

***Things That Can and Cannot Be Said***



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*Essays and Conversations*

Arundhati Roy and John Cusack

 juggernaut

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*John Cusack*

# Things That Can and Cannot Be Said





“Every nation-state, by supposition, tends toward the imperial: that is the point. Through banks, armies, secret police, propaganda, courts and jails, treaties, treasuries, taxes, laws and orders, myths of civil obedience, assumptions of civic virtue at the top. . .

Still it should be said that of the political left, we expect something better. And correctly. We put more trust in those who show a measure of compassion. We agree, conditionally but instinctively, with those who denounce the hideous social arrangements which make war inevitable and human want omnipresent; which foster corporate selfishness, pander to appetites and disorder, waste the earth.”

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—**Daniel Berrigan**, from *The Nightmare of God: The Book of Revelation*, 1983

One morning as I scanned the news—horror in the Middle East, Russia and America facing off in Ukraine—I thought of Edward Snowden and wondered how he was holding up in Moscow. I began to imagine a conversation between him and Daniel Ellsberg (who leaked the Pentagon Papers during the Vietnam War). And then, interestingly, in my imagination a third person made her way into the room—the writer Arundhati Roy. It occurred to me that trying to get the three of them together would be a fine thing to do.

I had heard Roy speak in Chicago, and had met her several times.<sup>1</sup> One gets the feeling very quickly and comes to the rapid conclusion that with her there are no preformatted assumptions or givens. Through our conversations I became very aware that what gets lost, or goes unsaid, in most of the debates around surveillance and whistleblowing is a perspective and context from outside the United States and Europe. The debates around them have gradually centered on corporate overreach and the privacy rights of US citizens.

The philosopher/theosophist Rudolf Steiner says that any perception or truth that is isolated and removed from its larger context ceases to be true: “When any single thought emerges in consciousness, I cannot rest until this is brought into harmony with the remainder. Such an isolated concept is entirely unendurable. I am

simply conscious that there exists an inwardly sustained harmony among all thoughts. . . . Therefore every such isolation is an abnormality, an untruth. When we have arrived at that state of mind in which our whole thought world bears the character of complete inner harmony, we gain thereby the satisfaction for which our mind is striving. We feel that we are in possession of the truth.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, every isolated idea that doesn’t relate to others yet is taken as true (as a kind of niche truth) is not just bad politics, it is somehow also fundamentally untrue . . . To me, Arundhati Roy’s writing and thinking strives for such unity of thought. And for her, like for Steiner, reason comes from the heart.

I knew Dan and Ed because we all worked together on the Freedom of the Press Foundation.<sup>3</sup> And I knew Roy admired both of them greatly, but she was disconcerted by the photograph of Ed cradling the American flag in his arms that had appeared on the cover of *Wired*.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, she was impressed by what he had said in the interview—in particular that one of the factors that pushed him into doing what he did was the NSA (National Security Agency)’s sharing real-time data of Palestinians in the United States with the Israeli government. She thought what Dan and Ed had done were tremendous acts of courage, though as far as I could tell, her own politics were more in sync with Julian Assange’s. “Snowden is the thoughtful, courageous

# W I R E D

CONTACT: SEP. 2014



saint of liberal reform,” she once said to me. “And Julian Assange is a sort of radical, feral prophet who has been prowling this wilderness since he was sixteen years old.”

I had recorded many of our conversations, Roy’s and mine—for no reason other than that they were so intense that I felt I needed to listen to them several times over to understand what we were really saying to each other. She didn’t seem to notice, or if she did, she didn’t seem to mind. When I asked her if I could use some of the transcripts, she said, “Okay, but make sure you edit out the idiocy. At least mine.”

I’ll roll the tapes:

**AR:** All I’m saying is: what does that American flag mean to people outside of America? What does it mean in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Palestine, Pakistan—even in India, your new “natural ally”?<sup>5</sup>

**JC:** In his [Ed’s] situation, he’s got very little margin for error when it comes to controlling his image, his messaging, and he’s done an incredible job up to this point. But you’re troubled by that isolated iconography?

**AR:** Forget the genocide of American Indians, forget slavery, forget Hiroshima, forget Cambodia, forget Vietnam, you know . . .

**JC:** Why do we have to forget?

*(Laughter)*

**AR:** I'm just saying that, at one level, I am happy—awed—that there are people of such intelligence, such compassion, that have defected from the state. They are heroic. Absolutely. They've risked their lives, their freedom . . . but then there's that part of me that thinks . . . How could you ever have believed in it? What do you feel betrayed by? Is it possible to have a moral state? A moral superpower? I can't understand those people who believe that the excesses are just aberrations. . . . Of course, I understand it intellectually, but . . . part of me wants to retain that incomprehension. . . . Sometimes my anger gets in the way of their pain.

**JC:** Fair enough, but don't you think you're being a little harsh?

**AR:** Maybe *(laughs)*. But then, having ranted as I have, I always say that the grand thing in the United States is that there has been real resistance from within. There have been soldiers who've refused to fight, who've burned their medals, who've been conscientious objectors.<sup>6</sup> I don't think we have ever had a conscientious objector in the Indian Army. Not one. In the United States, you have this proud history, you know? And

Snowden is part of that.

**JC:** My gut tells me Snowden is more radical than he lets on. He has to be so tactical . . .

**AR:** Just since 9/11 . . . we're supposed to forget whatever happened in the past because 9/11 is where history begins. Okay, since 2001, how many wars have been started, how many countries have been destroyed? So now ISIS [also known as Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham] is the new evil—but how did that evil begin? Is it more evil to do what ISIS is doing, which is to go around massacring people—mainly, but not only, Shi'a—slitting throats? By the way, the US-backed militias are doing similar things, except they don't show beheadings of white folks on TV. Or is it more evil to contaminate the water supply, to bomb a place with depleted uranium, to cut off the supply of medicines, to say that half a million children dying from economic sanctions is a "hard price," but "worth it"?<sup>7</sup>

**JC:** Madeleine Albright said so—about Iraq.

**AR:** Yes. Iraq. Is it alright to force a country to disarm, and then bomb it? To continue to create mayhem in the area? To pretend that you are fighting radical Islamism, when you're actually toppling all the regimes that are not radical Islamist regimes? Whatever else their faults

“In Syria, you’re on the side of those who want to depose Assad, right? And then suddenly, you’re with Assad, wanting to fight ISIS. It’s like some crazed, bewildered, rich giant bumbling around in a poor area with his pockets stuffed with money, and lots of weapons—just throwing stuff around.”

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may be, they were not radical Islamist states—Iraq was not, Syria is not, Libya was not. The most radical fundamentalist Islamist state is, of course, your ally Saudi Arabia. In Syria, you're on the side of those who want to depose Assad, right? And then suddenly, you're with Assad, wanting to fight ISIS. It's like some crazed, bewildered, rich giant bumbling around in a poor area with his pockets stuffed with money, and lots of weapons—just throwing stuff around. You don't even really know who you're giving it to—which murderous faction you are arming against which—feeling very relevant when actually . . . All this destruction that has come in the wake of 9/11, all the countries that have been bombed . . . it ignites and magnifies these ancient antagonisms. They don't necessarily have to do with the United States; they predate the existence of the United States by centuries. But the United States is unable to understand how irrelevant it is, actually. And how wicked . . . Your short-term gains are the rest of the world's long-term disasters—for everybody, including yourselves.<sup>8</sup> And, I'm sorry, I've been saying *you* and *the United States* or *America*, when I actually mean the US government. There's a difference. Big one.

**JC:** Yeah.

**AR:** Conflating the two the way I just did is stupid . . . walking into a trap—it makes it easy for people to say,

“Oh, she’s anti-American, he’s anti-American,” when we’re not. Of course not. There are things I love about America. Anyway, what is a country? When people say, “Tell me about India,” I say, “Which India? . . . The land of poetry and mad rebellion? The one that produces haunting music and exquisite textiles? The one that invented the caste system and celebrates the genocide of Muslims and Sikhs and the lynching of Dalits? The country of dollar billionaires? Or the one in which 800 million live on less than half a dollar a day?<sup>9</sup> Which India?” When people say “America,” which one? Bob Dylan’s or Barack Obama’s? New Orleans or New York? Just a few years ago India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh were one country. Actually, we were many countries if you count the princely states. . . . Then the British drew a line, and now we’re three countries, two of them pointing nukes at each other—the radical Hindu bomb and the radical Muslim bomb.<sup>10</sup>

**JC:** Radical Islam and US exceptionalism are in bed with each other. They’re like lovers, methinks . . .

**AR:** It’s a revolving bed in a cheap motel . . . Radical Hinduism is snuggled up somewhere in there, too. It’s hard to keep track of the partners; they change so fast. Each new baby they make is the latest progeny of the means to wage eternal war.

“Radical Islam and US exceptionalism  
are in bed with each other.  
They're like lovers, methinks . . .”

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**JC:** If you help manufacture an enemy that's *really* evil, you can point to the fact that it's really evil, and say, "Hey, it's *really* evil."

**AR:** Your enemies are always manufactured to suit your purpose, right? How can you have a good enemy? You have to have an utterly evil enemy—and then the evilness has to progress.

**JC:** It has to metastasize, right?

**AR:** Yes. And then . . . how often are we going to keep on saying the same things?

**JC:** Yeah, you get worn out by it.

**AR:** Truly, there's no alternative to stupidity. Cretinism is the mother of fascism. I have no defense against it, really . . .

**JC:** It's a real problem.

*(Both laugh)*

**AR:** It isn't the lies they tell, it's the *quality* of the lies that becomes so humiliating. They've stopped caring about even that. It's all a play. Hiroshima and Nagasaki happen, there are hundreds of thousands of dead, and

the curtain comes down, and that's the end of that. Then Korea happens. Vietnam happens, all that happened in Latin America happens. And every now and then, this curtain comes down and history begins anew. New moralities and new indignations are manufactured . . . in a disappeared history.

**JC:** And a disappeared context.

**AR:** Yes, without any context or memory. But the people of the world have memories. There was a time when the women of Afghanistan—at least in Kabul—were out there. They were allowed to study; they were doctors and surgeons, walking free, wearing what they wanted. That was when it was under Soviet occupation. Then the United States starts funding the mujahideen. Reagan called them Afghanistan's "founding fathers."<sup>11</sup> It reincarnates the idea of "jihad," virtually creates the Taliban. And what happens to the women? In Iraq, until before the war, the women were scientists, museum directors, doctors. I'm not valorizing Saddam Hussein or the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, which was brutal and killed hundreds of thousands of people—it was the Soviet Union's Vietnam. I'm just saying that now, in these new wars, whole countries have slipped into mayhem—the women have just been pushed back into their burqas—and not by choice. I mean, to me, one thing is a culture in which women have not broken

out of their subservience, but the horror of tomorrow, somebody turning around and telling me: “Arundhati, just go back into your veil, and sit in your kitchen and don’t come out.” Can you imagine the violence of that? That’s what has happened to these women. In 2001, we were told that the war in Afghanistan was a feminist mission. The marines were liberating Afghan women from the Taliban.<sup>12</sup> Can you really bomb feminism into a country? And now, after twenty-five years of brutal war—ten years against the Soviet occupation, fifteen years of US occupation—the Taliban is riding back to Kabul and will soon be back to doing business with the United States. I don’t live in the United States, but when I’m here, I begin to feel like my head is in a grinder—my brains are being scrambled by this language that they’re using. Outside [the United States] it’s not so hard to understand because people know the score. But here, so many seem to swallow the propaganda so obediently.

So that was one exchange. Here’s another:

**JC:** So, what do you think? What do we think are the things we can’t talk about in a civilized society, if you’re a good, domesticated house pet?

**AR:** (*Laughs*) The occasional immorality of preaching nonviolence?

(This was a reference to *Walking with the Comrades*, Roy's account of her time spent in the forests of central India with armed guerrillas who were fighting paramilitary forces and vigilante militias trying to clear indigenous people off their land, which had been handed over to mining companies.<sup>13</sup>)

**JC:** In the United States, we can talk about ISIS, but we can't talk about Palestine.

**AR:** Oh, in India, we can talk about Palestine, but we can't talk about Kashmir.<sup>14</sup> Nowadays, we can't talk about the daylight massacre of thousands of Muslims in Gujarat, because Narendra Modi might become prime minister.<sup>15</sup> [As he did subsequently in May 2014.] They like to say, "Let bygones be bygones." *Bygones*. Nice word . . . old-fashioned.

**JC:** Sounds like a sweet goodbye.

**AR:** And we can decide the most convenient place on which to airdrop history's markers. History is really a study of the future, not the past.

**JC:** I just want to know what I can't talk about, so I'll avoid it in social settings.

**AR:** You can say, for example, that it's wrong to behead

people physically, like with a knife, which implies that it's alright to blow their heads off with a drone . . . isn't it?

**JC:** Well, a drone is so surgical . . . and it's like, a quick thing. They don't suffer, right?

**AR:** But some "muzzlims," as you call them, are also good, professional butchers. They do it quick.

**JC:** What else can and cannot be said?

**AR:** This is a lovely theme . . . About Vietnam, you can say, "These Asians, they don't value their lives, and so they force us to bear the burden of genocide." This is more or less a direct quote.

**JC:** From William Westmoreland.<sup>16</sup>

**AR:** Yes, there was Westmoreland and then there was Saint Robert McNamara, who supervised the destruction in Vietnam and also planned the bombing of Tokyo, in which more than eighty thousand people were killed in a single night.<sup>17</sup> Then he became the president of the World Bank, where he took great care of the world's poor. At the end of his life, he was tormented by one question—"How much evil must we do in order to do good?" That's a quote, too.<sup>18</sup>



**JC:** It's tough love.

**AR:** Fucking selfless stuff . . .

We had these conversations sitting at my kitchen table, in New York corner booths, in a Puerto Rican diner that became a favorite spot. On impulse, I called New Delhi.

Wanna go to Moscow and meet Dan Ellsberg and Ed Snowden?

Don't talk rubbish . . .

Listen . . . if I can pull it off, should we go?

There was silence, and I felt the smile over the phone.

Yaa, Maan. Let's go.