

A Tea Party for Hitler: Raja Mahendra Pratap's Confessed Opportunism

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Note: The following is the text of a 15 minute presentation delivered on January 8, 2011 at the American Historical Association 125th Annual Meeting to supplement papers listed for the panel below. I was a replacement for one of the original presenters who was unable to attend.

Illiberal Modernism 1900–50: A Global Moment?

Chair: Sven Beckert, Harvard University

The Post-World War I Reconstruction Debate in 1920s Colonial Korea

Ellie Y. Choi, Smith College

Latin America's Place in the Global Crisis of Liberalism, 1918–39

Micheal T. Goebel, European University Institute Florence

The Illiberal Modernism of National Socialism in Global Perspective

Stefan J. Link, Harvard University

Comment: Charles S. Maier, Harvard University

The years between 1900 and the end of World War II witnessed the formulation and implementation of radical political departures from what was seen as a corrupt liberal modernity. Politics were laid out “in a new key” (Carl Schorske). Opposing the liberal tenets of the marketplace and bourgeois self-fashioning, illiberal modernizers used mass mobilization, economic planning and state dirigisme in an effort supplant a crisis-ridden and seemingly obsolete capitalist order. From the Young Turk revolution in 1908, the Bolshevik takeover in Russia (1917), through the ascendancy of Fascism in Italy (1923), the elimination of the party system in Japan (1932) and the beginning of National Socialism in Germany (1933), to the reformulation of the role of the state in the New Deal USA (1933), and the advent of Peronism in Argentina (1943) - an incomplete list - political projects of the first half of the 20th century years styled themselves in explicit opposition to the crisis-ridden liberal order. In each case, the imperative was to challenge capitalist liberalism, sometimes identified as 'Western,' through an agenda of modernization by alternative but illiberal means. In key areas such as labor sciences, eugenics, economic planning, the creation of infrastructure, industrial rationalization, and consumerism, illiberal modernizers competed with the 'West' and with each other in an effort to create more equitable, if less liberal, societies and economies. Often, this new political key included a turn to the irrational, secular-religious, and utopian.

This panel aims to establish a synoptic view of these and similar projects, with the immediate aim of developing a framework for theorizing the global turn to illiberal modernization. The panel assembles papers from historians of the 20th-century who investigate the concrete ways in which illiberal modernization articulated itself as a political project around the globe. We want to address these paramount questions:

- To what extent can we identify common reasons for the trend to illiberal modernization in the first half of the 20th century? Are these reasons structural in nature (industrialization, global economic volatility, decolonization) or ideological (anti-liberalism, collectivism)?
- What is the relationship between the different projects of illiberal modernization of that era? To what extent did they communicate with, borrow from, or oppose each other? Was there an awareness of working on a common project?
- What is the relationship between illiberal modernism and decolonization? To what extent did anti-imperial thinkers and decision-makers adopt illiberal modernist agenda?
- Taking into consideration the theme of the AHA 2011: did illiberal modernization re-arrange the relationship of societies to the sacred? What role did the 're-enchantment of the world' play in the politics of illiberal modernization?
- Finally, how could a synoptic understanding of the successes and failures of illiberal modernization efforts help us contextualize the dominant triumphalist narrative of Western modernization?

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There was a time when desperate exiles, roaming revolutionaries, and the leaders of the collaborationist regimes that flourished in the mid-20th century were dealt with by historians either with a round dismissal or a romantic narrative in the tragic mode. Now we plunder their usually repetitive political tracts in search of original ideas, subtle acts of resistance, or the seeds of future intellectual trends. Even if their politics or their extremism is condemned, their creativity is celebrated, and the hodgepodge of their ideologies given careful analysis. This has not been without results, with perhaps the greatest contributions coming in the form of a challenge to broader theories of fascism or replacing the simplifications of totalitarianism which is the aim of today's panel. As in all matters political, however, it is vitally important that we not lose sight of the fundamental opportunism at work, whether we speak of Chinese collaborators with Japan's occupation military, Habsburg royals embracing fascism or East European nationalist movements, or anti-colonial Koreans who embraced the Soviet Union without the most basic understanding of Marxism-Leninism.

This point might well be considered obvious, but it is harder to sustain in argument. It is easy to point to shifting alliances and ideological reversals, but rarely does an opportunist confess to his opportunism unless he is pleading for his life in court or otherwise reflecting upon his actions long after the fact. An unusual exception to this reticence is the Indian independence activist Raja Mahendra Pratap (1886-1979). [SLIDE 2] Pratap was an anti-colonial revolutionary whose ideas were a contradictory and often

bizarre patchwork of both liberal and illiberal principles married to an unbounded confidence in the power of political federalism and religious synthesis.¹ Like some of his fellow Indian revolutionaries, during his career Pratap variously praised and sought the military support of Germany (both during World War I and World War II), the Soviet Union, and finally Japan for a campaign to liberate India and other colonies from British rule. Unlike his like-minded compatriots, however, he was surprisingly forthcoming about his opportunism, and ultimately unwilling to abandon some of his utopian schemes that were inimical to the goals of both Nazi Germany and the Japanese empire. He was thus a double failure: he paid the cost of embracing the Axis powers and openly called upon his supporters to back them in war despite expressed reservations, but was completely abandoned by his Japanese benefactors and fellow Indian exiles who choose instead the leadership of Rash Behari Bose and eventually Subhas Chandra Bose.

Mahendra Pratap, adopted and married into the aristocracy in Uttar Pradesh, had a long and complex career we cannot address in detail here. His moment of glory, and perhaps the only fact known to those who still recognize his name today, came during World War I when, in 1915 he made his way to Afghanistan on a German sponsored mission and declared a provisional government of India, with the stated goal of joining German and Afghan forces in an invasion to liberate India.² [SLIDE 3] This exile regime amounted to even less than Subhas Chandra Bose's similar efforts several decades later,

¹ I have presented elsewhere on Pratap's World Federalism. A text of the presentation, entitled "Pan-Asianism or World Federalism? Raja Mahendra Pratap and the Japanese Empire, 1925-1945" is available here: <http://muninn.net/papers/2010/pratap/pratap-presentation.pdf>

² The mission is traced in detail in Ashok Kumar Patnaik "Raja Mahendra Pratap and The Provisional Government of India at Kabul" in Vir Singh, ed. *The Life and Times of Raja Mahendra Pratap* (Delhi: D. K. Publishers, 2005), 13-26.

but did receive attention within India and made Pratap an actively hunted enemy of the British colonial administration. The adventure, and Pratap's princely origins, gave him access to the halls of power all over the world, which he circled on his travels in most years up to the 1930s, and during this period he met or corresponded with political activists from Marcus Garvey to Sun Yat-sen, Wilhelm II, Lenin, Trotsky, and had a number of exchanges with Gandhi. Gandhi would reluctantly publish an essay by Pratap on the need for violence in overthrowing the British in his weekly *Young India*, and later play a role in securing his release from an American stockade in February, 1946.³ After Germany's defeat in World War I Pratap sought Soviet support for Indian liberation, making several trips to Moscow, working closely with many founding Indian communist leaders both in Russia and in Berlin, and presenting at the Frankfurt conference of the League Against Imperialism in 1929. Even as he tried to gain support for a military liberation of India through his communist allies, Pratap began to circulate and translate a far more peace loving work entitled *The Religion of Love* outlining a pantheistic theory of religious unity.

In 1929 Pratap also began a publication calling for a unified world, decolonization, religious harmony, and local autonomy entitled *World Federation*, [SLIDE 4] that continued almost monthly under similar titles until 1942. While the reason is unclear the Soviet Union began to bar Pratap's applications for entry in the early 1930s, and the utopian prince shifted his focus to gaining support from Japan for an "Aryan" army that

³ For details of his travels see reprint of his memoir, Raja Mahendra Pratap *Reminiscences of a Revolutionary* (Books India International, 1999). The essay mentioned was published in *Young India* July 4, 1929. For Gandhi's involvement, see his letters in January 1946, in Mahatma Gandhi *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Delhi : Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, 1958), vol. 89. Pratap's FBI file, listed as a "treason" case, has been declassified and is available in the US National Archives, RG 65 Class: 061 File: 05783 Section: 001 NARA Box: 009 Location: 230 86/03/03.

would carve out a new region for his global federation stretching from “Iran to Assam,” to be liberated once and for all from British and French control. Pratap settled in Japan and became a leader, together with Rash Behari Bose, N. S. Gill and Anand Mohan Sahay of the Indian independence activists there who received the generous patronage of Japanese militarists and pan-Asianist ideologues such as Ōkawa Shūmei and the secretary-general of the Greater Asia Society, Nakatani Takeyo.⁴

It was in his mouthpiece *World Federation*, apparently mostly authored by himself, that we can trace the evolution of Pratap’s ideas. In most issues, Pratap did his utmost to see the good in everyone and everything. A typical list of compliments can be found in 1935, “We admire that sense of liberty of the American people which made them throw their over lords. We are surely thankful to Soviet Russia for creating new hopes among the peasants and workers of the world. No one can possibly denounce Japan for her stand against racial discrimination.”⁵ In 1936 he welcomes the popular front in France, wishes the best for everyone in Spain, and is, “also happy Herr Hitler could break the chains of absolute monarchy.”⁶ Usually, however Pratap is a friend of royalty, proposing in 1937 an association of ex-rulers, led by Edward VIII as its president, King Amanullah Khan as its chief secretary, and with Trotsky as advisor on social questions with the aim of preventing the open or secret takeover of any other state.⁷ Pratap declares in 1937, “we should never condemn a nation, a race, a religion or a party as a whole. Let them fight as cocks, if they

⁴ See the excellent article by Nakajima Takeshi “R. M. Purataapu to kindai nihon no ajiashugi – hanshokuminchi nettowaaku sekairenpō nihon teikokushugi” [R. M. Pratap and Pan-Asianism in modern Japan – the anti-colonial network, world federalism, and Japanese imperialism] *Kokusai Seiji* [International politics] 146 (2006)

⁵ *World Federation* 7.3 (May-June 1935): 2.

⁶ *World Federation* 8.4 (July-August, 1936): 3.

⁷ *World Federation* 9.2 (February, 1937): 2.

must fight, but we can not denounce as a whole either the communist party or the Fascists.”⁸ In the same issue, however, he argues that if war is to come, “friends of humanity, Labour in general, peace workers and the oppressed nations” should stand behind Japan, Italy, and Germany, who are the weaker parties in a battle against the empires.⁹ Pratap continued to abound with admiration for the Soviet Union and Stalin in particular. Filled with new hope at news of the Nazi-Soviet pact, he declared that, “Hitler, Stalin, [and] Mussolini will go down in history as forming the trinity which brought about political and social salvation of the peoples of Asia and North Africa!”¹⁰ On April 20th, 1940 Pratap arranged a three hour tea party at his World Federation center to celebrate Hitler’s birthday. At the party, attended by Germans and Japanese, Pratap chided some his guests who had expressed anti-Soviet sentiments.¹¹ [SLIDE 5] A German gentleman at the party, speaking in German, seconded Pratap’s words of defense, which after all, was consistent with German foreign policy at the time, and the party concluded with a “Banzai” for Hitler.

Though his publications were filled with internationalist aspirations, the exiled Pratap was still deeply driven by his desire to liberate India. [SLIDE 6] In June, 1940 Pratap established an Executive Board of India with himself as president, Rash Behari Bose as vice-president and Anand Mohan Sahay as chief secretary.¹² Pratap made a propaganda tour of China in 1941 on behalf of the Japanese government, and in November launched

⁸ *World Federation* 9.1 (January 1937): 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰ *World Federation* 11.9 (September 1939): 1.

¹¹ *World Federation* 12.5-6 (May-June, 1940): 5. If Hitler’s birthday got a tea party, the Japanese emperor got a family sukiyaki party. Pratap apologized for not being in Tokyo to organize anything for Mussolini’s birthday.

¹² Pratap, *ibid.*, 12.

again a movement to create an “Aryan Army” for the liberation of India at a banquet with a congratulatory speech given by Ōkawa Shūmei himself. A public rally for the Aryan army followed in Tokyo’s Hibiya park.¹³ However, at the March 1942 conference that is remembered as the formal beginning of imperial Japan’s support for Indian liberation, Pratap was absent. There a new Indian Independence League under Rash Behari Bose was formed that would later come under the leadership of Subhas Chandra Bose.¹⁴ [SLIDE 7] Exactly what transpired in those short months that robbed Pratap of his Japanese support is unclear.¹⁵ In his own memoirs he claims that he could not agree to Japanese terms, though given the strange mix of ideas to be found in his *World Federation*, it may be that the Japanese government merely found him to be an unsuitable leader. Another Indian independence activist who knew him at the time claims that Pratap’s continued support for a multi-national “Aryan army” was seen as a distraction and that the Japanese government even considered deporting him.¹⁶ Only two weeks before the conference Pratap was ordered to cease all publications and sit quietly through the war in his World Federation Centre.¹⁷

Throughout this period, Pratap was surprisingly open about the reasons behind his support for Japan’s empire and his faith in Hitler, a fact that may have contributed to a distrust of him by the Japanese. It was not that he was drawn to the ideology of the fascists. Indeed, Pratap embraced a radical theory of ‘scientific breeding’ that supported

¹³ *World Federation* 13 (December, 1941), 3.

¹⁴ Joyce C. Lebra *The Indian National Army and Japan* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 47.

¹⁵ A letter written from Pratap to a Japanese supporter, a Mr. Moriyama or Morimoto on February 9, 1942 suggests that he is still optimistic about the project to lead an Aryan army to “free India.” Iida City Archives Matsui collection.

¹⁶ On A. M. Nairu’s thoughts of Pratap, see Nakajima Takeshi, *ibid.*, 66.“

¹⁷ Pratap, *ibid.*, 78.

miscegenation among races and castes in a move towards global racial unity. It was mass-scale miscegenation, not the preservation of racial purity that would, “evolve to perfection the basic qualities of humanity: beauty, strength, intellect and morality.”¹⁸ And yet, as he puts it in 1939 with a breathtaking naivety found all too commonly in his work, “I consider it my duty to side with the Fascists! To be very plain I must admit that by my nature and education I am more a democrat than a Fascist. I am a rebel against race theories as practiced in Indian caste system, or white race ideology prevailing in U.S.A. or in South Africa. I believe in human family. But I think that the Fascist powers indirectly help to establish racial equality. The fact that Nordic Germany, Latin Italy and the Mongolian Japan are allied together is sufficient to prove that here not any one race is trying to stamp its superiority over others. These three powers are desperately trying to break the chains which hold the world in bondage.”¹⁹ Despite the racist policies of National Socialism, and Pratap’s own “different way of thinking,” he declared that he would, “still seek the support of leader Hitler.”²⁰ And in response to criticism he received for hosting a Hitler tea party, he protested to his readers that, “Now, again I seek German cooperation to further my ideal. I have great hopes on Leader Hitler. I do not try to convert him as I tried to convert Comrade Lenin when I presented him my book of the Religion of Love, which he classified as Tolstoyism. I only try to make Germany and freedom loving India comrades in arms during this struggle.”²¹ When Pratap briefly loses hope in his cause in late 1940, he confesses that he was horrified by the Manchurian incident, the growing

¹⁸ *World Federation* 13.1 (December 1941), 3.

¹⁹ *World Federation* 11.5 (May, 1939), 1.

²⁰ *World Federation* 11.5 (May, 1939), 1.

²¹ *World Federation* 12.5-6 (May-June, 1940), 5.

scale of Sino-Japanese conflict, but feared that if he openly opposed Japan, it would only, “make racial discrimination worse.”²²

[SLIDE 8] Like so many other figures who were able to briefly prosper under the sponsorship of wartime powers such as Germany and Japan, Pratap received, for a time, the support he sought on the basis of long past glory. In this case, however, the historian is spared the need to speculate on his motives. Despite his dislike of Nazi racial policies, or of Japanese imperialist ambitions in China, Pratap openly professed the need for an alliance of convenience. When war came, he was thus perfectly happy to mix his own elaborate and often contradictory vision for global peace, humaneness, and unity in all forms with a call for the foes of the fascist powers to be, “smitten to death.”²³

²² *World Federation* 12.11 (December, 1940), 1.

²³ *World Federation* 12.11 (December, 1940), 1.