

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

ANANTA KUMAR GIRI, *Conversations and Transformations: Toward a New Ethics of Self and Society*. (Introduction by FRED DALLMAYR). Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002, xvi + 344 p., Index, \$80.00 (U.S.) hardcover, \$26.95 (U.S.) paper,.

Ananta Kumar Giri's newest work, *Conversations and Transformations*, is impressive and represents what this reviewer believes will – and should – be the future of sociological theorising: the conversation between North and South, East and West, all in an attempt to reframe both the content and intent of social theory.

This work takes on a most daunting task, an examination of the relationship between social criticism and the world it criticises. Giri sees the endeavour of sociological theory as one that necessarily must engage the world it attempts to understand and should be "animated by a passion of both critique and construction" (2). One must understand that endeavour as having abandoned its constructive engagement with the world. Giri's suggestion is a reasonable one, namely "that social criticism now needs to have an agenda of spiritual criticism that encompasses rational criticism. ... an agenda of what can be called *practical spirituality*" (5). Giri's development of this practical spirituality takes the reader through what genuinely amounts to a conversation among contemporary Western social theorists. Ricoeur, Habermas, Foucault, Derrida, Appiah, Dallmayr, and Bellah are some of the many that make an appearance, as well as their counterparts in Indian social thought, ranging from Gandhi and Das (potentially two of the better-known theorists to Westerners) to Kothari, Nandy, Uberoi, Chandhoke, and Pande (who rightfully deserve to be better known in North America).

The bulk of the book is structured in the form of a conversation, with issues surrounding the Western approach to theorising which early on sets the terms of the discussion; the opening chapters focus on Indian responses to Western questions and problems, while later chapters are geared toward an exposition of the ways that Indian social theory serves as an amelioration to Western counterparts. Giri takes us on a long walk through this work, leading us on what amounts to a phenomenological re-examination of scholarly inquiry. Topics for this work begin with the intent of social criticism, move on to developing an "ethics of argumentation," explore the social-structural factors within the university that influence social critics, and ultimately ending up with a discussion of an "ethics of servanthood."

That ethics – quite possibly the most intriguing, yet underdeveloped idea here – is one that works to bridge the gap between traditional "ethics of the self" and post-modern "ethics of the other." By enabling us to recognize our interconnectedness and interdependence, this ethics of servanthood calls us to see ourselves as "a humble, voluntary, and noncompromising maker of one's destiny" (337), and asks us to serve as an interlocutor committed to the continual improvement of our selves, others, and the world around us. In sum, the discussion leads us to the point where we are compelled to consider the ends to which we will use our scholarly tools, academic prestige, and socially beneficial insights.

In large part, this book represents a monumental achievement – the direct conversational confrontation of Indian and Western social-theoretical traditions, albeit in a manner that is motivated by the love of both, in an attempt to go beyond the mere call-and-response of what is generally known as post-colonial theory. Giri's work extends the post-colonial motif of non-western sensibilities meeting western theoretical traditions by working to make non-western theoretical traditions speak to peculiarly Western problems. To that end, *Conversations and Transformations* represents a significant contribution to our understanding of Indian sociological theory and modes of theorising, as well as an awareness of the importance of these kinds of cross-cultural, cross-national conversations. This work will most certainly provide readers new to trends in Indian social thought with a comprehensive overview of its contribution.

Problematically, though, the book is somewhat weakened by the very thing that makes it such an interesting text – its apparent syncretism and lack of coherence. The organization of this text is a bit too loose to support the scope of the project; and on occasion, especially in earlier chapters, it almost seems as if a matching exam became the organizational motif. Part of this is most likely due to the unification of a set of diverse and occasionally disparate essays, which when paired with the vastness of the project contribute to an apparent lack of coherence. The book can benefit from a complete glossary of the many Hindu concepts enabling the uninitiated reader to translate these concepts into the interstices of Western thought.

These criticisms aside, Giri has thankfully produced what I hope will be just the opening round of conversations–and transformations–of Western social theorising. The problems we face are global and require our committed reflection and engagement in order to develop solutions; and if we continue to follow Giri's model of conversing across the boundaries, the chances of developing those solutions are greatly improved.

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