

Interview with Leela Gandhi

Leela Gandhi is a post-colonial theorist based at Brown University and author of the book, *Affective Communities: Anti-Colonial Thought, Fin-de-siècle Radicalism and the Politics of Friendship* as well as other works including *Common Cause*. As we were working through this book, we were struck by how Leela navigated some of the key questions we kept getting stuck on, in particular, her ideas of 'unfinishedness', of the mobility of friendship as a figure for democracy and of friendship as perpetual affective motion. Her unwillingness to default to easy constraints and definitions opened a ton of theoretical territory for us.

AJ/MH: In a lot of our conversations with people, and in a lot of our thinking, we have found a definitional problem: what is friendship? There is a long historical twitch that threads through many different intellectual traditions trying to define friendship: what exactly is it, how can it be defined, how can it be categorized?

LG: I've been keenly interested in tracing and giving voice exactly to how (within a transcultural genealogy of the concept) friendship is the positive possibility rather than problem, as you put it, of something that cannot either be categorized or defined: yet which is unmistakable when you're in its vicinity. I've come to this understanding by degrees.

In my book, *Affective Communities*, on anticolonial thought and the politics of friendship, I started out with an interest in a non-antagonistic historiography for thinking about colonial encounters. My paramet-

ters were circumscribed by the geography and chronology of the South Asian-British/European colonial encounter at the last *fin de siècle*: a liminal moment before the emergence of the irremediably jingoistic, totalizing and instrumentalizing new imperialisms that started to emerge in the twentieth century; and which were countered by necessary but hardened forms of xenophobic cultural nationalisms. We are still heir to the formations engendered by these antagonisms on both sides: in the spheres of economy, ecology, aesthetics, knowledge, and so on.

Now, by antagonism (or antagonistic historiography) I don't just mean a situation where there are battlelines, factions, hostilities (sometimes we must take sides and identify with precise causes for precise ends). It is more about how in reified *hostilities of two*, let's call it (dialectical thinking included, as we know from Mikhail Bakhtin, the great thinker of dialogic forms) there is a desperate quest for *settlement* of this or that ethical and political truth or vantage. Anticolonial nationalisms are examples of this sort of settlement.

In early Indic ecumenical thought (Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Jain, and Indigenous belief systems, combined) there is a deep suspicion – a phobia even – of thinking by two. The medieval mystic-poet, Kabir, tells us that occurrences of two (in the matter of gender, religion, species, for example) bring on an anguish of settlement and clarification at any cost. He recommends the position of the *middle*, which is not a zone of neutrality but rather a locus where clarities, final shapes, and immutable forms (definitions and categories, no less) are *called into question*. There is no aversion here to forms as such – life after all is no more no less than forms of life (work, vacation, love, protest, communication). The problem occurs when our imagination and actions become inflexibly transitive, namely, attached to this or that object and objective: to that one and nothing else, selective, partial viewpoints, values, domains, and norms. Kabir says, *the one who stands in the middle crosses the ocean in an instant. The world of two extremes is drowning. Two is torment. The fire bird makes its nest in the sky. It remains in between, far from earth and sky* – and here's the striking envoi – *its confidence is not based on anything*.

When I was engaged in the inquiry just described, friendship seemed to me a powerful figure for something like Kabir's non-antag-

onism of the middle: a willful blurring of settlement projects on either side of any divide; and a suspension, however transitory, of formation, clarification, actualization. I was very interested, in historical terms, of westerners who became powerful critics of the imperial project, thereby giving up their own entitlements] to the considerable spoils and advantages of empire. Many of the radicals who created a *zone of uncertainty* in the heart of the imperial project (that's what I'm interested in, more than any story of crossing over to the other side) were actively engaged in friendships with colonized counterparts and interested in the ethical possibilities of friendship as above. So, for example, the homosexual reformer Edward Carpenter (read and admired by M.K. Gandhi), who believed quite whimsically and beautifully that gender normativity was at the crux of the imperial attitude, posited friendship as an intense yet non-binary anti-colonial relation: a relation in which there is no teleology toward reproductive economy, no future posterity, no social role allocation and so on. Yet, it is specific and singular, in the sense of friendship with x or y or between x and y, and so on.

AJ/MH: Since you've written *Affective Communities*, has your thinking changed about friendship and community? And you talk a little bit about these notions of border crossing solidarities that aren't fixed in advance. We're wondering how you're thinking about these things today?

LG: In my more recent work, a book called, *Common Cause*, I've explored the relational dimension of friendship as a project of *imperfection*: it can be explained in terms of the grammatical distinction between *imperfective* and *perfective* verbs. Imperfective verbs are temporally capacious. They include past, present, future tenses and describe incomplete and iterative activities. By contrast, perfective verbs (forms of settlement) are restricted to past and future activities, and express actions (projects, aspirations) that are fully and finally completed (or projected to be so). In these terms, friendship is available for uptake as a commitment to *making unfinished*.

In social terms, we know it is good to have friends (for mental health, psychological well-being), but it is ultimately something that is its own end, without final form outside itself. It does not give us any known social rewards (except in the cynical sense of friends in high places). It is dissociable from the property relations at the heart of the biological family. It is not something you can inherit – or if someone else's friendships (e.g., of your parents or siblings) fall to you, they must be cultivated anew to have any chance of surviving and flourishing in your own life. When we enter friendship, then, we could say we enter – perhaps, unknowingly, and unconsciously at first – into a category of love and affection, affect, *tout court* – that arises from the dissolution of instrumental social contract relations. Such friendship becomes ethical when we are mindful and appreciative of its disorientation.

I should add, there is an aspect and promise of friendship in all relations, even the most contractual and abstract (as with the state, for example, in our capacity as citizens). When we mine friendship qualities in any relationship, from the most ossified to the most incidental, we are engaged in intransitivity, imperfection: the work of making unfinished. In this guise, I've argued, friendship is a figure for *democracy*. This idea has been pursued by various contemporary theorists of friendship. It was certainly germane to the subcultures explored in *Affective Communities*. Edward Carpenter's most substantive thinking on friendship, for instance, occurs in a book called *Towards Democracy*.

In the western radical intellectual and critical-theoretical tradition, imperfectionist democracy (friendship-based democracy, to gather all the threads) is often rendered as a mode of *utopian inclusivity*, premised on keeping the gates open: to this or that institution, this or that privilege and obligation, indeed, to the future itself (which may include the end of utopian inclusivity). Derrida's model of hospitality is apposite here. I've been very moved by thinking along these lines. Of late, though, I'm interested in the emergence with respect to the points above, of another ideal of *renunciation* in political life, which summons but does not belong unqualified to some untrammelled non-western tradition. It arrives at the way we think now about revolution and radical democracy out of the entanglement (in the very early twentieth century) of the European hu-

man sciences and orientalism: it entails a complex appropriation (and resistances, responses to such appropriations) of non-western, specifically Indic, and Asian antiquities – in the service of global modernism. The conceit of renunciation, at this juncture, is not other-worldly and life-denying. Rather it indicates a kind of restlessness – perpetual motion – the better to make revolutionary or reformist politics perennial rather than permanent.

Is friendship perpetual affective motion? Perhaps the portion of friendship in all our relations is just so: mobile, kinetic, nomadic, constantly starting over again?

AJ/MH: We were wondering, do you think that friendship even has a political horizon worth pursuing? What about friendship with the more-than-human? What would you say about that?

LG: Yes, it is essential to imagine relations of friendship with the non-human: animals, certainly, but why not stones, and the air we breathe? Forests? Oceans? Gods and monsters? Why not dreams, in so far as dreams belong to another species of consciousness? In *Affective Communities* I was very absorbed with the notion of *xenophilia*: the consideration of friendship as a disposition towards strangers and whatever is or seems foreign and other to the subject of perception. Over time I've become less persuaded by the self/other model which has dominated ethical thinking in the wake of European phenomenology and post-structuralism. This model is far too wedded to the profound influence and adaptation in western philosophy of the notion of *entelechy*: the importance of each of us having distinct, discrete, and separate irreversible configuration; in the breach of which we allegedly interfere with each other's unique vital growth and potential.

There are models for relationality from other traditions, western and non-western, modern and ancient alike, that tell us something different: make yourself homologous (establish identity and likeness) with the dog, the bird, the ocean, the air. The recommendation bypasses anxieties about erasing the alterity of putative others. The focus is on relaxing our own *ipseity*, i.e., what we think of as our minimal irreducible selfhood,

and to do so in the spirit of recreation. We have very appealing cues for this sort of exercise from some of the great culture crossing dramaturges and performance theorists of our time. The polish director Jerzy Grotowski, whose work profoundly draws on Asian performance traditions, for instance, suggests that in any act (or acting) of relation or dialogue we begin by making a gift of *our* own formation, *our* distinct identity-attachment, if only for the duration of a performance: *I am giving myself to you for safekeeping until the show ends*. To the animal interlocutor summoned by your question, we might say in this vein, *I am giving you custody of my putative species distinction for the duration of the performance of our friendship*.

I am very intrigued by what the figure of *performance* (and its duration) liberates; for friendship or of any vested action and thought. It brings aspects of play, provisionality, experimentation, carnival into the grave matters of *the* political and *the* ethical, and a certain liberation from the matter of core existential and ontological orientation. I mean who lives by means of core existential orientation all the time? We are always trying things out, rehearsing, remaking, revising our projects.

AJ/MH: We're wondering when we think about the climate emergency, what are the political possibilities of friendship – are there some new ways we might think about these entanglements?

LG: Ah that's a big question. I don't have easy answers; except to say that the desire to redress the crisis and think sincerely about coexistence certainly comes from a place of friendship.