hybridity, complexity, and syncretism of South Asian

political thought at the dawn of the twentieth century. Finally, it hints at the Darwinist underpinnings of Ghose's anticolonialism, situating India's prospects in an evolutionary adaptation through which the social body would digest those political principles fitted to its “fundamental motives” (Ghose 1997d, 86).

It also encapsulates this article's preoccupations. I aim to show how Aurobindo Ghose, one of the early Indian anticolonial movement's leading lights, consolidated a wide range of fin-de-siècle political Darwinisms into a penetrating critique of British imperialism and of the liberalism he saw at its root. In so doing, I engage a growing scholarship on anticolonial political theory examining the reconstitution of “foundational questions of modern politics” in colonial contexts (Kapila 2021, 5). While scholars in history and literary studies have for decades engaged their nuances, political theorists have only recently begun to broach disciplinary and conceptual matters raised by and through anticolonial thought (Elam 2017; 2021; Getachew 2016; 2019; Getachew and Mantena 2021; Idris 2022; Iqtidar 2022; Klausen 2020; Manjappa 2020; Pham 2020; Sultan 2022; Temin 2022; Wilder 2015). J. Daniel Elam suggests that beyond the struggle for national independence, anticolonialism comprises a “philosophical movement and critical analytic” (Elam 2017) widening and unsettling our political imaginary. At once engaging, rejecting, and transcending the terms of Western modernity, it reformulates political theory's categories by compelling us to “rethink, or unthink, the supposedly European parameters of modern thought” (Wilder 2015, 9). Reflecting on the decolonization of political thought, Humeira Iqtidar conceptualizes this rethinking “as a layered process of appropriating, reworking, and reinterpreting ideas, and bringing them in to a wider conversation beyond Europe's parochial

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experience to invert colonial hierarchies of ideas” (Iqtidar 2021, 1146). Ghose’s evolutionary anticolonialism captures just this juncture of appropriative, re-imaginative, and anti-hierarchical thinking, modeling an intellectual dexterity stretching political theory beyond its European limits.

A second objective is to contribute to modern South Asian intellectual history exploring what Shruti Kapila characterizes as the “Indian political” (Kapila 2014; see also Baxter 2016; Bayly 2011; Bose and Manjapra 2010; Elam and Moffat 2016; Goswami 2004; Kapila, 2007; 2010; Maclean and Elam 2013; Parasher 2022; Sartori 2008). By exhuming the underappreciated Darwinism in Ghose’s political philosophy, I hope to complement “new histories of political thought in India” centering anticolonial thinkers, agitators, and revolutionaries (Elam and Moffat 2016, 514). Drawing on essays penned in the radical broadsheets that Ghose published in the 1910s and just prior (*Bande Mataram*, *Karmayogin*, and *Arya*), I show that evolutionary theory formed a conceptual ecosystem framing his understanding of progress—national, spiritual, and civilizational—and reformulating the temporal coordinates of the liberal empire he sought to resist. To be sure, Darwinism is one among many influences, Indian and Western, inflecting Ghose’s political thought and the spiritualism with which it became increasingly integrated as of approximately 1908.<sup>1</sup> Intellectual historians have long noted the sway of German idealism, and of Hegel in particular, in his social and political philosophy (Klausen 2014; Maitra 1956; Sartori 2008; 2010; Varma 1976; Wolfers 2016; 2017). Few, however, have recognized the extent of Ghose’s debts to various political Darwinisms circulating in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and still fewer, how these furnished a language for articulating a distinctive anticolonial and anti-liberal politics.<sup>2</sup> I argue that evolutionism formed the backbone of a notion of progress that contested Western liberalism, traced its slide into imperialism, and charted an Indian alternative.<sup>3</sup> It grounded both a radical

critique of colonial power and the constructive, future-oriented vision of political order that Ghose saw superseding it.

Finally, more broadly, I expose the surprising critical potential of political Darwinism and social evolutionism in colonial contexts, pressed as they were into serving anticolonial ends. Darwinism is of course an unlikely candidate for advancing anti-imperialist politics, given its long association with chauvinist militarisms, racial supremacism, and civilizational hierarchies. Political theory has found little to redeem in the evolutionisms worming their way into turn-of-century social and political thought.<sup>4</sup> Yet Darwinism and evolutionary theory were more protean than the common view allows, fitting more or less comfortably into positions spanning the period’s political spectrum, from anarchism (Adams 2016), to socialism (Stack 2000), to libertarianism and conservatism (Hofstadter [1944] 1955). Rather than a fixed doctrine, Mike Hawkins treats Darwinism as “a cultural unit such as an idea (or set of ideas)... capable of being replicated in diverse circumstances” (Hawkins 1997, 16). These Darwinist replications spilled outside the West and took on novel political tenors in colonial settings. If some Euro-American variants tended toward “*laissez-faire* liberalism, racism or imperialism” (Hawkins 1997, 7), Darwinism and evolutionism were in the subcontinent shaped by, and drawn into, a climate of ascendant nationalism (Killingley 1995, 174). A purpose of this article is thus to widen our view of Darwinism’s political currency by uncovering the anticolonialisms it served in India and beyond.

I excavate several evolutionist threads in Ghose’s anticolonialism, spanning a little over a decade (1906–21). The first stem from his brief, though luminous, career of direct political activism (1906–10); the second, from a series of political essays he wrote between 1918 and 1921, following a near-decade of withdrawal from active politics during which he formulated a complex yogic philosophy. Evolutionism, I show, is a guiding thread connecting these intellectual, spiritual, and political endeavors, the conceptual language through which Ghose figured humanity’s advancement widely (in the arc of human civilization) and narrowly (in India’s movement beyond colonial rule). It comprises an organizing meta-principle, a polyglot theoretical ecosystem framing his understandings of social, political, species-wide, and spiritual growth, recurring at various points and in various guises at various junctures of his life and ideas.

<sup>1</sup> See Iyengar (1945), Singh (1963), and Varma (1976).

<sup>2</sup> Commentators commonly recognize Ghose’s evolutionism, but almost uniformly subsume it under his spiritualism, obscuring the political Darwinisms I examine here. I address Ghose’s spiritual evolutionism in the section “A Deeper Evolutionism: Reform Darwinism in Colonial India,” and the literatures on it in footnotes 6, 9, 10, and 19.

From the political standpoint, Varma touches on Ghose’s rejection of Darwin’s materialism (1976, 20–4), acknowledges his acceptance of “the general formula of an evolutionary progression” (5), and remarks briefly on his affinities with turn-of-century Darwinists. Dennis Dalton states that “an analysis of Aurobindo’s theory of evolution is important for his political philosophy” (113) but does not trace that evolutionism further. Klausen’s (2014) careful exposition of the vitalism, evolutionism, and biological theory in Ghose’s anticolonialism shares ground with my argument, but does not speak to the reform Darwinism that, I argue, structures his account of Indian social evolution.

<sup>3</sup> Studies of Darwinism’s sociopolitical uptake note the looseness of the “Darwinism” often invoked in political contexts—bordering at times on complete misconstrual—as “Darwinism was appealed to as a

tactic” or even an “honorific title” (Stack 2000, 684). Ghose’s anticolonialism shares in this imprecision, integrating often undifferentiated evolutionist schemas—Darwinist, Lamarckist, Spencerian, and other. This does not affect my argument, however, which does not concern how faithfully Ghose hewed to Darwin, but how evolutionism shaped his anticolonialism.

<sup>4</sup> For Darwinism and evolutionary theory in the history of political thought, see Ball (1979), Dryzek and Schlosberg (1995), and Richards (2009). A richer scholarship in the history of biology tracks Darwinism’s social and political lives. For just a few in an expansive literature, see Bowler (1983; 1990), Burrow (1966), Crook (2007), Dickens (2000), Fichman (2002), Kohn (1985), Rogers (1972), and Sober (1984).

These evolutionisms carried distinctive political grammars which Ghose engaged and, in their liberal iterations, criticized. He distinguishes two evolutionist logics, which I'll call *liberal evolutionism* and *social evolutionism*. Liberal evolutionism framed human advancement in terms of natural selection, unimpeded competition, and civilizational fitness—as the contest between social groups in an evolutionary struggle typically associated with social Darwinism. Social evolutionism, conversely, took humanity's progress as based on communality, mutual aid, and concerted ethical steering. I argue that Ghose saw liberal evolutionism as operative at an early phase in humanity's advancement, associated with a still-immature species mired in competition and struggle, which social evolutionism would ultimately surpass. While liberal principles based on the “survival of the fittest” contributed to progress in a juvenile humanity, communalistic principles of mutuality and non-competition would prove an evolutionary advantage for a better developed species.

This was not an entirely novel position: it mirrored arguments advanced by Western “reform Darwinists” at the turn of the century (Bannister 1979). Ghose's originality, however, lay in drawing these political Darwinisms into the colonial context and transmuting them into an incisive critique of liberal imperialism. Where Western evolutionists such as Herbert Spencer, William Graham Sumner, T. H. Huxley, Alfred Russel Wallace, Benjamin Kidd, and Lester Ward grappled over whether evolutionary laws might steer ethics and social policies, Darwinism took on an entirely different political life in colonial peripheries. In Ghose's hands, it animated a sharp critique of European modernity, of its presumed advancement over Indian civilization, and of its liberal ethos and institutions. More constructively, it also underpinned the “complex communal freedom and self-determination” (Ghose 1997a, 405) he recovered in the Indian polity. Ghose's evolutionism thus braced his resistance to liberal imperialism and his vision of a future politics grounded in mutualism, non-competition, and global interdependence.

The argument proceeds as follows. I start by sketching the evolutionist parameters of Ghose's early anticolonialism (1906–10), which provincializes European claims to civilizational superiority by recasting the narrative of development from the limited scale of European modernity to the larger arc of human evolution. I then move to the late 1910s and early 1920s, when he published a series of essays on Indian politics, progress, and civilization. In them, I uncover liberal and social evolutionisms which Ghose associated, respectively, with Western imperialism and Indian communalism. I elucidate Ghose's sharp polemic against the former and the alternative to it that he found in the latter. The conclusion widens the lens by uncovering Darwinism's critical afterlives in anticolonialisms within and beyond the subcontinent.

## SCALING UP: EVOLUTIONISM IN GHOSE'S EARLY NATIONALISM

Aurobindo Ghose was born in Calcutta in 1872, the son of a well-to-do family immersed in the reformist

Brahmo Samaj movement. His father, Krishna Dhun Ghose, developed an abiding interest in Darwin and evolutionism while pursuing his medical studies in Edinburgh. Aurobindo and his siblings attended a Christian anglophone boarding school in Darjeeling until 1879, when the family moved to England. Despite his distaste for the Christian intonations of his education, Ghose excelled and won a scholarship to Cambridge, which he attended for two years. He then secured an appointment in the civil service at Baroda, returning to India in 1893, where he taught himself Sanskrit and Bengali.

Though he'd been openly critical of the British empire since his days at Cambridge, Ghose deepened his commitment to Indian independence on his return to the subcontinent. He organized an underground revolutionist group (ineffective though it was) and met influential members of what would ultimately become the “extremist” faction of Congress. Following Bengal's 1905 partition, Ghose moved to Calcutta and began publishing *Bande Mataram*, a radical nationalist broadsheet, alongside Bal Gangadhar Tilak. During this period, he became a public champion of non-cooperation and passive resistance while privately advancing more radical revolutionary efforts. In 1906–08, he ascended to the leadership of the nationalist movement and came to be among its most uncompromising, advocating India's unqualified independence. He was jailed for a year in 1908, charged with conspiracy and “waging war against the King” in the Alipore Bomb Case, and spearheaded two more anticolonial periodicals on his emergence (*Karmayogin* and *Dharma*). By 1910, he turned his attention from political to spiritual matters, moving to an ashram in Pondicherry where he remained and wrote prolifically until his death in 1950.<sup>5</sup>

Ghose appears to have inherited his father's interest in evolutionism, which comprises a conceptual through-line linking his early activism, the yogic philosophy he developed as of the 1910s, and his postwar political essays. It also shaped his anticolonialism. Here, he was not alone. Dermot Killingley (1995) and C. Mackenzie Brown (2012) note the pervasiveness of Darwinism and evolutionism in the thought of leading turn-of-century figures, including Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Shyamji Krishnavarma, and Swami Vivekananda. As in the West, social Darwinism also emerged in India, painting lower castes, Muslims, Indigenous tribes, and other “undesirable” populations as inferior or unfit, or as causing the degeneration of Hindu civilization (Killingley 1995, 184). Darwinism nonetheless provided a vital conceptual repository for anticolonial politics, Ghose's among them (Kapila 2007; Marwah 2019).

In his early political period (1906–10), Ghose drew on evolutionism to provincialize conceits of civilizational superiority by vastly extending the timescale of historicist frameworks placing Europeans at the apex of human advancement. In articles, speeches, and essays,

<sup>5</sup> For overviews of Ghose's life and political thought, see Dalton (1982), Heehs (2008), Iyengar (1945), Singh (1963), and Varma (1976).



he recast European modernity and Indian history to illustrate the relative brevity of Western ascendancy. By stretching the measure of progress from the European context to the arc of human evolution, he highlighted the limitedness of Western notions of social improvement. On this larger temporal map, tracing the motions of human civilizations dating back to Europe's infancy, one could see that "Asia is long-lived, Europe brief and ephemeral... Europe lives by centuries, Asia by millenniums." "In the place which is left vacant by the decline of the European nations," Ghose prognosticated, "Asia young, strong and vigorous...is preparing to step forward and possess the future" (Ghose 1907). This evolutionary standpoint, loosely construed though it is, inverts the civilizational story. Europe was advanced only from within its own constrained understanding of progress, consisting of industrial development, militarist expansionism, secularism, and rationalism. But the measures themselves revealed a cramped view of social evolution destined to wear itself out by its sheer vacuity. It was, then, "the office of Asia to take up the work of human evolution when Europe comes to a standstill," Ghose averred. "Such a time has now come in the world's history" (Ghose 1908a).

At this juncture, Ghose is giving an evolutionist gloss to a common trope of the period, as anticolonialists of all stripes upturned Eurocentrist historicisms by appealing to Indian civilization's longevity (Bayly 2011; Prakash 1999). Excavating what Partha Chatterjee describes as a constructed "classical" past (Chatterjee 1993, 95–115), they undercut the charge of backwardness by illuminating the depth of Indian society and knowledge, which far predated Europe's. "Hindus could use the vast scale of evolutionary time as ammunition in their resistance against Western intellectual hegemony," Killingley observes, and "claim to be on the side of enlightenment against the Christians" (1995, 190). By expanding civilization's timescale to the evolutionary level, anticolonialists reclaimed an epistemic patrimony by exhuming endogenous traditions of thought demonstrating the falsity of Indian "stagnancy" (Prakash 1999). Ghose's evolutionism was, then, at this point more patina than substance. This would change in the following decade.

## A DEEPER EVOLUTIONISM: REFORM DARWINISM IN COLONIAL INDIA

Ghose left political life in 1910, moving to an ashram in Pondicherry where he would spend the rest of his days. His withdrawal from active politics, however, in no way abated his thinking or writing on India's political prospects. Dennis Dalton sees his constructive anticolonial project as emerging in this "second phase," between 1910 and 1921, as Ghose "reached the summit of his capacity as a thinker only after his withdrawal from political activity" (Dalton 1982, 86). During this period, Ghose developed an evolutionary philosophy that more deeply engaged Darwinism and other evolutionisms (Brown 2012, 156). While rejecting Darwin's materialism, he saw evolutionism as "the

key-note of the thought of the nineteenth century," affecting "all its science and its thought-attitude," along with "its moral temperament, its politics and its society" (Ghose 1998, 169; Raina and Habib 1996, 15). Over the 1910s and early 1920s, he wrote voluminously on natural, spiritual, social, and political evolution, leading C. Mackenzie Brown to characterize him as "the foremost Hindu evolutionary thinker of the 20th century" (Brown 2012, 160; Dalton 1982).

Between 1914 and 1919, Ghose published a stream of essays in *Arya* elaborating the "integrative evolutionism" that would shape *The Life Divine* (Brown 2012; see also Singh 1963, 69–72). This was his principal philosophical work on spiritual evolution, which situated humanity on an evolutionary scale (Iyengar 1945, 271).<sup>6</sup> Ghose draws on "evolution which the Darwinian theory first made plain to human knowledge" to argue that the

struggle for life is not only a struggle to survive, it is also a struggle for possession and perfection, since only by taking hold of the environment whether more or less, whether by self-adaptation to it or by adapting it to oneself... can survival be secured, and equally is it true that only a greater and greater perfection can assure a continuous permanence, a lasting survival. It is this truth that Darwinism sought to express in the formula of the survival of the fittest. (Ghose 2005, 211–2)

Ghose's evolutionism here integrates several ideas indebted to Herbert Spencer.<sup>7</sup> First, evolution is a meta-principle governing individual, group-based, and civilizational progress.<sup>8</sup> Second, his appeal to the "survival of the fittest"—which, though Darwin came to accept it, originated with Spencer—imports an ambiguous notion of fitness (an adaptedness to particular conditions, or a more generalized capacity for survival over competitors?). Finally, Ghose integrates the directionality of Spencer's evolutionism, which he—Spencer—took as a universal law by which simpler and less perfected forms of life developed into increasingly complex and ameliorated ones.

In these instances, Ghose follows a line of leading turn-of-century figures who developed spiritualist evolutionisms in response to the Darwinian revolution. As in the West, Indian thinkers grappled with the cosmological implications of Darwinism's thoroughgoing materialism, by turn integrating and rejecting principles of natural selection in relation to Hindu notions of birth, death, creation, reincarnation, evolution, and involution within and beyond the organic world. Their syntheses were also shaped by nationalist

<sup>6</sup> An extensive literature addresses Ghose's spiritual evolutionism; for just a few, see Brown (2012, 155–72), Bruteau (1971, 254–72), Mahapatra (2020, 204–6), Reddy (1966), Singh (1963, 69–72), and Srivastava (1968).

<sup>7</sup> For Spencer's sway over *bhadralok* intellectual circles at the turn of the century, see Raina and Habib (1996, 17).

<sup>8</sup> For an early statement of Spencer's all-encompassing evolutionism, predating Darwin's evolutionary theory by two years, see "Progress: Its Law and Cause" (1857).

ambitions to reconcile Hinduism with advances in modern science, particularly within revivalist circles that came to prominence in this period (Bayly 2011; Nanda 2020; Prakash 1999). As early as 1875, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee declared Hinduism's alignment with the mechanisms of natural selection, claims later taken up and bolstered by Theosophists seeking to "recover" evolutionary principles in Hindu scriptures (Bevir 2020; Nanda 2011; Singleton 2007). Keshab Chunder Sen advanced an "Avataric evolutionism," tracing the four stages of matter's transformation, from gross elements to vegetative life, to animality, to humanity, to divinity (Brown 2012, 114). Trends in Western thinking helped consolidate this fusion of spiritualism, science, and evolutionism under the pall of colonial rule. Oxford Sanskritist Monier Monier-Williams proclaimed that Hindus were "Darwinians many centuries before Darwin; and Evolutionists many centuries before the doctrine of Evolution had been accepted by the Scientists of our time" (Monier-Williams 1891, xii). The spread of Henri Bergson's vitalism lent credence to the contention that the Indian variant supplemented Darwin's incompletely materialistic theory by accounting for evolution's operation at a higher—spiritual—level (Brown 2012, 159–60).

Evolutionism thus became intimately braided with Hindu spiritualism and anticolonial nationalism, buttressing "Occidental" claims to India's advances over Western civilization. This confluence was particularly pronounced in Swami Vivekananda, who significantly influenced Ghose's spiritual and political thinking (Brown 2012, 131–54; Dalton 1982, 29–58; Raina and Habib 1996, 17; Singleton 2007, 130–1). Vivekananda's "Modern Advaitic Evolutionism" accepted Darwin's struggle doctrine as operative in the natural world but supplemented it with a Lamarckian theory of evolutionary transmutation across reincarnations. By tracing spiritual evolution through cycles of rebirth, Vivekananda recovered an overall cosmological purposiveness evacuated by Darwin's starkly mechanistic postulation of aimless evolutionary transformation. Vivekananda also asserted the priority of Hinduism's claims over evolutionism, stating that the "idea of evolution was to be found in the Vedas long before the Christian era" (cited in Brown 2012, 141) and that Patanjali was "the father of evolution, spiritual and physical" (cited in Singleton 2007, 131).

While Ghose's spiritualist evolutionism was indebted to Vivekananda's, he superseded it by incorporating the latest in Western debates on organic evolution (Brown 2012, 154). This became integrated with his political Vedantism, which saw "the final fulfilment of the Vedantic ideal in politics" as "the true Swaraj for India" (Ghose 1908b). The Vedanta "provide[d] a metaphysical defense of the idea of the country as the Mother and as divine" (Varma 1976, 229), grounding the spiritualist nationalism that became increasingly entrenched following Ghose's 1908 jailing.<sup>9</sup> In this

<sup>9</sup> For just a few in a large literature on Ghose's spiritualist nationalism, see Basu (1998), Deutsch (1986), Mahapatra (2004), Minor

context, Ghose's evolutionism is embedded in an overarching projection of humanity's spiritual advancement and of the nationalist movement's role in it, a synthesis of Vedantic cosmology, Hegelian idealism, Darwinist evolutionism, and Nietzschean notions of self-overcoming.<sup>10</sup>

The scholarship addressing Ghose's evolutionism nearly invariably situates it in this light—in relation to the Vedantism inflecting his nationalism and to his vision of humanity's progress toward divinity. But the emphasis on Ghose's *spiritual* evolutionism obscures Darwinism's impacts on his *political* thought and on the anticolonialism he developed in the 1910s and 1920s. While evolutionism undoubtedly merged with Hinduism in his spiritualism and early nationalism, it took a markedly political turn in later essays addressing politics, culture, and colonialism in India and abroad. These essays—published in *Arya* between 1914 and 1921 and gathered together as *The Human Cycle* (1916–1918), *The Ideal of Human Unity* (1915–18), and *The Foundations of Indian Culture* (1918–21)—are among Ghose's most sustained reflections on politics. In them, he broaches domestic and international relations, political ideologies, social evolution, colonial rule, and much more in a distinctly corporeal register and through a Darwinist lens.

In several of these essays, Ghose appears to adopt social Darwinism's conceptual parameters, treating competition, struggle, fitness, natural selection, and adaptation as human evolution's operative principles. He also draws out their affinities with liberal commitments to political and economic non-interference, taking intervention as impeding otherwise "natural" selective processes improving the stock of a given society, race, or civilization. In this liberal evolutionist view, progress is driven by struggle, antagonism, and competition, enabling the best and fittest to rise up in a kind of existential meritocracy.

These are the terms in which Ghose characterizes the contest between India and Britain in *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, a series of essays responding to William Archer's depiction of Indian culture, art, and religion as "a repulsive mass of unspeakable barbarism" (Ghose 1997d, 55).<sup>11</sup> Here, Ghose figures India's resistance to colonial domination as an evolutionary clash of civilizations. He invokes liberal evolutionism's vernacular to frame the schism between India's "predominantly

(1978), Ragi (2011), Singh (1963), Varma (1955; 1976), and Verma (1990).

<sup>10</sup> For the intersections of Hegelian idealism, evolutionism, and Vedantism in Ghose's nationalism, see Brown (2012), Dalton (1982), Mahapatra (2007, 483–96), Maitra (1956, 39), Varma (1976), and Wolfers (2016, 529; 2017, 288). For the influence of Nietzsche and eugenics, see Singleton (2007, 133) and Wolfers (2017, 288–9).

<sup>11</sup> These essays are "The Renaissance in India," published serially between Aug–Nov. 1918 (4 essays); "Indian Culture and External Influence," published in March 1919; "Is India Civilized?," published serially between December 1918 and February 1919 (3 essays); and "A Defense of Indian Culture," published serially between February 1919 and January 1921 (24 essays).

spiritual” and Europe’s “predominantly material” principles as a “war of cultures” (Ghose 1997d, 55–6). In starkly social Darwinist terms, he proclaims that

by the law of struggle which is the first law of existence in the material universe, varying cultures are bound to come into conflict. A deep-seated urge in Nature compels them to attempt to extend themselves and to destroy, assimilate and replace all disparates [*sic*] or opposites... [T]he civilization which neglects an active self-defence will be swallowed up and the nation which lived by it will lose its soul and perish. Each nation is a Shakti or power of the evolving spirit in humanity and lives by the principle which it embodies... The principle of struggle has assumed the large historical aspect of an age-long clash and pressure of conflict between Asia and Europe. (57)

Portending their accelerating rivalry, India’s rise in global affairs was “already intensifying the attempt, natural and legitimate according to the law of competition, of European civilization to assimilate Asia” (60).

Cast in this light, the confrontation of Indian nationalism and European colonialism constitutes a battle between opposing ideals of social existence played out on the global stage. “The principle of struggle, conflict and competition,” Ghose contends, “still governs and for some time will still govern international relations” (63). This Darwinian dogfight yields one of two possibilities: “[e]ither India will be rationalised and industrialised out of all recognition and she will be no longer India or else she will be the leader in a new world-phase” (65).<sup>12</sup> In these instances, Ghose adopts a liberal evolutionist framework in which unconstrained grappling for civilizational preeminence yields fitness. This mirrors Western militarist Darwinisms that, Paul Crook notes, took “struggle [as] necessary for the genetic health of a species” (Crook 1994, 77). Without indulging their racist excesses, Ghose shares ground with social Darwinists such as Jules de Gaultier (1912), who saw the conflict between nations as “an expression of social Darwinism” (254).

However, this is not Ghose’s final word on the matter, as he goes on to show the *deficits* of liberal evolutionism. Retaining the evolutionist schema, he relativizes both European and Indian claims to civilizational superiority by exposing their shared parochialism. “[C]ivilization and barbarism,” he avers,

are words of a quite relative significance. For from the view of the evolutionary future European and Indian civilization at their best have only been half achievements, infant dawns pointing to the mature sunlight that is to come. Neither Europe nor India nor any race, country or

continent of mankind has ever been fully civilized from this point of view. (Ghose 1997d, 85–6)

Here, Ghose looks *beyond* the liberal evolutionism figuring Asia and Europe as locked in an existential duel. From this vantage point, “this view from the future, the coming ages may look on Europe and Asia of today much as we look on savage tribes or primitive peoples” (86).

At first glance, Ghose’s position appears incoherent, both adopting and criticizing liberal evolutionism and its social Darwinist presumptions. How are we to reconcile an evolutionism driven by Britain’s and India’s rivalry with a view of both civilizations as “half achievements”?

To make sense of his claims, we need to contextualize them within late nineteenth-century Euro-American debates on political Darwinisms, with which Ghose was intimately familiar (Brown 2012; Varma 1976). These spanned a range of social, political, and ethical questions, but a central one concerned the extent to which the evolutionary laws revealed by Darwin governed, or should govern, ethics and social policy. Did its principal tenet—that evolution proceeded through natural selection, enabling better-adapted organisms to succeed over the less well-adapted through a process of competitive struggle—apply to human societies? If so, by what mechanisms and through what modifications, given humanity’s advanced capacities? Two basic positions coalesced, whose duality Mike Hawkins captures as “nature as model and threat” (1997, 18).

The first—“nature as model”—is what’s commonly taken as social Darwinism.<sup>13</sup> Broadly speaking, social Darwinists took natural selection as operative in human societies, indulging a certain ethical naturalism by treating the “struggle for existence” as the antagonistic process through which individuals, races, civilizations, and species evolved.<sup>14</sup> While this glosses over considerable differences across social Darwinist positions, its basic thrust was to take state interventionism as contrary to evolutionary laws. By mitigating the excesses of markets, redressing systemic inequalities, and aiding disadvantaged populations, overly intrusive states impeded competitive struggle and artificially preserved “inferior” stock. If human evolution required selective pressures to eliminate its weaker elements, state interference was ultimately dysgenic. This unforgiving stance is commonly associated with classical liberals such as Spencer, William Graham Sumner, and Franklin Giddings, who to varying degrees opposed social and economic policies

<sup>12</sup> Liberal evolutionism recurs in Ghose’s other essays of the period. In the fourth installment of “Indian Polity,” he maintains that “the life of man is still predominately [*sic*] vital and moved therefore by the tendencies of expansion, possession, aggression, mutual struggle for absorption and dominant survival which are the first law of life” (426); in “Indian Culture and External Influence,” he ponders the “biological necessity” and “instinct of life” operative in the historical processes by which an “inactive or weaker culture perishes” (45).

<sup>13</sup> For the many debates on social Darwinism’s parameters, see the literature in footnote 4. For a helpful overview of those debates, see Crook (2007, 29–43). On the term’s fluidity and instabilities, see Hawkins (1997, chap. 1).

<sup>14</sup> Most commentators take this as a minimal condition of social Darwinist positions, typically conjoined with other characteristic features (see, e.g., Hawkins 1997, 31). As I aim to illustrate the broader split between social and reform Darwinists, I do not address more particular definitional questions.



constraining competition within societies (Ryan 2001).<sup>15</sup> Sumner, for instance, took unfettered capitalism as a site for the “natural” contest between individuals and groups. Humanity had “made no step whatever in civilization which has not been won by pain and distress,” he intoned in an 1879 lecture, and “if we do not like the survival of the fittest, we have only one possible alternative, and that is the survival of the unfittest” (Sumner 1918, 221–5). Spencer similarly fulminated that “[i]f left to operate in all its sternest, the principle of the survival of the fittest... would quickly clear away the degraded,” but for the “shortsighted beneficence... [of] unwise institutions, [which] brought into existence large numbers who are unadapted to the requirements of social life.” The state was empowered to preserve justice, Spencer argued, but should indulge in no further charity (Spencer 1897, 392).

Against this were reform Darwinists, who distinguished the operation of evolutionary struggle in the natural and human spheres, arguing that natural laws could not serve as the basis of moral and social choice (so, “nature as threat”). Immutable as Darwin’s principles were in the natural world, humanity’s unique attributes set it outside of their ambit, a position held by the period’s leading biologists—T. H. Huxley, Alfred Russel Wallace, and Darwin himself. Reform Darwinists attacked the “brutal laws of social Darwinism,” stressing the influence of culture and intellect in human evolution and resisting the baleful effects of unchecked natural forces (Bannister 1979, 11).

As with social Darwinists, reform Darwinist arguments varied widely. Huxley, for one, refuted Spencer’s cosmological evolutionism by drawing a firm line between antagonistic struggle in the natural world and the human sphere’s ethical grounding. The “intense and unceasing competition of the struggle for existence” in nature was, he claimed, diametrically opposed by humanity’s “characteristic feature... the elimination of that struggle” (1896, 13). Leading thinkers such as Edward Bellamy, Jacques Novicow, and John Fiske adopted this rough dualism, distinguishing the operation of natural selection and competitive struggle in the lower orders from a social-ethical sphere governed by humanity’s higher faculties (Bannister 1979; Crook 1994). A related tack differentiated primitive and modern populations. Natural selection held sway over nascent societies struggling against both environment and competitors, the argument went, but such brutalities were superseded in advanced societies whose evolutionary advantage lay in combination and coordination. This commonly translated into a racialized historicism demarcating “barbarous” non-Europeans subject to violent selective pressures from

modern peoples characterized by, in Benjamin Kidd’s terms, “higher social efficiency” (1894, 42). “Among civilized nations at the present day, it does not seem possible for natural selection to act in any way,” Wallace maintained, concluding that “it must inevitably follow that the higher—the more intellectual and moral—must displace the lower and more degraded races” (1871, 329–30).

We can now better understand Ghose’s view, which transposes the reform Darwinist argument into the colonial context.<sup>16</sup> Like the reform Darwinists, Ghose regards competitive struggle as serving its evolutionary purpose only at an early point in humanity’s development, as the selective force governing all biological entities in the natural world. His reformulation, however, situates this violent contest not in “primitive” societies but in the clash of civilizations propelled by Western empire. Liberal evolutionism and the imperialism it countenanced took competitive struggle as determining civilizational fitness, reflecting the propulsions of a still-immature species mired in natural rather than human selection.

The longer view—the “view from the evolutionary future”—comprised *social* evolutionism. This was a communalistic Darwinism treating human advancement as driven by mutual aid, social cooperation, and concerted political direction—by conscious choice rather than antagonistic rivalry. Ghose depicts humanity as progressing

through three successive stages. The first is the period of conflict and competition which has been ever dominant in the past and still overshadows the present of mankind... The second step brings the stage of concert. The third and last is marked by the spirit of sacrifice in which... each gives himself for the good of others. The second stage has hardly commenced for most; the third belongs to the indeterminate future. (Ghose 1997d, 56)<sup>17</sup>

Humanity remained at present in the first stage, in which sociopolitical development was spurred by imperialism’s “conflict and competition.” But the view from the future, as Ghose glimpsed it in India’s ascendant nationalism, would ultimately proceed through “concert,” the cooperative interchange of social evolutionism. From this standpoint, liberal evolutionism and the imperialism it sustained belonged to an early phase of our collective trajectory. The eclipse of the West’s domination over Asia would mark a new stage of social evolution moved by the principles of combination,

<sup>15</sup> The common perception of social Darwinism is largely indebted to Richard Hofstadter’s *Social Darwinism in American Political Thought* (1944), which framed its substance and linked it to conservatism (in fact, classical liberalism). A revisionist scholarship has widened well beyond this view, taking “Darwinism as a multiplex phenomenon translatable into many social and ideological idioms” (Crook 1994, 12). For an important rejoinder to Hofstadter’s view, see Bannister (1979).

<sup>16</sup> Ghose of course departs from Western reform Darwinists’ focus on domestic social policy, but retains the view that the competitive struggle governing the animal world is inapplicable to human societies and should not serve as its orienting principle. For reform Darwinism’s proximity to Marxist, socialist and communalist politics, see Hawkins (1997, ch. 7).

<sup>17</sup> These three evolutionary stages recur in “Indian Polity”: “Human society has in its growth to pass through three stages of evolution before it can arrive at the completeness of its possibilities” (Ghose 1997a, 398).

aid, and communality that Ghose read into Indian civilization.

Though filtered through his spiritualized nationalism, Ghose's contention is directly aligned with the "scientific pacificism" of antiwar evolutionists such as Jacques Novicow and Norman Angell. In *La guerre et ses prétendus bienfaits* (1894) and *La critique du darwinisme social* (1910), Novicow attacked social Darwinists such as Spencer, Ernest Renan, and Gustav Ratzenhofer for applying biological laws to social questions. Criticizing their "prodigious leap" from natural struggle to the social sphere, Novicow charged such facile equivalences with neglecting the "unimaginable complexity" of human interactions. "That some of these relations have become established between different animal species," he pointed out, "it does not follow that the *same* relations should be found, without modification, between human societies" (42–3), which transcended the laws of natural selection as they climbed the evolutionary ladder. Ghose claimed the very same: mature social evolution moved through human capacities for symbiotic exchange *against* the brutalities of nature, war, and early civilization.<sup>18</sup>

Ghose also integrates Piotr Kropotkin's conviction that mutual aid was the lynchpin of evolution. Drawing on his observations of animal behavior in northern Asia and Siberia, Kropotkin saw intraspecies cooperation, rather than competition, as an evolutionary advantage. The struggle for existence concerned a species' resistance to rivals and natural elements, such that success hinged on joint action. "[C]ompetition is not the rule either in the animal world or in mankind," Kropotkin held, since "[b]etter conditions are created by the *elimination of competition* by means of mutual aid and mutual support" (1902, 79). Ghose's evolutionism, still further, takes Indian anticolonialism as the tipping point of a global movement toward concert and self-sacrifice, echoing Kropotkin's encompassing cosmopolitanism: "the ethical progress of our race, viewed in its broad lines, appears as a gradual extension of the mutual-aid principles from the tribe to always larger and larger agglomerations, so as to finally embrace one day the whole of mankind" (210–1).

Ghose's anticolonialism thus consolidates a range of socialistic Darwinisms obfuscated by the scholarship's tendency to collapse his evolutionism into his spiritualism. But re-situated within this political-conceptual landscape, his appeal to liberal evolutionism's cultural clash becomes comprehensible. At an historical juncture where the international sphere remained structured by Western powers driven by antagonistic competition, India had little choice but to engage Britain on those terms. "Conflict is not indeed the last and ideal stage," he sees, "for that comes when various

cultures develop freely, without hatred, misunderstanding or aggression and even with an underlying sense of unity. But so long as the principle of struggle prevails, one must face the lesser law; it is fatal to disarm in the midmost of the battle" (Ghose 1997d, 57). One should, then, "regard this age of civilization as an evolutionary stage, an imperfect but important turn of the human advance" from competitive struggle to mutual aid (Ghose 1997d, 82). While "the real and perfect civilization" would ultimately emerge from this transition, the present "life of mankind is still nine tenths of barbarism to one tenth of culture." This was the result of the "European mind [that] gives the first place to the principle of growth by struggle," treating society as "an organization for growth by competition, aggression and farther battle" (Ghose 1997d, 92).

The global context, however, was shifting. With Asia's ascendancy, "a certain growing mutual closeness of the life of humanity is the most prominent phenomenon of the day," leading "to a free concert with some underlying oneness" (Ghose 1997d, 63–4). "Indian culture," Ghose holds, aimed at "a lasting organization that would minimize or even eliminate the principle of struggle" (Ghose 1997d, 92). In a clearly Darwinist idiom—in an essay titled "Evolution"—he recognizes that "[s]truggle exists, mutual destruction exists, but as a subordinate movement, a red minor chord"; the "real law" of human evolution "is rather mutual help" (Ghose 1998, 174). Humanity's evolutionary future lay in interdependent social forms set against liberalism's atomism, competitiveness, and political culture. By mapping its coordinates onto the colonial context, Ghose thus marshaled reform Darwinism to criticize liberalism's social, political, and ethical foundations, along with the imperialism to which it inevitably succumbed.

This critique advanced several related arguments. The first highlighted the straightforward hypocrisy of a doctrine whose professedly universalistic commitments to liberty, self-government, and autonomy so easily meshed with a racialized exceptionalism denying those entitlements to Indians. Liberal imperialists, he acidly charged, indulged a "mass of contradictions, the profession of liberalism running hand in hand with the practice of a bastard Imperialism which did the work of Satan while it mouthed liberal Scripture to justify its sins" (Ghose 1908b). Ghose had drawn these linkages since his student days at Cambridge, as he became increasingly conscious of the cultural supremacism underpinning Asia's political subjection (Heehs 2008, 30; see also Sartori 2010; Singh 1963, 35–41). He dissected liberalism's connections to empire in print as early as 1893. In "New Lamps for Old," published in *Indu Prakash*, he skewered the Congress moderates' gradualist liberalism, militating for India's complete political independence. "We must no longer hold out supplicating hands to the English Parliament," he declaimed, "but must recognize the hard truth that every nation must beat out its own path to salvation" (quoted in Heehs 2008, 38).

More profoundly, Ghose exposed the nexus of liberalism's individualistic atomism, its ethos of

<sup>18</sup> Varma (1976, 21–2, 191) acknowledges Ghose's affinities with Novicow and Kropotkin and his critique of social Darwinist "struggle theories" but does not address their reform Darwinist grounding.



competitiveness, and its materialist foundations.<sup>19</sup> In *The Human Cycle*, he lambastes liberal government in Darwinian terms, as a contest between antagonistic monads driven by “an increasing stress of competition,” whose “conflict ends in the survival not of the spiritually, rationally or physically fittest, but of the most fortunate and vitally successful” (198).<sup>20</sup> Even in the West, liberalism amounted to “a huge organised competitive system, a frantically rapid and one-sided development of industrialism and, under the garb of democracy, an increasing plutocratic tendency that shocks by its ostentatious grossness” (Ghose 1997f, 199–200).

In the subcontinent, its ravages were still more pronounced. The taproot of India’s subjugation, Ghose saw, was the cultural and economic liberalism at the heart of the British empire, which fueled Indian immiseration and envisioned progress in strictly antagonistic and materialist terms. Under its “competitive system of commerce, with its bitter and murderous struggle for existence,” Indians had borne “this industrial realization of Darwinism. It has been written large for us in ghastly letters of famine, chronic starvation and misery and a decreasing population” (Ghose 1909a). Liberal notions of societal improvement predicated on expansionary industrialism, alienating individualism, and economic rivalry had for Indians yielded entrenched poverty, political subservience, a wealth drain to a foreign power, and the destruction of the social fabric. The presumption that struggle constituted a natural law of progress drove liberal evolutionism, politics, and empire: a civilization anchored in materialism and propelled by antagonism naturally led to imperialist exploitation vindicated by spurious claims to “fitness.” Ghose thus sought to counter liberalism’s very measure of progress which, along with its disintegrative individualism, reduced the polity to “a battle of conflicting interests” (Ghose 1997f, 198). The political task, as he rather bluntly put it, was “to get rid of this great parasitical excrescence of unbridled competition, this giant obstacle to any decent ideal or practice of human living” (Ghose 1997f, 200). As Andrew Sartori notes, Ghose’s anticolonialism aimed to transcend the “shallowness of colonial political categories—the liberal categories of exchange” (Sartori 2008, 142).

By contrast, mutualism and communalism were woven into the fabric of Indian society, which Ghose envisioned, like Spencer, as an organic unity.<sup>21</sup> “The true nature of the Indian polity” must be regarded “as a

part of and in its relation to the organic totality of the social existence”; “[a]ll its growth, all its formations, customs, institutions are then a natural organic development” (Ghose 1997a, 396, 398). This organicism belonged to Swadeshi efforts to reconceptualize the Indian social body outside the compass of liberal modernity, as more fundamental than a mere assemblage of individuals (Sartori 2008, 154–5; see also Bose 2010, 129; Dalton 1982, vi; Sartori 2010, 325). Against liberalism’s atomism, materialism, and antagonism, Ghose conceptualized Indian social existence as rooted in “institutions and ways of communal living already developed by the communal mind and life” (Ghose 1997a, 401–2). This communalism was neither isolationist nor solipsistic. It was, rather, constructive, outward-looking, and cosmopolitan: India’s resurgence would lead to a reconstitution of global relations based on “concert” rather than antagonism.<sup>22</sup> Ghose’s nationalism aimed at “building up India for the sake of humanity” (Ghose 1909b).

Taking political institutions as embedded in webs of sociality and communal practice, then, India would evolve as an organic whole whose constituent elements—social, economic, political, and spiritual—could not be isolated from one another, much less set against each other. Retaining “the system of a very complex communal freedom and self-determination” (Ghose 1997a, 405) embedded in the Indian polity, advancement would “proceed not along the Western line of evolution, but to a new creation out of its own spirit” (Ghose 1997a, 407–8). This would be based on “the principle of an organically self-determining communal life” in which “the condition of liberty it aimed at was not so much an individual as a communal freedom” (Ghose 1997a, 408). For Ghose, decolonization extended well beyond Indian independence, and well beyond the political possibilities imaginable within liberal evolutionist terms. The view from the evolutionary future was ultimately a reorientation of the political itself, in India and globally, toward mutualism, interdependence, and human unity.

## THE VIEW FROM THE EVOLUTIONARY FUTURE

I suggested at the outset that evolutionism forms a conceptual ecosystem connecting Ghose’s spiritualism, politics, and anticolonialism. We may now perhaps better see its reach. In Ghose’s hands, evolutionism is more than a tool for condemning British imperialism,

<sup>19</sup> Many of the period’s cultural nationalists framed their anticolonialisms through a bifurcation between Indian spiritualism and Western materialism. Ghose’s distinction lies in the reform Darwinism anchoring his critique and in the acuity of its analysis of liberalism’s—and liberal evolutionism’s—entanglements with empire.

<sup>20</sup> The commentary on *The Human Cycle*’s social evolutionism relegates it, as above, to Ghose’s spiritual philosophy, particularly by tying it to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s theological evolutionism. As above, this neglects the political Darwinism I highlight here. See Deutsch (1986, 200–10), Gupta (2014, 51–66), Korom (1989), Varma (1955, 238–9); Verma (1990, 61–3), and Zaehner (1971).

<sup>21</sup> While Sartori takes Ghose’s organicism as “ground[ing] politics in the life of the people” (Sartori 2008, 169), Manu Goswami points

to its dangers in the Swadeshi era. In this context, she argues, organicism naturalized “Hindus as the original, organic, core nationals” and depicted Muslims as “an external element within the corporatist vision of an organic national whole” (Goswami 2004, 188). For Ghose’s affinities with Spencerian social organicism, see Verma (1990, 65).

<sup>22</sup> On the cosmopolitanism of Ghose’s anti-imperialism, see Sartori (2010), Varma (1955, 240–1), and Verma (1990). For a cognate vision of Indian nationalism’s cosmopolitan moorings, see Pal’s *Nationality and Empire*.

and it extends beyond the spiritual philosophy to which much of the commentary confines it. It is, rather, the connective tissue threading together a sweeping critique of liberalism's Eurocentrism, historicism, and imperialism and grounding an alternative political future to which India might aspire.

This is neither to minimize the problematic features of Ghose's evolutionism nor to treat it as any kind of anticolonial template. Many of his more practically disposed compatriots observed that Ghose's nationalism was closer to a metaphysics, a poetry, or a spiritual philosophy than a practicable decolonial program. His organicist depiction of India's inborn mutualism fell within a culturalized politics contributing to, as Manu Goswami describes it, the "the progressive Hinduization... of the imagined body politic" (2004, 258). For Sumit Sarkar (2010), the Swadeshi movement's failure lay in its lapsing into this Hindu exclusivism, feeding the Hindutva that today corrodes Indian democracy. More generally, anticolonialism's capitulation to the nation-state form, its capture by elites, and its proximity to nationalist chauvinisms have long been subjected to well-warranted criticism. To be clear, Ghose did not partake in any such nativism. "[T]he *swadesh*," he wrote, "which must be the base and fundament of our nationality, is India, a country where Mahomedan and Hindu live intermingled and side by side" (Ghose 1909c). But the wider repercussions of the organicist and culturalist politics he helped inaugurate and its degeneration into Hindu jingoism belong to his political and intellectual legacy.

Another dimension of that legacy, however—and one that has received little attention—lies in its revealing Darwinism's curious political trajectory in the subcontinent, and its perhaps unanticipated emancipatory capacities in colonial peripheries. While Darwinism's sociopolitical harms are well catalogued, they risk concealing its critical potential outside the West. In Euro-American contexts, Darwinism was a battleground between social reformers and laissez-faire liberals over state intervention into markets, populations, social pathologies, and the overall gene pool (Bannister 1979; Bowler 1983; Hawkins 1997). At the international level, racial realists such as Ludwig Gumplowicz and Gustav Ratzenhofer invoked Darwin and Spencer in reading global conflict through the prism of fitness and existential struggle (Crook 1994; Hobson 2012). Leftist Darwinists such as Karl Pearson fared no better, taking socialism as benefiting Western nations in the contest "of superior with inferior race." "No thoughtful socialist," he remarked, "would object to cultivating Uganda at the expense of its present occupiers if Lancashire were starving" (1894, 111). Darwinism's persistent interweaving with racial supremacism has led John Hobson to relegate it to a "Eurocentric conception of world politics" (2012, 1).

This misses the critical purposes Darwinism served in the colonial world. There, it took on an entirely different political life, furnishing a conceptual repertoire to

confront Western civilizational hierarchies, racialized historicisms, and colonial rule. And if the acuity of Ghose's anticolonial evolutionism is especially noteworthy, it was not unique to him as anticolonialists the world over tapped into an ascendant Darwinism to stake their claims.

Within India, nationalists across the ideological spectrum advanced radically original evolutionisms countering colonial logics. Shyamji Krishnavarma, for instance, drew on Herbert Spencer's evolutionary sociology to criticize empire as a relapse—in Spencer's term, a "rebarbarization"—into "militant" social order (Kapila 2007; Marwah 2017). He also refuted the canard of Indians' political immaturity by showing that Darwinism undercut the "law of progress" on which it rested (Indian Sociologist 1907, 38). Bipin Chandra Pal echoed him, declaring it "impossible for any man to lay down beforehand... the particular form of Swaraj that will be established in this country," since Darwinism proved the impossibility of predicting what "the particular form of a thing... passing through a process of evolution will be" (Pal 2020, 200). Like Ghose, Pal also saw liberalism's thoroughgoing individualism as exacerbating "conflicts of economic competition," "enfeebl[ing] the spirit of co-operation in the community, and set[ting] up the doctrine of the survival of the fittest, in its crudest and least scientific sense, as the predominating principle of the evolution of human society" (1916, 26–7). Vivekananda drew on Darwinism to proclaim that the "highest evolution of man is effected through sacrifice alone" (Vivekananda 2006, 3026), advancing a mutualist evolutionism antithetical to colonial rule.

Such anticolonial evolutionisms extended well beyond India. Marwa Elshakry traces the integration of socialism and evolutionism in Middle Eastern anti-imperialisms, where "[m]utual moral development (as much as national collectivism) became the new mainstream reading of social evolution" (Elshakry 2013, 223). The "power of evolutionary socialism," she reflects, "lay precisely in its ability to bring together an emphasis on national development and a growing international critique of Western capitalist and imperial expansion outside Europe" (225). Middle Eastern intellectuals claimed that "the true moral lesson of evolution was the rise of the mutualism of scientific socialism" (226), treating "social evolution as founded on 'the exchange of aid' (*tabadul al-musa'ida*), not competition" (231). In a very different idiom, Vietnamese anticolonialists such as Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chu Trinh drew on social Darwinism to articulate their anxieties about the Vietnamese people's survival, situate them in relation to global struggles between stronger and weaker nations, and chart a way toward self-rule (Pham n.d.; Marr 1981). Justo Sierra's *The Political Evolution of the Mexican People* adopted evolutionism to work through the complications of Mexico's colonial history, national identity, and political modernity. In *La Libertad*, he developed a "program for national reconstruction through scientific politics buttressed by social assumptions drawn from Spencer and Darwin" (Hale 1989).

In each of these instances, Darwinism offered an opening—a theoretical grammar enabling the deconstruction and reformulation of notions of progress, social evolution, and political capacity underpinning colonial rule. It was, in effect, a wedge for anticolonialists to pry apart the colonial order's imbrication of racial supremacy and political power, and the foundation on which to redraw its undergirding temporal map. Evolutionism subtended both a critique of, and a political future built from, the terms of a modernity that colonial subjects had no choice but to adopt (Chakrabarty 2000; Kaviraj 2005). It was pressed into navigating the quandaries of this colonial modernity, caught between Eurocentrism, Europhilia, and Europhobia. Anupama Rao suggests that “the enduring legacy of insurgent thought lies in the example of its relentless experimentation in remaking words, concepts, and new worlds” (Rao 2014, 8). In India and beyond it, anticolonial evolutionism exemplifies just this novel and worldmaking mode of political thought.

As Getachew and Mantena (2021) recognize, this constructive, future-oriented, and globally-minded politics was central to anticolonial theory, though it remains overshadowed by the critiques of Eurocentrism that have tended to attract scholarly attention. The preponderance of historiographical literatures either reproducing or lamenting anticolonialism's collapse into nationalist teleology has, also, often eclipsed its internationalist and “improvisational constitution of imaginary futures” (Goswami 2012, 1462–3). And yet, beyond the immediacy of its struggle for national independence, anticolonialism was “a way of imagining a properly postcolonial world beyond one's own national borders” (Elam 2017), a politics whose wider political and conceptual reach is easily overlooked. V. P. Varma treats Ghose as issuing “a concrete social philosophy for the reconstruction of the social and political life of a dependent nation” (Varma 1955, 235–6). This is true, but incomplete. Its evolutionist bent also situated Indian progress in relation to a global transformation beyond the Western political order. It was, in Elam's terms, “an attempt to articulate a world that has yet to exist” (Elam 2021, 4). Though in a different context, Arendt (1990) captures the perplexities of charting a new political order out of the wreckage of another's demise, from the “hiatus between end and beginning, between a no-longer and a not-yet” (205). Ghose envisioned a way out of that hiatus through the reconstitution of an endogenous Indian sociality grounded in the “inner domain of national life” (Chatterjee 1993, 26), outside the colonial state's remit.

This India extended beyond the West without for that rejecting it outright. For all his asperity toward liberal modernity, Ghose neither indulged the fantasy of revivifying a precolonial Indian civilization nor repudiated the West out of hand. Ghose was, Sugata Bose observes, “no traditionalist” (2010, 124). He was censorious toward Indians grasping at the shell of past practices rather than modernizing Indian civilization in alignment with its ethical foundations. He readily

criticized the imperfections of Indian culture and acknowledged the value of Western scientific and political advances, which he encouraged Indians to adopt. But he remained wary of the ethos under which they passed. To accept “that terrible, monstrous and compelling thing, that giant Asuric creation, European industrialism” would be to take on “its social discords and moral plagues and cruel problems” (Ghose 1997e, 46). It was a fine line to toe, but Ghose insisted that Indians “observe with an unbiased mind the successes of the West, the gifts it brought to humanity,” and “consider how we can assimilate it to our own spirits and ideals” (Ghose 1997d, 88).<sup>23</sup>

Evolutionism was key to this assimilative vision of India's political future. India should neither blindly incorporate Western norms and institutions nor cling to its own historically freighted social and political practices. An evolving India had to recover its “essential idea-forces” (Ghose 1997d, 86) and move beyond its historical limitations without relinquishing its ethical warp. Indian evolution, then, looked neither backward to a nostalgia-tinged past nor forward to a future plotted out by the West. It would be, rather, a “reshaping of the forms of our spirit” (Ghose 1997d, 89). To adopt Western ideals would leave Indians “clumsy followers always stumbling in the wake of European evolution and always fifty years behind it.” By integrating its better elements, however, India would become “no mere Asiatic modification of Western modernism, but some great, new and original thing of the first importance to the future of human civilization” (Ghose 1997b, 19, 18). Ghose's evolutionist anticolonialism thus evades the Promethean vision of decolonization as radically autonomous self-constitution, free of the pollutions of Western thought, and capitulating to the West's political vision. Evolutionism demonstrated that “[a]ny attempt to remain exactly what we were before the European invasion or to ignore in future the claims of a modern environment and necessity is foredoomed to an obvious failure,” since “the living organism which rejects all such interchange, would speedily languish and die of lethargy and inanition” (Ghose 1997e, 51, 48). Ghose saw that abandoning the West wholesale was as futile as accepting it root and branch would be damaging. The only option, he concluded, was to evolve.

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<sup>23</sup> On Ghose's “borrowing” from the West while retaining India's “fixed and permanent spirit,” see Klausen (2020, 661), Varma (1976, 207–9), and Verma (1990, 65).



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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflict of interest in this research.

## ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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