Beyond *Mountains*: Toward Liberatory Development

Brij Mohan

Areas of social development are manifestations of Social Reality (SR) which defines possibilities and barriers to achieving a better life. An argument is made to unravel the "dialectic" of a broken society in the post-imperialist world. At the heart of Liberatory Development, one must recognize the lethality of coloniality and its vestiges that incubate a culture of dehumanizing subjugation, urbicidal inequality, and global injustice. A Kaleidoscopic view of human misery and our failure to address fundamental issues signifies the call for needed praxis.

A few years ago, my daughter gifted me a book, *Mountains Beyond Mountains* authored by the Pulitzer Prize winner Tracy Kidder (2003). I found Kidder's choice of the Haitian proverb—"Beyond mountains, there are mountains"— especially intriguing and thoughtful. I would never have understood the essence of this metaphorical allusion had I not moved toward the rolling hills of California, a 500-mile vertical enclave between the Pacific and an endless mountain chain fertile with hope and dangers. Also, I began to reflect on two separate entities— Paul Farmer and Haiti—as microcosms of both vision and vicissitudes. Dr. Farmer knew how to fix the world. Haiti continues to be an abyss of darkness which propels the need for Social Development. A critique of Social Reality is to reflect on issues, aspects, and challenges that bedevil humanity.

In *The Social Construction of Reality,* Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann posit "reality" as a social contract at the heart of the sociology of knowledge (1966).

Brij Mohan, Dean Emeritus, LSU School of Social Work, Los Angeles, CA, USA. He can be contacted at brijmohan128@gmail.com and SWMOHA@lsu.edu.

Social Reality as I see transcends the realm of sociology of knowledge. It is embedded in human nature itself: How *Homo Sapiens* evolve as a "social animal," spells out both the construction and deconstruction of *reality* that lays down the foundation of society. Slavery and apartheid are human-caused realities that human society must address considering its spatio-temporal cultural platitudes. It is hard to postulate, let alone propound, the legitimacy of revolutionary consciousness which helps construct Liberatory Development (LD).

"Reality" and "knowledge" as discussed by Berger and Luckmann (1966) seem to bridge the *Objective* and *Subjective* aspects of social construction. "Society does indeed possess objective facticity. And society is indeed built up by activity that expresses subjective meaning" (1966: 18). This articulation leaves systemic exploration of the root causes of *evil* which manufactures instruments and institutions of dehumanization. I have learned—and academically benefited—from the *knowledge* that Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud offer to comprehend the human-social "reality." My work underscores human-social development which validates the authenticity of liberatory development.

In his book *The Paradox of Social Order*, Swiss sociologist Pierre Moessinger concludes: "[I]t is necessary to start from nonrational behavior to explain not only order, but also disorder, instability, and social disequilibrium" (1996: 133). Human irrationality is a complex nexus of *Id*, *Ego*, and *Superego* which Freudian psychodynamics has explained. This "nonrational" behavior, however, masquerades as the womb of all pathologies of the microsystems. Examination of macrosystems and their institutional structures is crucial to understanding human development.

Like caste in India, race—and racism—in the United States has a complex historical backdrop. The origins of caste stem from Vedic culture which mythologized institutional hierarchy based on Varna (karma and dharma). This is an indefatigable system that endures sustaining inequality and injustice. Racism in the US has no such mythology: It is pure economics that invented slavery and subsequent racism. Historian Winthrop Jordan studied *American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* in his book *White Over Black* (1968). Based on his research and findings he offered *The Whiteman's Burden* thesis (1974). This notion eponymously has alluded to the so-called *Third World.* Howsoever offensive vocabularies of "human" and "social" development may be, the Atlantic European countries in general, the Englishmen especially, have developed the notions of "black" and "blackness" as well as "white" and "whiteness". On the one hand, they defined the absolute "otherness" of the inferior, dark, and non-Christian people—likened to Apes, Moors, heathen, savage, beastlike men of Africa—and on the contrary, the pure, civilized, and....of "whiteness". Winthrop Jordan's words are notable:

> "The condition of savagery—the failure to be civilized—set Negroes apart from the Englishmen in an ill-defined but crucial fashion. If Negroes were likened to beasts, there was a beast in Africa which was likened to men. It was a strange and eventually tragic happenstance of nature that Africa was

the habitat of the animal which in appearance most resembles man.... Far more common and persistent was the notion that there sometimes occurred a 'beastly copulation or conjuncture' between apes and Negroes, and especially that apes were inclined wantonly to attack Negro women" (1974: 13–17).

Dominance and subjugation, like "white" and "black," have hierarchized humans in stratified institutional structures which were dysfunctional in origin. This trajectory continues in varied manifestations coloring experiences, beliefs, and perceptions that conjure up social reality.

Not until Donald Trump became a veritable destroyer of the world's most endurable democracy, did I not fully comprehend the malignancy of power. Societies and cultures have been governed by kings, tyrants, Tsars, and colonial-imperial rulers with impunity since times immemorial. Modern advancements, as I assayed earlier, have not liberated humanity from its own inner trappings. The three theoretical strings that I employ here unravel the deconstruction of a broken society which helps comprehend the paradoxical evolution of the Enlightenment.

A broken society is marked by anomic institutional meltdown which constitutes its functional structure. Unacceptable norms, illegal practices, and antisocial behaviors become the "new normal' of success and prosperity. This implies the rise of outlaws in positions of power. Magnitudes of social misery, poverty, crime, and inequality also rise. This perverse co-relation irreparably unhinges society. This kaleidoscope of unwanted manufactured misery is a perfect call for *liberating development*.

In his *Brief History of Humankind,* the learned scholar, Harari, explores three main bases of revolutions: Cognition, Agriculture, and Science:

"Three important revolutions shaped the course of history: the Cognitive Revolution kick-started history about 700,000 years ago. The Agriculture Revolution sped it up about 12,000 years ago. The Scientific Revolution, which got underway only 500 years ago, may well end history and start something completely different... There were humans long before there was history" (2015: 3).

We confront a massive "cognitive dissonance" confounded by the culture of falsification, lies, and misinformation that debunk truth, justice, and civility. This manufactured *Social Reality* is subverting democracy, good governance, and the foundations of civil society.

There is no panacea to deconstruct a "broken society." It calls for a movement to reinvent democracy as the vehicle of social transformation which involves *rediscovery of society* (Mohan, 2022).

In *The Age of Extremes,* Eric Hobsbawm (1994) copiously details the horrors of the First and the Second World Wars naming the Twentieth Century as "The Age

of Total War" (1955: 21–53). In his book, *The Age of Anger*, Pankaj Mishra narrates "a history of the present" (2017). Mishra writes:

> "Endemic war and persecution have rendered an unprecedented sixty million people homeless. Endless misery provokes many desperate Latin Americans, Asians, and Africans to make the risky journey to what they see as the center of successful modernity. ... Forcibly confined to zones of abandonment, containment, surveillance, and incarceration, this class of excluded performs yeoman service as the feared 'others' in unequal in unequal societies. They are both scapegoats for the race-and-class-based anxieties of many insecure individuals and the *raison d'être* of a growing industry of violence" (2017: 328–329).

"Industry of violence" is a fearsome epitaph in a culture in disarray. The rise of a burgeoning crop of terrorized helplessness has obviously diminished the role of the *State* as the equalizer of order and stability. Social Contract II may not restore the loss of innocence and civility. The plague of violence and terror, by and large, engulfs expanded area of darkness—like Pakistan—which appears more like a failed State. A *New York Times* report presents Karachi, a chaotic metropolis of 20 million people, how street thugs and gangs of robbers have paralyzed a civil society: Possession of a phone or motorcycle, the two main targets, may cause loss of life at the hands of robbers at large. People's hopelessness and despair, in the absence of no governmental protection or security, is breeding raw vigilantism manifested by frequent lynchings.[1] Dissolution of society elsewhere in Gaza, Sudan, and Ukraine is a veritable challenge to the State's legitimacy.

I hypothesize the consilience of three strands of ideological heresies that validate the need for *deconstruction.* As I envision in this context, any renewal or reform may not yield desired results unless the basic "structure of evil" (Becker, 1968) is transformed. The proposed manifesto for this change is predicated on the recognition of the three-faceted reality that thwarts progress.

(a) Poverty of Culture
(b) Demise of *The Enlightenment*
(c) Post Colonial-Imperial Complex

Material Indices—Wall Street prowess, a flood of college graduates, neon lights of opulence, and the glow of royal palaces—may not be a true indicator of people's general well-being. The rise of New Inequality validates my thesis on *Poverty of Culture*. Fourteen years ago, when I refuted the prevailing orthodoxy and its invincible power by offering a theory of *Poverty of Culture*, an overriding proposition

---

[1]*See* Zia ur-Rehaman, 'Muggings, Murders and Mob Violence: Crime Increasing in Karachi,' *The New York Times International,* June 14, 2024, A 6.

emphasized the prominence of culture that breeds a counterculture of dysfunctionality (Mohan, 2011). *Social Reality* as experienced amply demonstrates how war, violence, and terror continue to prevail to maintain peace and order. *The Enlightenment* that invented *science* and empowered us to control nature and its wrath has failed in its mission. Global glaciers are melting, climatic catastrophes are commonplace, and plagues and pandemics threaten human extinction. The ignorance and arrogance of "enlightened" people in power too often cannot see the mountains beyond mountains. This lethal paradox of success is mystifying.

Homo Sapiens, Elizabeth Kolbert copiously details, may have innate "Faustian Genes" (2025: 251–258). Her revelations of "unnatural history" of *Sixth Extinction* have disclosed the findings:

> "If extinction is morbid topic, mass extinction is, well, massively so. (p.3). ... The Neanderthals lived in Europe more than a hundred thousand years... . [they] would be there still... . With the capacity to represent the world in signs and symbols comes the capacity to change it, which, as it happens, is also the capacity to destroy it. A tiny set of genetic variations divides us from the Neanderthals, but that has made all the difference" (2015: 258).

> Amnesty International reports: "Israel has unleashed unlawful lethal force against Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, carrying out unlawful killings and displaying a chilling disregard for Palestinian lives."[2]

The world we live in is anthropologically not much different from what it was before. Modern monstrosities are surrealistically swift, depersonalized, and banal. The horrors of Hiroshima may have faded away in this generation, but day-to-day violence and terror are in everyone's consciousness. In the so-called developing world, public and police corruption makes a joke of a law-and-order society. While Western consumerism and new lifestyles may not be congruent in the wake of indigenization, people in developing countries usually seek the comforts they despise. This duality of existence is psychopathological at its best.

The "third world" psyche remains deeply embedded in the post-independence nostalgia, the enduring legacy of the colonial-imperial era. The romance of becoming "civilized" and "Western" characterizes a complex: *Everything—from Railways to Universities—that the British established—enhanced our progress.* Despite monumental strides that India has achieved through indigenous resources, people still sing the hymns of the Raj. Much of the developing world is mired in a sense of false consciousness that seems to paralyze the *Will* of the people. The imported quasi-identity problem is a source of inferiority—a deterrent to achieving

---

[2]https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/5/impunity-amnesty-international-details-israeli-violence-in-west-bank?traffic_source=rss (February 8, 2024). Cf. InterAction SmartBrief (February 8, 2024).

self-confidence. The banality of marketplace values and the existential security needs of nations—further complicate this identity crisis. Xenophobia, bigotry, and institutional exclusions impede integration and assimilation which promote ethnocentric pride and illusion. Often, this crisis—*India Currents* reminds—assumes a colonial character as demonstrated by a Tamil refugee crisis:

> '*Tamil refugees displaced and trapped in Diego Garcia underscore that a rules-based international order applies to every country, including Western nations.* ... Diego Garcia, one of the Chagos Islands which are still controlled by Britain, has become a "hell" for Sri Lankan Tamil refugees who are trapped on this remote Indian Ocean island. The Chagos Islands is Britain's last African colony, a reminder that colonialism has not been entirely defeated."[3]

The world map is spilled over by ominous dots of darkness. Kate Wagner writes about "The urbicide of Gaza" signifying how colonization continues in death and destruction as a planned evisceration of a particular group of population:

> "[U]rbicide is a tactic used to make sure there is nothing to return to, nothing can be cherished and latched on to. Its goal is a total colonization of the landscape that erases whatever used to be." (Kate Wagner, 2024: 10)

Ethnic proclivity obscures rationality and humanity. Watson compares two different reactions after accidental fire destroyed Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris and calculated destruction of the 1500-year-old Great Omari Mosque in Gaza. Bulldozing of poor colonies of marginalized people is a widespread practice in India.

When I talk about *Social Contract II,* I hesitate to endorse the concept of "anti-social contract" as postulated by Kly (1989). I do, however, agree with him about the *reality* of the 18th century "Social Contact" which validated the Western constitutionality of exploitation and savagery as witnessed in the United States and European countries and their colonies. A serious dialogue about US minority rights and human conditions, Kly argues, is long overdue:

> "[A] dialogue that has historically been effectively blocked by the blind adherence to U.S. clichés and myths about its political system, about its all-seeing and all-knowing perfect democratic Constitution, about its founding on the dream of riches, freedom and equality for all men, about its adherence to the will of God, about U.S. justice being color blind, about there being no ethnic minorities but instead one big melting pot in which everyone is really just an American like everyone else ... ; that the U.S. is better than and morally superior to all other countries, etc. (1989: 4)

---

[3]India Currents, February 7, 2024 (https://indiacurrents.com/a-tamil-refugee-crisis-is-a-reminder-that-colonialism-has-not-been-entire).

Democracy and its freedom are necessarily congruent. Even asylum seekers in Time Square, New York, brutally attack the police. The fabled *American Dream* is a driver of the unimaginable specter of migrant people from all over the world. Ubiquitous homelessness in America has made new inequality an invisible scourge. Global *resentment* is a sign of unstoppable decay. Much of human misery in enslaved countries are embedded in their colonial subjugation and pillage.[4]

The history of civilization is awash with Faustian bargains. The fate of "Faustian Gene" is still unclear. A possible theory of *liberatory development* may ward off the *return of Leviathan* (Mohan, 2024). Rudyard Kipling invented the pejorative myth of the "white man's burden". The beastly, "venerous" nature of Black people shaped Whiteman's perception of blackness which, as a Victorian notion, represented the neo-imperialists' bogus inclination to assume the responsibility of "civilizing" the Ape like Negros of Africa and barbarians of other colonies subjugated by colonial powers.

William Easterly has masterfully shown "Why the West's efforts to aid the rest have done so much ill and so little good" (2006). Modernity's advancements have changed the colors of oppression without transforming *social reality.* The throwaway kids in the "golden ghettoes" of Seattle[5] and the criminally wanton commodification of poor young girls in the nasty streets of Munawwarpur,[6] Bihar, confirm the harrowing reality that a predatory culture breeds, incubates, and sustains. Liberatory praxis is the logical response to annihilate this heinous way of life. It is a nadir of distasteful reality when animal predators call their victims "human garbage."

References

Becker, Ernest. (1968). *The structure of evil: An essay on the unification of the science of man.* New York: Free Press.

Berger, Peter, & Luckmann, Thomas. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge.* New York: Anchor Books.

Easterly, William. (2006). *The white man's burden: Why the WEST'S efforts to save the rest have done so much ill and so little good.* New York: Penguin Press.

---

[4] Amitav Ghosh, a noted author, records "the secret history of how some of America's oldest families made their fortunes in the opium trade" (2024: 24). Cf. Shashi Tharoor's brilliant work to understand the extent India's exploitation by the British.

[5] Cf. "*The Killing* is an American crime drama television series that premiered on April 3, 2011, on AMC, based on the Danish television series *Forbrydelsen* (literal translation *The Crime* but also widely known as *The Killing* internationally). The American version was developed by Veena Sud and produced by Fox Television Studios and Fuse Entertainment. Set in Seattle, Washington, the series follows the various murder investigations by homicide detectives Sarah Linden (Mireille Enos) and Stephen Holder (Joel Kinnaman)." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ (February 13, 2024).

[6] Cf. "Bhakshak" (Predator), a *film* inspired by the Muzaffarpur Women's Shelter Case (Red Chilies Production, 2024; directed by Pulkit).

Ghosh, Amitav. (2024). Merchants of addiction. *The Nation, 318*(1), 26-–38/59. (Excerpted from his forthcoming book *Smoke and Ashes* (New York: Farrah, Strauss, and Giroux.)

Harari, Yuval Noah. (2015). *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind.* New York: Harper.

Hobsbawm, Erick. (1994). *The age of extremes: The short twentieth century, 1914-1991.* London: Abacus.

Jordan, Winthrop D. (1968). *White over black.* Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Jordan, Winthrop D. (1974). *The Whiteman's burden: Historical origins of racism in the United States.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Kidder, Tracy. (2003). *Mountains beyond mountains: The quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a man who would cure the world.* New York: Random House.

Kly, Y. N. (1989). *The anti-social contract.* Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press.

Kolbert, Elizabeth. (2015). *The sixth extinction: An unnatural history.* New York: Picador.

Mishra, Pankaj. (2017). *The age of anger: A history of the present.* New York: Picador.

Moessinger, Pierre. (1996). *The paradox of social order.* Stephen Scher and Francesca Worrall (Trans.). New York: Aldine De Gruyter.

Mohan, Brij. (2011). *Development, poverty of culture, and social policy.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mohan, Brij. (2022). *Rediscovery of society.* New York: Nova Scientific Publications.

Mohan, Brij. (2024). *Return of the Leviathan.* New York: Amazon eBook Publishers.

Wagner, Kate. (2024). The urbicide of Gaza. *The Nation, 318*(1) 10–11.