



Consider This: "In the United States, we can talk about ISIS, but we can't talk about Palestine"

EXCLUSIVE: MEETING ED SNOWDEN - III

## Things That Can And Cannot Be Said (Contd)

The Arundhati Roy — John Cusack conversation continues.

JOHN CUSACK

Over the next week or so, the logistics had to be planned. It was short notice and a bit of a mad scramble. Roy made her own arrangements, but I had in mind Dan Ellsberg's history as a nuclear weapons planner for America's retaliation to a possible Soviet first strike. In other words, he had only spent a few years of his life planning the physical obliteration of the Soviet Union. Nuclear secrets, domino theory—he was *in those rooms*. Then there were the 85-plus arrests for civil disobedience, one of those in Russia on the Sirius, the Greenpeace boat protesting Soviet nuclear testing. But Dan's visa came. And mine came, too.

Meanwhile in India, some of Roy's worst fears had materialised. Eight months before, Narendra Modi had become the new Prime Minister of India. (In May, I received this text: *Election results are out. The fascists in a landslide. The phantoms are real. What you see is what you get.*)

I met up with Roy in London. She had been there for two weeks giving talks in Cambridge and the South Bank on her new work on Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar. At Heathrow, she told me quite casually that some folks in India were burning effigies of her. "I seem to be goading the Gandhians to violence," she laughed, "but I was disappointed with the quality of the effigy."

We flew together to Stockholm to meet up with Dan, who was attending the ceremony of the Right Livelihood Awards—some call it the Alternative Nobel—because Ed was one of the laureates. We would fly to Moscow together from there.

The Stockholm streets were so clean you could eat off the ground.

On our first night, there was a dinner at a nautical museum with the complete salvaged wreckage of a huge 16th-century wooden warship as the centrepiece of the modernist structure. The *Wasa*, considered the *Titanic* of Swedish disasters, was built on the orders of yet another power-hungry king who wanted control of seas and the future. It was so overloaded with weapons and too-heavy it capsized and sank before it even left the harbour.

It was a classic human rights evening, to be sure: gourmet food and good intentions, a choir singing beautiful Noels. I enjoyed watching the almost pathologically anti-gala Roy trying to mask her blind panic. Not her venue, as they say. Dan was busy and in great demand, meeting people, doing interviews. We caught occasional glimpses of him—and managed to say a quick hello.

The awards ceremony took place in the Swedish parliament. Roy and I were graciously invited. We were late. It occurred to us that if neither of us would be comfortable sitting in the parliament halls of our own countries, what the fuck would we be doing sitting in the Swedish parliament? So we skulked around the corridors like petty criminals until we found a cramped balcony from which we could watch the ceremony. Our empty seats reflected back at us. The speeches were long. We slipped away and walked through the great chambers and found an empty banquet hall with a laid out feast. There was a metaphor there somewhere. I switched on my recorder again.

**JC:** What is the meaning of charity as a political tool?

**AR:** It's an old joke, right? If you want to control somebody, support them. Or marry them.

(Laughter)

**JC:** Sugar daddy politics....

**AR:** Embrace the resistance, seize it, fund it.

**JC:** Domesticate it....

**AR:** Make it depend on you. Turn it into an art project or a product of some kind. The minute what you think of as radical becomes an institutionalised, funded operation, you're in some trouble. And it's cleverly done. It's not all bad...some are doing genuinely good work.

**JC:** Like the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union)....

**AR:** They have money from the Ford Foundation, right? But they do excellent work. You can't fault people for the work they're doing, taken individually.

**JC:** People want to do something good, something useful....

**AR:** Yes. And it is these good intentions that are dragooned and put to work. It's a complicated thing. Think of a bead necklace. The beads on their own may be lovely, but when they're threaded together, they're not really free to skitter around as they please. When you look around and see how many NGOs are on, say, the Gates, Rockefeller or Ford Foundation's handout list, there has to be something wrong, right? They turn potential radicals into receivers of their largesse—and then, very subtly, without

appearing to—they circumscribe the boundaries of radical politics. And you're sacked if you disobey...sacked, unfunded, whatever. And then there's always the game of pitting the "funded" against the "unfunded", in which the funder takes centre stage. So, I mean, I'm not against people being funded—because we're running out of options—but we have to understand—are you walking the dog or is the dog walking you? Or who's the dog and who is you?

**JC:** I'm definitely the dog...and I've definitely been walked.

**AR:** Everywhere—not just in America...repress, beat up, shoot, jail those you can, and throw money at those whom you can't—and gradually sandpaper the edge off them. They're in the business of creating what we in India call Paaltu Sher, which means Tamed Tigers. Like a pretend resistance...so you can let off steam without damaging anything.

**JC:** The first time you spoke at the World Social Forum...when was that?

**AR:** In 2002, I think, Porto Alegre...just before the US invasion of Iraq.

**JC:** In Mumbai. And then you went the next year and it was....

**AR:** Totally NGO-ised. So many major activists had turned into travel agents, just having to organise tickets and money, flying people up and down. The forum suddenly declared, "Only non-violence, no armed struggles...." They had turned Gandhian.

**JC:** So anyone involved in armed resistance....

**AR:** All out, all out. Many of the radical struggles were out. And I thought, fuck this. My question is, if, let's say, there are people who live in villages deep in the forest, four days walk from anywhere, and a thousand soldiers arrive and burn their villages and kill and rape people to scare them off their land because mining companies want it—what brand of non-violence would the stalwarts of the establishment recommend? Non-violence is radical political theatre.

**JC:** Effective only when there's an audience....

**AR:** *Exactly.* And who can pull in an audience? You need some capital, some stars, right? **Gandhi was a superstar. The people in the forest don't have that capital, that drawing power. So they have no audience.** Non-violence should be a tactic—not an ideology preached from the sidelines to victims of *massive* violence.... With me, it's been an evolution of seeing through these things.

**JC:** You begin to smell the digestive enzymes....

**AR:** (Laughter) But you know, the revolution cannot be funded. It's not the imagination of trusts and foundations that's going to bring real change.

**JC:** But what's the bigger game that we can name?

**AR:** The bigger game is keeping the world safe for the Free Market. Structural Adjustment, Privatisation, Free Market fundamentalism—all masquerading as Democracy and the Rule of Law. Many corporate foundation-funded NGOs—not all, but many—become the missionaries of the "new economy". They tinker with your imagination, with language. The idea of "human rights", for example—sometimes it bothers me. Not in itself, but because the concept of human rights has replaced the much grander idea of justice. Human rights are fundamental rights, they are the minimum, the very least we demand. Too often, they become the goal itself. What should be the *minimum* becomes the *maximum*—all we are supposed to expect—but human rights aren't enough. The goal is, and must always be, justice.

**JC:** The term *human rights* is, or can be, a kind of pacifier—filling the space in the political imagination that justice deserves?

**AR:** Look at the Israel-Palestine conflict, for example. If you look at a map from 1947 to now, you'll see that Israel has gobbled up almost all of Palestinian land with its illegal settlements. To talk about justice in that battle, you have to talk about those settlements. But, if you just talk about human rights, then you can say, "Oh, Hamas violates human rights", "Israel violates human rights". Ergo, both are bad.

**JC:** You can turn it into an equivalence....

**AR:** ...though it isn't one. But this discourse of human rights, it's a very good format for TV—the great atrocity analysis and condemnation industry (*laughs*). Who comes out smelling sweet in the atrocity analysis? States have invested themselves with the right to legitimise violence—so who gets criminalised and delegitimised? Only—or well that's excessive—*usually*, the resistance.

**JC:** So the term *human rights* can take the oxygen out of justice?

**AR:** Human rights takes *history* out of justice.

**JC:** Justice always has context....

**AR:** I sound as though I'm trashing human rights...I'm not. All I'm saying is that the idea of justice—even just dreaming of justice—is revolutionary. The language of human rights tends to accept a status quo that is intrinsically unjust—and then tries to make it more accountable. But then, of course, *Catch-22* is that violating human rights is *integral* to the project of neoliberalism and global hegemony.

**JC:** ...as there's no other way of implementing those policies except violently.

**AR:** No way at all—but talk loud enough about human rights and it gives the impression of democracy at work, justice at work. There was a time when the United States waged war to topple democracies, because back then democracy was a threat to the Free Market. Countries were nationalising their resources, protecting their markets.... So then, real democracies were being toppled. They were toppled in Iran, they were toppled all across Latin America, Chile....

**JC:** The list is too long....

**AR:** Now we're in a situation where democracy has been taken into the workshop and fixed, remodeled to be market-friendly. So now the United States is fighting wars to instal democracies. First it was topple them, now it's instal them, right? And this whole rise of corporate-funded NGOs in the modern world, this notion of CSR, corporate social responsibility—it's all part of a New Managed Democracy. In that sense, it's all part of the same machine.

**JC:** Tentacles of the same squid.

**AR:** They moved in to the spaces that were left when "structural adjustment" forced states to pull back on public spending—on health, education, infrastructure, water supply—turning what ought to be people's rights, to education, to healthcare and so on, into charitable activity available to a few. Peace, Inc. is sometimes as worrying as War, Inc. It's a way of managing public anger. We're all being managed, and we don't even know it.... The IMF and the World Bank, the most opaque and secretive entities, put millions into NGOs who fight against "corruption" and for "transparency". They want the Rule of Law—as long as they make the laws. They want transparency in order to standardise a situation, so that global capital can flow without any impediment. Cage the People, Free the Money. The only thing that is allowed to move freely—unimpeded—around the world today is money...capital.

**JC:** It's all for efficiency, right? Stable markets, stable world...there's a great violence in the idea of a uniform "investment climate".

**AR:** In India, that's a phrase we use interchangeably with "massacre". Stable markets, *unstable* world. Efficiency. Everybody hears about it. It's enough to make you want to be pro-inefficiency and pro-corruption. (*Laughing*) But seriously, if you look at the history of the Ford Foundation and Rockefeller, in Latin America, in Indonesia, where almost a million people, mainly Communists, were killed by General Suharto, who was backed by the CIA, in South Africa, in the US Civil Rights Movement—or even now, it's very disturbing. They have always worked closely with the US State Department.

**JC:** And yet now Ford funds *The Act of Killing*—the film about those same massacres. They profile the butchers...but not their masters. They won't follow the money.

**AR:** They have so much money, they can fund everything, very bad things as well as very good things—documentary films, nuclear weapons planners, gender rights, feminist conferences, literature and film festivals, university chairs...anything, as long as it doesn't upset the "market" and the economic status quo. One of Ford's "good works" was to fund the CFR, the Council of Foreign Relations, which worked closely with the CIA. All the World Bank presidents since 1946 are from the CFR. Ford-funded RAND, the Research and Development Corporation, which works closely with the US defence forces.

**JC:** That was where Dan worked. That's where he laid his hands on the Pentagon papers.

**AR:** The Pentagon papers.... I couldn't believe what I was reading...that stuff about bombing dams, planning famines.... I wrote an introduction to an edition of Noam Chomsky's *For Reasons of State* in which he analyses the Pentagon papers. There was a chapter in the book called 'The Backroom Boys'—maybe that wasn't the Pentagon papers part, I don't remember...but there was a letter or a note of some kind, maybe from soldiers in the field, about how great it was that white phosphorous had been mixed in with napalm.... "It sticks to the goods like shit to a blanket, and burns them to the bone." They were happy because white phosphorous kept burning even when the Vietnamese who had been firebombed tried to jump into water to stop their flesh from burning off....

**JC:** You remember that by rote?

**AR:** I can't forget it. It burned me to the bone.... I grew up in Kerala, remember. Communist country....

**JC:** You were talking about how the Ford Foundation funded RAND and the CFR.

**AR:** (*Laughs*) Yes...it's a bedroom comedy...actually a bedroom tragedy...is that a genre? Ford funded CFR and RAND. Robert McNamara moved from heading Ford Motors to the Pentagon. So, as you can see, we're encircled.

**JC:** ...and not just by the past.

**AR:** No—by the future, too. The future is Google, isn't it? In Julian Assange's book—brilliant book—*When Google Met WikiLeaks*, he suggests that there isn't much daylight between Google and the NSA. The three people who went along with Eric Schmidt—CEO of Google—to interview Julian were Jared Cohen, director of Google Ideas—ex-State Department and senior something or other on the CFR, adviser to Condoleezza Rice and Hillary Clinton. The two others were Lisa Shields and Scott Malcolmson, also former State Department and CFR. It's serious shit. But when we talk about NGOs, there's something we must be careful about....

**JC:** What's that?

**AR:** When the attack on NGOs comes from the opposite end, from the far right, then those of us who've been criticising NGOs from a completely different perspective will look terrible...to liberals we'll be the bad guys....

**JC:** Once again pitting the "funded" against the "unfunded".

**AR:** For example, in India the new government—the members of the radical Hindu Right who want India to be a 'Hindu Nation'—they're bigots. Butchers. Massacres are their unofficial election campaigns—orchestrated to polarise communities and bring in the vote. It was so in Gujarat in 2002, and this year, in the run-up to the general elections, in a place called Muzaffarnagar, after which tens of thousands of Muslims had to flee from their villaoes and live in camps. Some of those who are accused of all that murdering



are now cabinet ministers. Their support for straightforward, chest-thumping butchery makes you long for even the hypocrisy of the human rights discourse. But now if the "human rights" NGOs make a noise, or even whisper too loudly...this government will shut them down. And it can, very easily. All it has to do is to go after the funders...and the funders, whoever they are, especially those who are interested in India's huge "market" will either cave in or scuttle over to the other side. Those NGOs will blow over because they're a chimera, they don't have deep roots in society among the people, really, so they'll just disappear. Even the pretend resistance that has sucked the marrow out of genuine resistance will be gone.

**JC:** Is Modi going to succeed long-term?

**AR:** It's hard to say. There's no real opposition, you know? He has an absolute majority and a government that he completely controls, and he himself—and I think this is true of most people with murky pasts—doesn't trust any of his own people, so he's become this person who has to interface directly with people. The government is secondary. Public institutions are being peopled by his acolytes, school and university syllabi are being revamped, history is being rewritten in absurd ways. It's very dangerous, all of it. And a large section of young people, students, the IT crowd, the educated middle class and, of course, Big Business, are with him—the Hindu right-wing is with him. He's lowering the bar of public discourse—saying things like, "Oh, Hindus discovered plastic surgery in the Vedas because how else would we have had an elephant-headed god."



**Taliban Rule** The US was liberating Aghan women from the Taliban? Can you bomb feminism into a country?

**JC:** (*Laughing*) He said that?

**AR:** Yes! It's dangerous. On the other hand, it's so corny that I don't know how long it can last. But for now people are wearing Modi masks and waving back at him.... He was democratically elected. There's no getting away from that. That's why when people say "the people" or "the public" as though it's the final repository of all morality, I sometimes flinch.

**JC:** As they say, "Kitsch is the Mask of Death"....

**AR:** Sounds about right.... But then, while there's no real opposition to him in Parliament, India's a very interesting place....there's no formal opposition, but there's genuine on-the-ground opposition. If you travel around—there are all kinds of people, brilliant people...journalists, activists, filmmakers, whether you go to Kashmir, the Indian part, or to an Adivasi village about to be submerged by a dam reservoir—the level of understanding of everything we've talked about—surveillance, globalisation, NGO-isation—is so high, you know? The wisdom of the resistance movements, which are ragged and tattered and pushed to the wall, is incredible. So...I look to them and keep the faith. (*Laughs*)

**JC:** So this isn't new to you...the debate about mass surveillance?

**AR:** Of course, the details are new to me, the technical stuff and the scale of it all—but for many of us in India who don't consider ourselves 'innocent', surveillance is something we have all always been aware of. Most of those who have been summarily executed by the army or the police—we call them 'encounters'—have been tracked down using their cellphones. In Kashmir, for years they have monitored every phone call, every e-mail, every Facebook account—that plus beating doors down, shooting into crowds, mass arrests, torture that puts Abu Ghraib in the shade. It's the same in Central India.

**JC:** In the forest where you went *Walking with the Comrades*?

**AR:** Yes. Where the poorest people in the world have stopped some of the richest mining corporations in their tracks. The great irony is that people who live in remote areas, who are illiterate and don't own TVs, are in some ways more free because they are beyond the reach of indoctrination by the modern mass media. There's a virtual civil war going on there and few know about it. Anyway, before I went into the forest, I was told by the Superintendent of Police, "Whoever crosses that river, can be shot on sight by my boys." The police call the area across the river 'Pakistan'. Anyway, then the cop says to me, "You know, Arundhati, I've told my seniors that however many police we put into this area, into the forest, we can't win this battle with force—the only way we can win it is to put a TV in every tribal person's house because these tribals don't understand greed." His point was that watching TV would teach them greed.

**JC:** Greed.... That's what this whole circus is about...huh?

**AR:** Yes.

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That evening, after the awards ceremony, we met up with Dan. The next morning, we caught the flight to Moscow. Travelling with us was Ole von Uexküll from the Right Livelihood Foundation, a lovely man with clear eyes and impeccable manners. Ole was going to give Ed the prize since he couldn't travel to Stockholm to receive it. Ole would be our companion for the next few days. On the flight, Dan, who is 83 years old, was furiously reading Roy's new essay, *The Doctor and the Saint*, scribbling notes on a yellow legal pad. My mind began to race, wondering what Roy was making of this mini flying-circus hurtling toward Moscow. What I would learn from what she calls—with sinister silkiness and mischief twinkling in her dark brown eyes—"the gook perspective"? She can disarm you at any time with her friendly hustler's grin but her eyes see

things and love things so fiercely, it's frightening at times.

Going through immigration of the country he once planned to annihilate, Dan flashed the peace sign. Soon we were driving through the freezing streets of Moscow. The Ritz Carlton is perched literally a few hundred yards from the Kremlin. The Red Square always seemed so much bigger on TV, during all those horror show military parades. It's so much smaller to the naked eye. We checked in and were whisked up to a VIP reception lounge with great views of the Kremlin and an Audi car display on its roof deck: *The Ritz Terrace Brought to you by Audi*. Another reminder hanging over Lenin's tomb that capitalism had supposedly ended history.

At noon the next day, I got the call I was waiting for in my room.

The meeting between these two living symbols of American conscience was historic. It needed to happen. Seeing Ed and Dan together, trading stories, exchanging notes, was both heartwarming and deeply inspiring, and the conversation with Roy and the two former President's Men was extraordinary. It had depth, insight, wit, generosity and a lightness of touch not possible in a formal, structured interview. Aware that we were being watched and monitored by forces greater than ourselves, we talked. Maybe one day the NSA will give us the minutes of our meeting. What was remarkable was how much agreement there was in the room. It wasn't just what was said, but the way it was said, not just the text, but the subtext, the warmth, and laughter that was so exhilarating. But that's another story. After two unforgettable days and 20 hours spent together, we said goodbye to Ed, wondering if we'd ever see him again.

During the last few hours with Ed, Dan had recounted in horrifying and empirical detail the history of the nuclear arms race—a history of lies—an apocalyptic tome of charnel monologues and murder rites.

At one point, Dan referred to Robert McNamara, his boss in the Pentagon, as a "moderate". Roy's eyes snapped wide open at the assertion. Dan then explained how, compared to the other lunatics in the Pentagon like Edwin Teller and Curtis LeMay, he was one. McNamara's moderate and reasonable argument, Dan said, was that the United States needed only 400 warheads instead of 1,000. Because after 400, there were "diminishing returns on genocide". It begins to flatten out. "You kill most people with 400, so if you have 800, you don't kill that many more—400 warheads would kill 1.2 billion people out of the then total population of 3.7 billion. So why have 1,000?"

Roy listened to all this without saying very much. In *The End of Imagination*, the essay she wrote after India's 1998 nuclear tests, she had gotten herself into serious trouble when she declared, "If it is anti-national to protest against nuclear weapons, then I secede. I declare myself a mobile republic." Dan, who is writing a book on the nuclear arms race, told me it was one of the finest things he's ever read on the subject. "Wouldn't you say," Roy said for the record, or to anybody willing to listen, "that nuclear weapons are the inevitable, toxic corollary of the idea of the Great Nation?"

Just after Ed left, Dan collapsed on to my bed—exhausted and blissful—with his arms stretched wide, but then a deep storm erupted. He became distressed and emotional. He quoted from *The Man Without a Country* by Edward Everett Hale, a short story about an American naval officer who was tried and court martialed. Hale's sentence was that he should forever go from ship to ship, and he should never hear the name "America" again. In the story, a character quotes the poem *Patriotism* by Sir Walter Scott:

*Breathes there the man with soul so dead,*

*Who never to himself hath said,*

*"This is my own, my native land!"*

Dan began to weep. Through his tears, he said, "I'm still that much of a patriot in some sense...not for the State but..." He talked about his son and how he came of age during the Vietnam war, and how he, Dan, used to think his son was born for jail. "That the best thing that the best people in our country like Ed can do is to go to prison.... Or be an exile in Russia? This is what it's come to in my country...it's horrible, you know...." Roy's eyes were sympathetic but distinctly unsettled.



Democracy Masquerade Uniform investment climate. A phrase interchangeable with Massacre.

It was our last night in Moscow. We went for a walk in the Red Square. The Kremlin was lit with fairy lights. Dan went off to buy himself a Cossack fur hat. We stepped carefully on to the treacherous sheet of ice that covered the Red Square, trying to guess where Putin's window might be and whether he was still at work. Roy kept talking as if she was still in room 1001.

**AR:** The diminishing returns of genocide...what's the subject heading? Math or economics? Zoology it should be. Mao said he was prepared to have millions of Chinese people perish in a nuclear war as long as China survived.... I'm beginning to find it more and more sick that only humans make it into our calculations.... Annihilate life on earth, but save the nation...what's the subject heading? Stupidity or Insanity?

**JC:** Social Service.... What do you think those maniacs look like in binary code?

**AR:** Good-looking. When you think of how much violence, how much blood...how much has been destroyed to create the great nations, America, Australia, Britain, Germany, France, Belgium—even India, Pakistan.

**JC:** The Soviet Union....

**AR:** Yes. Having destroyed so much to make them, we must have nuclear weapons to protect them—and climate change to hold up their way of life...a two-pronged annihilation project.

**JC:** We must all bow down to the flags.

**AR:** And—I might as well say it now that I'm in the Red Square—to capitalism. Every time I say the word *capitalism*, everyone just assumes....

**JC:** You must be a Marxist.

**AR:** I have plenty of Marxism in me, I do...but Russia and China had their bloody revolutions and even while they were Communist, they had the same idea about generating wealth—tear it out of the bowels of the earth. And now they have come out with the same idea in the end...you know, capitalism. But capitalism will fail, too. We need a new imagination. Until then, we're all just out here....

**JC:** Wandering....

**AR:** Thousands of years of ideological, philosophical and practical decisions were made. They altered the surface of the earth, the coordinates of our souls. For every one of those decisions, maybe there's another decision that could have been made, should have been made.

**JC:** *Can* be made....

**AR:** Of course. So I don't have the Big Idea. I don't have the arrogance to even want to have the Big Idea. But I believe **the physics of resisting power is as old as the physics of accumulating power. That's what keeps the balance in the universe...the refusal to obey.** I mean what's a country? It's just an administrative unit, a glorified municipality. Why do we imbue it with esoteric meaning and protect it with nuclear bombs? I can't bow down to a municipality....it's just not intelligent. The bastards will do what they have to do, and we'll do what we have to do. Even if they annihilate us, we'll go down on the other side.

I looked at Roy, and wondered what trouble awaited her back in India...an old Yugoslavian proverb came to mind—"Tell the truth and run". But some creatures will not run...even when maybe they should. They know that to show weakness only emboldens the bastards....

Suddenly she turned to me and thanked me formally for organising the meeting with Edward Snowden. "He presents himself as this cool systems man, but it's only passion that could make him do what he did. He's not just a systems man. That's what I needed to know."

We kept an eye on Dan in the distance bargaining with the hat-seller. I was worried he might slip on the ice.

"So, for the record, Ms Roy," I asked, "as someone with 'plenty of Marxism' in her, how does it feel to be walking on ice in the Red Square?" She nodded sagely, appearing to give my talk-show question serious consideration. "I think it should be privatised...handed over to a foundation that works tirelessly for the empowerment of women prisoners, abolishing of child labour and the improvement of relations between mass media and mining companies. Maybe to Bill and Melinda Gates."

She grinned with sadness in it.... I could almost hear the chimes of harmonic thinking, as clear as the church bells that suddenly filled the frozen air and the wind that chopped through the bleak winter night.

"Listen man," she said. "God's back in the Red Square."

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