Walking with the Comrades
Arundhati Roy
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Walking Backwards into the Future
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The central tension at work in Arundhati Roy’s recent collection of published articles, Walking with the Comrades, becomes apparent early in the first entry, “Mr. Chidambaram’s War,” through her half-hearted defense of “Comrade Ganapathy,” a leader of the Indian Maoist movement. As Roy explains here, Ganapathy is one among a legion of Maoists whose mission is to protect India’s marginalized peoples from the threats posed to them by capital development — most notably, the displacement and exploitation of the tribal poor by the privatization of their central Indian forest homelands. In order to mitigate such threats, Maoists like Ganapathy engage in armed resistance and, more generally, condone violence when it helps achieve their desired ends. This willingness to employ violence is the source of great tension for Roy. On one hand, Roy deplores the use of force employed by the Maoists for a range of reasons: in the case of Ganapathy, specifically, because of its negative repercussions felt by the very people such efforts are meant to help. On the other hand, she also believes that armed resistance might be the most successful — and possibly, only — option available to the rural tribal (adivasi) communities that have been disenfranchised as the government makes their land available to mining and other industries. Roy comes to terms with the tension articulated by the Ganapathy example, and puts her support behind the Maoists, when she links their pro-violence ideology to what she regards as the adivasi’s essentially oppositional nature. But in linking her defense of Maoist practice to an essential cultural characteristic, the emphasis of Roy’s analysis of the threats posed to the adivasi by industrial capital shifts away from the economic framework she sets out with and becomes a Heideggerian concern with the adivasi’s ontological relation to (modern) technology. Ultimately, this shift proves to
be problematic for Roy, as it undermines her ability to provide any coherent account of her initial reason for justifying the Maoists’ use of violence — their success in mitigating the negative impact that the spread of industrial capital is having upon the adivasi.

Though Roy ultimately defends the violence perpetuated by Ganapathy and the other Maoists on cultural grounds, she nevertheless accurately identifies the economic conditions that are the source of this violence — specifically, the impact of India’s New Economic Policy upon rural tribal populations. According to Roy, this policy — premised on the belief that privatization would foster economic growth that would benefit the entire population — has in reality only increased the poverty of rural tribal communities living in the forests stretching from West Bengal to Jharkhand, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, and Andhra Pradesh. When ownership of these mineral-rich forests is given over to industrial corporations such as Tata, Vedanta, and Sterlite for the removal of bauxite, iron, and other natural resources, the adivasi are affected on a number of levels. Most immediately, they are displaced — they can no longer live in their ancestral homeland. Furthermore, and as a result, their relation to subsistence has changed; as Roy puts it, a “very tiny percentage of the displaced people get jobs, and those who do, earn as slave wages to do humiliating, back-breaking work” (26). And what’s particularly troubling about these developments, she adds, is that the government is not interested in addressing these effects. Roy believes the government’s actual interests are made clear by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s 2010 declaration that the very Maoists whom Roy praises for challenging privatization and defending their right to their ancestral homeland are the “single biggest internal security challenge ever faced by our country” because their defense negatively impacts the “climate for investment” (qtd. in Roy 3). For Roy, Singh’s critique of the Maoists illustrates that the prime minister — as well as the Indian government he represents — values corporate concerns over those of its marginalized citizens.

When she claims that Maoist violence is a response to exploitive economic conditions, Roy appears to be working from a fairly traditional Marxian framework. And the sympathy between Roy’s approach and a Marxian framework is possibly nowhere more evident than when she discusses how M. Chidambaram, India’s home minister and a former non-executive director for Vedanta — a figure Roy refers to as “CEO of Operation Green Hunt” — articulates the complicity between government and corporate interests (27). As Roy recalls in “Trickledown Revolution,” the last essay compiled in Walking with the Comrades, Chidambaram claims in his 2007 lecture at Harvard entitled “Poor Rich Countries: The Challenges of Development” that India has suffered a slower than necessary growth rate since independence because of government control and appeasing tribal concerns, though “commonsense tells us that we should mine these resources quickly and efficiently. That requires huge capital, efficient organizations and a policy environment that will allow market forces to
operate” (qtd. in Roy 168). Roy disagrees, contending that “Allowing ‘market forces’ to mine resources ‘quickly and efficiently’ is what colonizers did to their colonies... development, but for someone else” (170). In other words, Chidambaram’s claim suggests that the tribals are undergoing a form of “neo-colonization.” Just as the British exploited colonized Indians for financial gain, Roy contends that enfranchised Indians who are active in the political and financial spheres are now colonizing the rural Indians for their own gain. The conditions Roy refers to here as neo-colonization are nothing other than what Marx refers to in the “Primitive Accumulation” chapter of Capital as the subsumption of labor under capital — in this instance, the formal shift from precapitalist labor processes to a process in which capital controls the means of production and workers are therefore forced to engage in wage labor to support themselves. That is, the formal process of subsumption Marx refers to as “a relation of domination and subordination” which “enters the relation of production itself” and “derives from capital’s ownership of the labour it has incorporated and from the nature of the labour process itself” is precisely what Roy refers to when she notes that, as industrial production spreads into the adivasi’s forest homelands, they are increasingly “alienated from their land” and put into “deepened poverty” (33).

Though Marx discusses subsumption in terms of the spread of factories in Victorian England, Roy shows that the same process is at play today in India’s mineral-rich forests as the adivasi’s jungle homeland is itself being transformed into an instrument of industrial technology.

Roy’s project here is not simply to point to the problem facing the adivasi, but to defend, in however qualified a fashion, the adivasi Maoists — regionally known as Naxalites — who defend their land right to their ancestral homelands through violent means. As Roy sees it, unlike other liberal and Left organizations such as the Congress Party (INC) and the Communist Party of India (CPI), these Maoists have been effective in improving the conditions of the adivasi. Roy sights an official government report produced by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj which attests to the significant role that the Maoists have had in a number of areas — including slowing the illegal seizure of tribal lands, ensuring that the adivasi are not paid below minimum wages, and guiding rural development efforts that have improved food security through efforts such as rainwater harvesting (201). Still, Roy is unsettled in her defense of the Maoists because of the violence that is an always-present component of the Maoists’ political efforts. For instance, in addition to Ganapathy’s sympathy for the Tamil Tigers, she is admittedly uncomfortable with ideologically consistent incidents in which the Maoists have killed innocent civilians and armed forces not directly engaged with tribal resistance as well as other incidents in which the Maoists have massacred their enemies (191). Displays of this kind lead Roy, at points in Walking with the Comrades, to question her support for the Maoists:

I feel I ought to say something at this point. About the futility of violence, about the unacceptability of summary executions. But what should I suggest they do?
Go to court? Do a dharna at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi? A rally? A real hunger strike? It sounds ridiculous. The promoters of the New Economic Policy — who find it easy to say “There Is No Alternative” — should be asked to suggest an alternative Resistance Policy. A specific one, to these specific people, in this specific forest. Here. Now. Which party should they vote for? Which democratic institution in this country should they approach? (88)

Here, Roy questions what outlets the Maoists have open to them other than violence. Political leaders like Singh and Chidambaram come down hard on the Maoists because they are unconcerned with the reasons why the adivasi become violent. And, Roy adds, even politicians who purport to have the adivasi’s interests in mind, either do not — as is the case with Rahul Gandhi of the Congress party, who claims to be a “soldier” for tribal people, though as a member of a party that supports mining in tribal lands, and so furthers policies which are, as Roy puts it, “predicated on the mass displacement of tribal people” (164) — or are powerless to protect the adivasi’s interests — as is the case with the CPI, a group which Roy contends “has not been able to prevent the systemic dismantling of workers’ rights” and “has managed to alienate themselves almost completely from adivasi and Dalit communities” (197). And, according to Roy, this unwillingness or inability of government officials to address the concerns of the adivasi is only deepened by the general hostility of the Indian media towards the Maoists — which, she maintains, ranges from mere vilification to outright misreporting. All together, the adivasi receive neither political nor popular/media support in addressing the poverty and displacement brought about by industrial corporations. By questioning, and eventually dismissing, the feasibility of these alternative modes of resistance, Roy expresses empathetic approval for the Maoists’ (violent) approach. As Roy sees the matter, Maoism is the only form of resistance to the corporate, government, and media-backed New Economic Policy left available to the adivasi. In other words, the current social climate, in which Indian politicians and media are complicit with the subsumption of tribal homelands, is one in which the adivasi are backed into Maoism.

However, in a move that ultimately undermines this defense, Roy also suggests that the violent tactics the Maoists adopt are not simply due to a lack of alternatives, but are a manifestation of the adivasi’s ethnic culture as well. Throughout Walking with the Comrades, Roy points to what she regards as the adivasi’s deep cultural association with their forest homeland, often romanticizing their connection to, and knowledge of, their environment — not only does she regard the adivasi’s ability to make use of the forest’s natural resources (what to eat and how to prepare food gathered in the forest, as well as how to navigate through a seemingly incomprehensibly dense landscape), she also plays with the notion that they have developed a number of supernatural abilities, such as seeing in complete darkness and materializing almost out of thin air. But whether or not the adivasi actually possess all of these capacities is beside the point. What matters is that the spread of corporations into central Indian
forests threatens every aspect of their traditional way of life. As Roy puts it, industrial development will not only displace the adivasi and drive them into poverty, but “by turn[ing] the entire tribal population into squatters on their own land,” corporate development carries the potential to “snatch away” the adivasi’s traditional forms of “livelihood” and the “dignity” associated with these distinct cultural practices (8). One could argue that the very fact that the adivasi have taken up Maoist armed resistance in response to industrial encroachment suggests that their traditional way of life based on their intimate — and romanticized — connection to their homeland has already been lost. But Roy contends that no such change has taken place, and she explains why when she discusses the history of Maoist resistance in India in Walking with the Comrades:

The antagonists in the forest are disparate and unequal in almost every way. On one side is a massive paramilitary force armed with money, the firepower, the media, and the hubris of an emerging Superpower. On the other, ordinary villagers armed with traditional weapons, backed by a superbly organized, hugely Maoist guerilla fighting force with an extraordinary and violent history of armed rebellion. (39)

At this point, she is establishing the long link between violent opposition and the adivasi-turned-Maoist. But the significance of this link is made even clearer elsewhere when Roy claims that the adivasi’s relationship to violent opposition predates the adivasi’s adoption of Maoism: “tribal people in Central India have a history of resistance that predates Mao by centuries” (42). As Roy sees it, then, the adivasi have an oppositional culture in general that is not simply a response to recent industrial capital. In effect, when they respond to the imposition of industrial technology through Maoist activity, they are engaging their ethnic culture. Opposition is just as central to their cultural constitution as their romanticized engagement with the forest. The adivasi are not simply in danger of losing their ethnic culture through technological development of the jungle; resistance to technological development also gives them an opportunity to perform their oppositional ethnic culture.

This conception of adivasi resistance as (at least in part) ethnic in nature signals a Heideggerian turn in Roy’s thought. Specifically, when Roy contends that that Maoist violence is a manifestation of adivasi culture, it becomes clear that what at first appears to be a purely Marxian concern with the conditions of formal subsumption — or, neocolonization — is also a Heideggerian concern with Enframing. To an extent, Roy employs Marxian and Heideggerian frameworks interchangeably. And this sort of conceptual play is possible because of similarities in both frameworks’ treatment of alienation — in particular, the increasingly adverse potential that modern technology presents. However, this shared concern is dealt with differently. From the Marxian perspective, the concern with the encroachment of industrial technology is framed as a historical materialist issue with the capitalist mode of production in which technological and economic development create new means of, and avenues for, the
extraction of surplus value. Put differently, the primary concern with the expansion of industrial technology into new territories is the spread of capitalist relations of production — specifically, the corporation’s exploitation of the worker’s labor power. From a Marxist perspective, the danger that expanding technology presents for tribal communities is that the capitalist corporations that introduce new technology will benefit from the “congelation of worker’s surplus labor time,” while the very workers who create profit for those companies will become less able to support themselves. In Heidegger’s treatment, the Marxian concern with who benefits from the congelation of labor time is regarded as an ontological issue. Economic exploitation is reframed as ontological Enframing — or what Heidegger characterizes in “The Question Concerning Technology” as comprising the nature of technology. In this Heideggerian articulation, surplus value is redefined as standing reserve, the stockpiled output produced by a technologically advanced society that exceeds immediate need. And it follows that production is viewed as merely overabundant, exploitation is not central, as it is in the Marxian framework. Instead of concern with inequality and how the uneven distribution of stockpiles becomes concentrated in the hands of the owners of the means of production, from the Heideggerian perspective, the central issue with technology is that the production of a standing reserve “challenges” an ontological “revealing” that “brings-forth,” or demonstrates one’s appreciation of the genuine nature of one’s relationship to nature and technology. Revealing makes clear the distinction between technological instruments and their ontological significance — which, for Heidegger, is based on the ability to appreciate his not-entirely human-centered mode of causality. Because this causality is not strictly human, it is has less to do with human intentions than a “responsibility” shared by beings and non-human things. When one appreciates how beings are constituted within such a model of causality, Heidegger believes that the nature of technology is revealed. The “danger” of technology, then, is that as these stockpiles grow in size, and as technology advances the ability to augment a standing reserve, this fundamental relationship to nature becomes increasingly difficult to comprehend. Effectively, in the shift from Marx to Heidegger, an intersubjective issue of equality becomes (is redefined as) a matter of intrasubjective revelation; the social and economic aspects of industrial technology are reframed as the ontological impact of technology upon individuals.

Roy’s embrace of this Heideggerian regard for Enframing is apparent in Roy’s appraisal of the impact of technological development upon the adivasi. Early on, Roy establishes that the adivasi experience the development spurred on by industrial capital as a form of neocolonization. And though what she refers to is not “colonization” in a traditional sense, the complicity between the Indian government and international business in privatizing tribal land and exploiting the displaced is still an economic matter. However, when Roy frets over the potential loss of traditional adivasi culture, and when she claims that this (naturally oppositional) culture can be a productive force in stemming the spread of industrial capital, Roy gives the
impression that the greatest concern for the Naxalites is not contemporary relations of production as much as it with the impact of modern production upon premodern ways of knowing. And, as has already been touched upon, even though any such defense of their premodern way of life seems to be invalidated in advance by the very fact that the adivasi have adopted Maoism to confront these external forces, their opposition to modern industrial technology does not necessarily foreclose their earlier way of life; rather, their opposition to modern technology articulates their ethnic culture. A key concern for Roy, then, is the tribal community’s ability to maintain its premodern culture in the face of advancing technology — specifically, their violently oppositional nature. From this perspective, the corporate and political forces that are responsible for the adivasi’s engagement with modern technology are no more significant than the manufacturers who produce the Heideggerian standing reserve that individuals must square themselves with ontologically. Simply put, based on Roy’s framing of the adivasi, the danger technology presents is not the economic matter of inequality, but the cultural matter of how community members confront technology.

If one believes that the danger of industrial technology is not economic, and is instead regarded as an ontological matter, then it follows that the resolution of this danger must also be ontological in nature. Providing just such an ontological solution is exactly what Heidegger had in mind in “The Question Concerning Technology” when he made his famous claim that “the essence of technology is nothing technological.” For Heidegger, the essence of technology is found in the revelation that technology does not entirely belong to human willing. But, in Heidegger’s estimation, this essential relationship between man and technology has been challenged by modern manifestations such as hydroelectric power stations, which reveal technology only as the progression towards an ever-expandable standing reserve. Or in more purely Heideggerian terms, by facilitating the misconception that nature is already, and has always been, at man’s disposal, the standing reserve produces technology as a veil that “blocks poiesis,” or, man’s fundamental relationship to technology, and so articulates the “extreme danger” of technology. Though Heidegger claims that when Enframing blocks poiesis, it presents “the extreme danger,” he also contends that it holds a “saving power.” Specifically, when one pays attention to — or “watches over” — the challenge that Enframing puts forward, then one reveals how modern technology conceals, which produces a new form of unconcealing in which Enframing reveals the way in which technology conceals an earlier revealing. This ontological awareness produces freedom, according to Heidegger; specifically, when Enframing is both revealing and concealing, it “fetch(es) something home into its essence, in order to bring the essence for the first time into its genuine appearing” as a “more original revealing and hence to experience the call of a more primal truth” of man’s relation to nature and technology. Simply, freedom comes about through “the revelation” of what Heidegger regards as a proper ontological appreciation of technology — that one
is not entirely responsible for technology, and that the destining towards standing
reserve that modern technology places man upon is not determined by his willing
alone. From this perspective, in order to secure freedom, one is not compelled to
engage technology in a particular way, as one is when the issue is inequality.

From a Heideggerian perspective, realizing this ontological freedom means
returning to a relationship with technology associated with cultural origins. For
Heidegger, this means re-linking techne and poiesis in the manner put forth in
ancient Greek culture: “Once there was a time when the bringing-forth of the true
into the beautiful was called techne. And the poiesis of the fine arts was also called
techne.”\textsuperscript{12} According to Heidegger, for a brief “but magnificent time,” art was techne
in that it “was a revealing that brought forth and hither, and therefore belonged
within poiesis.”\textsuperscript{13} In effect, he believes that by return to this unified conception of
art and technology, the saving power, or coming-to-presence, of technology can
again be revealed. Roy also adopts this Heideggerian notion that the saving power of
Enframing is to be realized through a return to a prior cultural relation to technology.
Roy views the two key aspects of \textit{adivasi} culture as their connection to the forest and
their oppositional nature. In order to realize the Heideggerian saving power, these
aspects need to be brought as a unified articulation of the \textit{adivasi}’s engagement with
technology. And this bringing together of poiesis and techne is exactly the function
that the Maoist jungle celebration, which operates as the centerpiece of the \textit{Walking
with the Comrades} experience and article, serves for Roy. After trekking with a small
group of \textit{adivasi} Maoists through the dense Dandakaranya forest for a number of days,
Roy arrives at a furtive gathering of Maoist groups from all over India to celebrate
“Bhumkal Day,” the anniversary of a 1910 \textit{adivasi} rebellion. Here, in addition to
witnessing a number of demonstrations — including posters and speeches — that
are common to political spectacles, she also makes a number of observations which
put forward the event as an articulation of the Heideggerian saving power: for one,
Roy notes celebrants wearing traditional festive attire while carrying semi-automatic
guns; and even more significantly, she watches as performers marry ancient tribal folk
songs and dances to Maoist content. For Roy, these and other observations establish
the Heideggerian saving link between culture and technology by articulating \textit{adivasi}
culture as essentially opposed to technology. As a result, when Roy rhetorically asks
who “could have imagined that this ancient people, dancing into the night, would be
the ones on whose shoulders [the dreams of Indian Maoism] would come to rest?,”
she is not simply suggesting that the \textit{adivasi} hold the potential to realize the dream of
Maoist freedom, but that they are — in a sense — enacting that freedom throughout
their celebration (Roy 120). Overall, and in Heidegger’s terms, the celebration allows
the \textit{adivasi} “to catch sight of what comes to presence in technology, instead of
merely staring at the technological” — or, more simply, it brings the ancient tribal
community into a proper (or freeing) understanding of their essential relationship to
technology.\textsuperscript{14} For Roy too, then, freedom is an ontological matter. When they are free
in this Heideggerian sense, the adivasi are not committed to “engage to technology in a particular way”; they “only need to acknowledge the nature of their essential relation to technology.” Put differently, from this perspective the relations of production that companies introduce when they descend upon the jungle to remove bauxite from the mountains are less significant than mere cultural displays that attest to their essential opposition.

Here, Roy’s Heideggerian emphasis on the significance of the adivasi’s ontological relationship to technology leads her to lose a proportionate sense of the interplay between adivasi culture and economic factors. That is, instead of addressing how encroaching industrial technology will, in one form or another, subsume the lifeworld of the adivasi, Roy claims that they can maintain their traditional ways of knowing if development benevolently bypasses the resource-rich homeland of the central Indian tribes. She concludes both “Mr. Chidambaram’s War” and “Trickledown Revolution,” for instance, by asking “Can we leave the bauxite in the mountain?” — a question that is both so broad and rhetorical that it seems to reject critical response. But Roy makes the same point more subtly elsewhere; after discussing the numerous services that a rogue doctor has provided for Maoists who have been hiding out in the forest, Roy suggests that even more help from the outside — particularly in the form of teachers, doctors, and farmers — might be necessary to preserve adivasi culture. Here, Roy envisions a position in which the adivasi culture both has value beyond — or outside — capitalist exchange, and that its preservation depends upon the willingness of outsiders to forego their own economic interests for the sake of maintaining the ethno-cultural value of central Indian tribal communities. Because Roy envisions the problem industrial capital poses to the adivasi as a cultural issue, she imagines that these communities can both exist outside of and be aided by capital. However, if she understood the fundamental economic character of the adivasi’s condition, one that is driven by the subsumption of their lifeworld, Roy would have a different sense of the adivasi’s position in relation to capital. Even if mining and industrial technology were to bypass the tribal homelands, when outsiders — teachers, doctors, farmers — whose skills have been cultivated within the market system provide services, those services implicate the adivasi in market relations — even if only as receivers of charity. But because Roy overemphasizes the role of culture, she makes claims that assume the logically impossible position of being both inside and outside of capital.

Roy’s overemphasis on culture not only undermines a coherent account of the adivasi’s economic position, it also leads her to claim too great a role for what she regards as their essential opposition to industrial technology in securing Maoist political victories. According to Roy, the Maoists have successfully aided rural communities where other groups — such as the CPI, CPM, and Congress parties — have not had effect. Further, she believes that these victories have something to do with the adivasi Maoists’ militantly oppositional nature. For example, in “Trickledown Revolution,” Roy claims that “It’s an old story in India — without militant resistance
the poor get pulverized” (207). And even though a few lines later she contends that the adoption of Maoist violence is a “tactical” decision (“The decision whether to be a Gandhian or a Maoist, militant or peaceful, or a bit of both [like in Nandigram] is not always a moral or ideological one. Quite often it’s a tactical one.”), rather than an aspect of the adivasi’s essential character, when Roy elsewhere asserts that the tactic which is most effective for forest resistance is Maoist armed opposition (196), she effectively makes the tactical/essential distinction irrelevant (207): any way you look at the matter, violence is always the appropriate tactic in the forest. But the victories that Roy claims for the Maoists — which include ensuring fair wages, land protection, and limiting local corruption — have nothing to do with violent tactics. To illustrate otherwise, Roy points to a passage from the Ministry of Panchayati Raj report cited earlier, which details the effectiveness of armed resistance in stanching local abuse of tribal-protection laws: “By virtue of the gun they wield, [the Maoists] are able to evoke some fear in the administration at the village/block/district level” (qtd. in Roy 200). But even here, though the Maoists carried guns, their militarized form of resistance is not a prerequisite for success in mitigating corruption and protecting adivasi land rights. Clearly, if local political leaders and organizational bosses acted lawfully, such tactics would be unnecessary. In this light, it is clear that the Maoists’ success is not necessarily linked to an essentialized oppositional character. They are simply committed to protecting rights that others are unwilling to enforce (because of corruption), or are unable to enforce (because of institutional barriers). In effect, the Maoist investment in violent resistance, as such, has little to do with their success. Nevertheless, because Roy has so deeply associated the threat that technology poses to the adivasi with their culture, she is unable to distinguish what she regards as the essentially oppositional — or violent — nature of the Naxalites from their unrelated political victories.

The dissonance created when Roy does not distinguish her Marxian framework from her Heideggerian cultural claims is not lost on the author; in fact, Walking with the Comrades closes with Roy attempting to square these two approaches. As she does throughout, over the last twenty or so pages, Roy acknowledges the oppositional nature of the adivasi Maoists. Unlike elsewhere, though, Roy does not simply defend their nature, and the violent tactics this nature evokes, as necessary evils. Instead, she asks a series of rhetorical questions that express concern for how their nature will play out in the future: “Are the Maoists really interested in peace and justice, people ask; is there anything they can be offered within the existing system that will deflect the Maoists from their stated goal of overthrowing the Indian state?” (186-87). In the next line, Roy’s rhetorical response — “probably not” — is meant to highlight the adivasi’s perceived lack of alternatives to violence, but she also draws attention to the danger of defending a group’s use of violence by claiming that it derives from an essential (oppositional) aspect of that group’s cultural constitution. The danger this sort of defense presents is put in more specific terms a few pages later when she
admits that “the Maoists’ policy (and practice) on mining remains pretty woolly” because “there is a persistent view that the Maoists are not averse to allowing mining and mining-related infrastructure projects” (210). According to Roy, if they were to mine, the Maoists could bring about the “certain death of the planet,” and therefore be just as great a threat to the jungle as the industrial corporations they are fighting against (212). On one hand, then, Roy views the very cultural disposition she believes has made the Maoists successful as also potentially catastrophic. Or in Heideggerian terms, not only can the adivasi’s Enframing come into a revealing relationship with the saving power of technology, it can also instantiate the “danger” of technology. But in order to justify her support of the adivasi Maoists, Roy must make a case that they ultimately represent the saving power. And she does so when she claims that the adivasi “are the ones who still know the secrets of sustainable living” (213). Though she does not spell out exactly what this means, Roy is clear that these secrets are antithetical to “climate-change conference rooms” and “cities with tall buildings,” and instead “lives down on the ground, with its arms around the people who go to battle every day to protect their forests, their mountains, and their rivers because they know that the forests, the mountains, and the rivers protect them” (213-214). For Roy, then, the secrets of sustainable living are a manifestation of the adivasi’s essential relationship with their cultural homeland; and she believes that their stewardship of the planet is justified because they possess the Heideggerian saving power that is derived from a rearticulation of cultural origins.

In effect, Roy has made two unresolvable claims about the adivasi. Based on her understanding of a small set of their cultural characteristics, Roy contends that the adivasi Maoists both have the capacity to bring about catastrophic effects on nature and are singularly situated to be nature’s stewards. Ultimately, there is no way to reconcile these claims into a logical defense of adivasi culture. By laying emphasis on a Heideggerian return to authentic cultural origins, Roy’s position becomes disconnected from the economic, and as a result, her claims cannot be justified by any coherent metrics. Roy admits as much when, having thought through the future implications of Maoist tactics and ideology, she asserts, “hope has little to do with reason” (212). Though Roy makes this point as a defense of a flight from reason, when logic fails Roy and she turns to an illogical defense of essence, she undermines her own claim that the Maoists’ cultural characteristics make them uniquely capable of addressing the economic conditions of the rural poor. That is, one is left to wonder, if the adivasi’s unique capacity cannot be defended on logical grounds, what is the value of contending that they possess such a capacity in the first place?

Here, the Marxian framework Roy establishes at the outset would help produce a more coherent way to address encroaching industrial technology. Because she frames the danger of encroaching industrial technology as a Heideggerian cultural concern, she imagines that culture is a significant aspect of addressing this issue — so much so that pragmatic political efforts are undermined and culturally justified
violence is condoned. But a systemic framework would illustrate that returning to an essentialized precapitalist iteration of culture is not possible. Instead of imagining that capital development might bypass the adivasi, Roy would have to acknowledge that their forest homeland has been formally implicated/brought into capital markets — if not yet completely. And with this acknowledgement, Roy would be forced to account for the actual impact that groups like the Naxalites have upon the economic conditions of the rural poor; for instance, her emphasis in discussing the Maoists’ relation to mining would shift from a concern with their ideological position on the practice of mining to a concern with whether their goal is equal distribution of profits accrued from mining. This sort of keyed-in economic analysis of the Maoists’ impact would put Roy in a better position to judge whether their efforts are effective in meeting specific goals. Further, such analysis would allow her to more accurately identify when — and whether — Maoist violence is justifiable.

As it stands, Roy’s justification for Maoist violence is not as convincing as she intends. Though her frustration with the economic and environmental harm caused to the adivasi and their homelands by large industrial corporations is understandable, and though her attempt to provide a counterperspective to the widespread political and media support for these corporations’ efforts is commendable, Roy missteps when she grounds this counterperspective on Heideggerian cultural claims. She loses sight of the economic conditions she sets out to critique. In effect, Roy simply rejects one form of violence — the exploitation of the adivasi — and embraces another — the violence perpetrated by the Maoists. Clearly, she wants the reader to believe that the former form of violence is so destructively powerful that it necessitates the latter, that the adivasi have been backed into violence; but, in the end, it is difficult to know if this is actually the state of affairs based on the cultural claims Roy puts forward. However, if Roy had spent more time illustrating exactly how the adivasi were being backed into an economic corner (and this does seem to be what Roy believes), then her defense of the Naxalites’ use of force might have been more convincing — regardless of the aggressors’ ethnic origins. In short, Roy wants the reader to view the Maoist tactics that are currently being employed in central India as a justifiable response to exploitation, but it remains difficult to understand why one should see things this way merely by “walking with” the adivasi in the way Roy presents here.
Notes

1. Overall, Roy contends, less than 10 percent of money earned goes back to the displaced community.

2. And to back up this claim, she points to a number of recent suspect governmental practices: for one, she notes how laws put into place in order to protect tribals’ way of life — such as the “Fifth Schedule of the Constitution” which “disallows the alienation of their land” (25) and the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, which makes compulsory taking of land from tribals and handing it over to corporations “illegal and unconstitutional” (171) — are being blatantly disregarded in the name of development; also, Roy believes that Singh’s government is covertly funding a program called “Operation Green Hunt,” which is meant to stanch efforts like the Maoists’ that resist the appropriation of tribal lands (2), and which has also facilitated operations/groups such as the “Salwa Judum” or “Purification Hunt,” a people’s militia responsible for the deaths of many non-resistance fighters (50).


4. To note, this is not the first time Roy’s work has evoked Heideggerian themes. In fact, a Heideggerian treatment of the effects that technological development has upon tribal people is consistently present in Roy’s nonfiction. In *The Cost of Living* (1999), for instance, she details her involvement in an effort to prevent the damming of the Narmada River to build a power station — which would bury the homes of many rural communities underwater. In effect, the spread of industrial technology is framed as threatening a traditional way of life. And the very fact that the threat comes from the prospect of damming the river in order to build power stations not only echoes Heidegger’s discussion of a hydroelectric station on the Rhine in “The Question Concerning Technology,” but it positions Roy’s earlier work as something of a case study for “the extreme danger” Heidegger associates with technology.


6. Heidegger gets at this means of causality through a re-envisioning of Aristotelian causality: causa materialis, causa formalis, causa finalis, and causa efficiens (6). Looking at these means and why they belong together provides the grounds for his conception of the relationship between man and technology. To illustrate his argument, Heidegger gives the example of a silver chalice. With this chalice, the causa materialis is apparent: silver; significantly, Heidegger emphasizes that its materiality is not the work of man but rather a distinct shaping force. Moreover, this force — the materiality of the silver — bears upon its causa formalis of a chalice. That is, the chalice is a chalice because it is made out of silver. But this relationship between the causa materialis and the causa formalis is reciprocal for Heidegger: since the silver is not a ring, a spoon, or some other form often found in silver, it owes its “aspect” to “chaliceness.” Together, then, “[b]oth the silver into which the aspect is admitted as chalice and the aspect in which the silver appears are in their respective ways co-responsible for the sacrificial vessel” (7). And while these causes are, according to Heidegger, co-responsible for each other, it is the causa finalis, or telos, that circumscribes the form of the material, and brings the chalice into existence as such; “the telos is responsible for what as matter and what as aspect are together co-responsible for the sacrificial vessel” (8). And just like the silver that exerts its own force, it is notable here that telos is not associated with human activity. Instead, telos is of the object, it is internal to the object, and is the genesis for what will be produced — as if, in some sense, independent of (or prior to) being mined,
purchased, and sold, and eventually welded by a silversmith, its manifestation as a chalice was already
teleologically determined. It follows, then, that the fourth factor in the manifestation of the chalice, the
silversmith, is not the causa efficiens, and rather only participates in this process. As with the material,
form, and telos, the silversmith is co-responsible for “bringing-forth” the chalice: “The three previous
mentioned ways of being responsible owe thanks to the pondering of the silversmith for the ‘that’ and
the ‘how’ of the coming into appearance and into play for the production of the sacrificial vessel” (8).
Put differently, Heidegger acknowledges that the silversmith has a central role in manifestation of the
chalice, but he also articulates that role as facilitating a “coming into appearance” of what was already
the chalice’s own. But if the silversmith is not the causa efficiens, as he is in Aristotle’s articulation of
the four causes, then it is not, in the last instance, his interests that are produced when he brings the
causes together. Simply, the manifestation of the chalice does not belong solely to his intentions.

In this light, the danger of the standing reserve that modern technology produces is easily identifiable as
an internalization of the “social hieroglyphic” of Marxian commodity fetishism. That is, the Heideggerian
standing reserve produced by modern technology is clearly a rearticulation of the concern embodied by
the commodity fetish — that the value of commodities is disconnected from the needs of the workers
involved in production. However, because the Heideggerian position regards the challenging of
Enframing as the danger of obscuring a full intrasubjective appreciation of man’s relation to technology,
and not the inequality this relationship produces, the concern with Enframing views industrialized
production as not fundamentally about relations between producers and so, from a Marxian position,
as an iteration of commodity fetishism.

Moreover, Roy questions whether mining would be restricted to meet their basic needs, or whether they
would mine to serve their own interests (211).