

Politics, Culture and Socialism

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Abstract: Between the start of World War I and the end of World War II, global capitalism was in a severe crisis. In addition to the two horrific wars, the Great Depression occurred during this time, which was the most severe economic crisis in capitalism's history up to that point. It should come as no surprise that a sizable portion of the intellectual elite in almost every nation held the view that the world had entered a "general crisis of capitalism" from which socialism was the only viable course. Working people worldwide, both in developed and developing nations, experienced severe distress at this time. For example, the Great Depression in India led to tremendous absolute poverty among the peasantry, but the colonial government's long-term halt in foodgrain production and the effects of World War II military spending resulted in a sharp rise in food prices, which in turn led to the 1943 Bengal famine, which killed three million people.



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It was a time of resistance as well. The struggle against colonialism gained an extraordinary force and sweep as a result of the destitute peasantry's backing. Additionally, a number of militant struggles among the working masses were a manifestation of the public awakening. Thus, this time of crisis for global capitalism also signalled the beginning of a massive global wave of revolution, which, of course, persisted for a while after the war ended but had started to slow down by 1950, albeit the protracted victory in Vietnam was the final instance of that upsurge.

The progressive cultural movement that arose in India and other places was both a result of and a factor in the power of this revolutionary wave. On the other hand, the demise of that revolutionary wave was reflected in the progressive cultural movement's inability to maintain its momentum in the 1950s and beyond. After more than fifty years, I think we are seeing the start of a new wave of revolution against global capitalism, which will obviously be different.

Change in its development, mobilisation strategy, and self-perceived advancement standards in contrast to the previous wave. This will also give rise to its own revolutionary progressive cultural movement, which will differ from the historical movement we are commemorating today.

I'm not here to make predictions about the characteristics of the upcoming cultural wave. It is to remind ourselves that in commemorating the old cultural movement, we must not fall into the trap of assuming that the task of progressive cultural movements must inevitably be confined simply to

what the old movement had set for itself, namely. supporting the fight to alter property relations in order to put an end to exploitation. Progressive cultural movements must continue to fight for the emancipation of the people, which calls for not only a change in property relations that involves the overthrow of the current ruling classes but also a transcendence of the old institutions and social mores that are upheld by cultural practices that define the old order. The overarching goal of overthrowing the exploitative dictatorship led by the large bourgeoisie and landowners cannot be the exclusive focus of progressive cultural organisations. They must also constantly be concerned with the daily fight against the caste-based patriarchal system, which is far more resilient than the particular exploiting groups that control it. In summary, emancipation necessitates a perpetual "cultural revolution"—a term that should be differentiated from both the Chinese "cultural revolution" and Leon Trotsky's "permanent revolution." This responsibility must be taken up by progressive movements as well. Allow me to elaborate.

Marxism views historical change as occurring in two stages: the dismantling of the previous community and the establishment of a new one. The old community is being destroyed by capitalism. The new society that emerges under capitalism ends up being the tool used to destroy capitalism itself; it culminates in the establishment of socialism. People do not choose to join the ancient community; rather, they are born into it. They choose to join the new community voluntarily due to being equally positioned inside the capitalist production process, which compels them to unite, initially in response to economic demands but later, as they theoretically understand the historical process, for coordinated political action to transcend the system. The old community is defined by status inequality within itself as well as exploitation by an outside power, such as an overlord.

It is a community that cripples the individual, i.e., among the exploited. Although capitalism purports to free the individual, it actually enslaves them to its immanent tendencies, turning them into a mere gear in the wheel of an impersonal, self-driven system. Paradoxically, the liberation of the individual only happens through the collective. The true liberation of the individual only happens through the new community, when individuals band together to intervene politically to effect a revolutionary overthrow of this "spontaneous" order and usher in socialism.

But in societies where capitalism appears late, is it possible for the old community to transform itself directly into the new community and thus by-pass the capitalist phase altogether? This is the question that had been posed to Marx by Vera Zasulich, who had wondered whether it was possible to build socialism directly on the basis of the old Russian village commune, the *mir*. The question so intrigued Marx that he wrote as many as four different drafts of a letter in reply to Zasulich, in 1881. While not ruling out the possibility of such a direct transition, Marx also noted that the Russian village commune, where the ownership of land was vested in the community but the operation of land was by individual families among whom it was periodically redistributed in accordance with family size, contained within itself a dualism that might give rise to differentiation among the peasantry, undermining the 'economic superiority of communal ownership'. The idea that capitalism not only could develop but was actually developing through differentiation within the village community itself was put across emphatically by Lenin in his classic work, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*. Indeed, by the turn of the century, there had been considerable changes in the Russian countryside, even compared to the time when Marx had written to Zasulich, and Lenin carefully documented these changes.

However, Lenin's own analysis, which served as the foundation for the revisionist agenda in twentieth-century third-world nations, envisioned an other kind of 'by-passing of capitalism'. The bourgeoisie, coming late on the historical scene, allied itself with the old feudal order, instead of dealing those decisive blows against it which thoroughgoing bourgeois revolutions, as in France, had done. The task of carrying forward the democratic revolution, for which the peasantry under the feudal yoke yearned, fell to the proletariat, since the bourgeoisie, afraid that

an attack on feudal property might rebound upon itself as an attack on bourgeois property, was not equal to this task. What Lenin visualised was a worker-peasant alliance that would carry forward the democratic revolution and move on to the socialist revolution, though of course, at each stage in this process, the classes within the peasantry that the working class would ally itself with would keep changing. Implicit in this view was a rejection of the position that the struggle for socialism must wait until capitalism had developed sufficiently. (Lenin was later to strengthen this argument, which he had developed by 1907, by inserting it into his theory of imperialism and the need for breaking the imperialist chain at its 'weakest link'.)

However, the demise of the old order by classical capitalism had two drawbacks:

two distinct components: the first was an attack on feudal property and the creation of petty property, the second was an attack on petty property and the creation of capitalist property, so that 'private property, based on personal labour will be supplanted by capitalist private property, based on the exploitation of the labour of others, on wage labour'. As Paul Baran was to note later, the development of capitalism had entailed in the countryside first a revolution in favour of the peasantry and then a counter-revolution against it. The Leninist conception of revolutionary transformation in Russia and other societies coming late to capitalism, by contrast, entailed the destruction of feudal property and its conversion into petty property, but not the expropriation of the petty producer, i.e. it visualised the first of the two components but not the second. The idea rather was to convert petty property into large-scale property through the coming together of petty producers to form co-operatives and collectives.

Thus, twentieth-century communist theory must inevitably

Not a rerun of the process capitalism had imposed on the previous system, it depicted the devastation of feudal property but not the devastation of petty property; instead, it showed petty property being converted into collective property. However, this also meant that communist theory did not envision the old community being destroyed, but rather being transformed over time and through changing class alliances into something that would not conflict with the socialist project, that is, with the goals of the new community, which was based on the proletariat.

However, this prompted the crucial question: to what degree could the old community, even if it was free of feudal exploitation, be forced to adapt to the new order emerging under the new community's leadership? If it couldn't, there was a chance that the shift to socialism would be completely undermined, in ways we will have the chance to discuss later.

This question, in turn, has two different dimensions, only one of which has been extensively discussed in communist literature thus far. It concerns the fact that the production of petty commodities creates capitalism through a process of internal differentiation within itself; in other words, capitalism may reappear through a process of differentiation among petty producers, even if it does not do so through the expropriation of petty producers. This can occur even if the petty producers are collectivised, as Marx had envisioned with regard to the *mir* in his letter to Vera Zasulich.

This was, of course, the main theoretical debate of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Chang Chun Chiao, Wang Hun Wen, Yao Wen Yuan, and Chiang Ching (the so-called "gang of four") were obsessed with the fear that the large number of petty commodity producers in China would provide, through internal differentiation, the genesis of a capitalist class. In fact, this fear has haunted ruling communist regimes everywhere for a long time, and as a result, they have insisted on limiting the scope of petty production, including even family production carried out with some hired help, out of fear of a capitalist restoration.

complete Cuban reforms.

Despite Lenin's famous (often taken out of context) statement that capitalism is developing "hourly" and "daily" within production, this fear of a capitalist restoration through differentiation among petty commodity producers is greatly exaggerated. In practice, this fear has been the source of much counterproductive ultra-Left deviation in communist regimes. The reason I think it is exaggerated is simply because any emergence of capitalism through this route is too long drawn out a process on i

And in our own country, we have had petty commodity production for centuries and even millennia without any notable historical tendency towards capitalist development through differentiation among such producers, i.e. through 'capitalism from below'. Even Maurice Dobb, in his famous work *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, downplayed the role of primitive accumulation of capital and emphasised this particular route, namely the process of differentiation among petty commodity producers, in the historical emergence of classical capitalism itself.

The other dimension of this question, namely the threat posed to social transformation by the continued existence of the old community, albeit within a set of transformed property relations, which has received less attention, relates to a whole gamut of ideological beliefs and socio-cultural practices. Not only are they major barriers to the march towards socialism, but, in conjunction with the tendency towards differentiation among petty commodity producers that may produce capitalist or proto-capitalist elements, they can prove to be an almost insurmountable barrier. What is more, since the new community that emerges in societies where capitalism develops late is itself not altogether free of the ideological perceptions and socio-cultural practices of the old community, its capacity to break these perceptions and practices gets correspondingly attenuated, giving rise for instance to the emergence of feudal traits even among the most advanced segments of the proletarian leadership. The net result may be a social stasis that creates the conditions for a capitalist restoration, not 'from below', as the ultra-Left fears, but through creating propitious conditions for the intervention of imperialism.

To demonstrate the point, let's look at a hypothetical situation: even though the caste system serves the interests of the feudal ruling class, it does not automatically disappear when this ruling class is overthrown by a revolution that alters the property relations in the countryside. The old community, of which the caste system is a defining characteristic, persists even after the feudal (or proto-capitalist) landlords who were its earlier "guardians" are removed. In their case, new "guardians" emerge, frequently drawn from the wealthiest petty producers in the old community, who now have the opportunity to strengthen their position due to the very elimination of the exploiting class that held them in thrall. They do realise this possibility because the process of differentiation among petty producers in the countryside favours them.

In other words, quite apart from the indubitable fact that ideological perceptions and cultural practices are not simply directly reducible to the property relations that underlie them, and have a life of their own and a durability that extends well beyond these property relations, the material roots of such ideological perceptions and cultural practices themselves may get nourishment even after the removal of the erstwhile exploiting class, not just despite but often because of such removal. The hope that the advanced leadership of the proletariat will intervene to act against such nourishment may also get belied for a number of reasons: first, because the advanced leadership itself may not be entirely free of these ideological perceptions and cultural practices. Even if the first generation leadership which ushers in the revolution may be free of these perceptions and practices, the same may not be true of subsequent generations, especially if the revolution remains isolated without sparking similar revolutions elsewhere. Secondly, in such conditions of isolation and encirclement, the tactical pressure 'not to rock the boat', to come to a sort of *modus vivendi* with the cultural practices and ideological perceptions of the old community, will be great, and succumbing to such pressure by a beleaguered leadership is all the more likely.

Additionally, there is a third, more intricate explanation. The shift from the involves a process of personal freedom, whereby the individual intentionally joins the new community as a thinking individual in the process of understanding the historical process; as this progresses, so does the individual's understanding of the need for the new community and commitment to it; the old community suppresses the individual, whereas the new community is founded on the individual's freedom; however, in a beleaguered socialist regime, there will be a strong tendency, for tactical reasons once more, to rein in the individual to ensure easy passage for decisions made by the leadership; this reining in of the individual, even within the new community, may compound the old community's suppression of the individual, resulting in an all-around conservative conformism that impedes the revolution's progress.

No matter what stance one takes on this, it is undeniable that the likelihood of this occurring is significantly increased in a historical context where the ideological perceptions and cultural practices of the old community remain unimpaired. Rosa Luxemburg is among the many who have commented on the tendency inherent in a "democratic centralist" Party towards sheer centralism on the one hand, and the de-politicization and de-activation of the masses on the other.

As was previously mentioned, the debate within the Chinese Cultural Revolution revolved around the capitalist tendency inherent in petty production, which could be expressed through the leadership of the Communist Party itself (hence the slogans "the bourgeoisie is inside the Party itself and "bombard the headquar- ters"). However, in contrast to this perspective, which was advanced by the so-called "gang of four," Zhou Enlai gave Edgar Snow an interview in which he saw the necessity of the Cultural Revolution as arising from the remnants of old traditional China, from superstitions, social conservatism, and patriarchal practices of the past, or what I have called "the ideological perceptions and cultural practices of the old community."

Naturally, these two viewpoints are not distinct and incompatible; on

Conversely, as previously mentioned, the continuation of the old community also increases the likelihood of the new community being distorted. Needless to say, none of this is a justification for letting society descend into the unproductive chaos of the Red Guards on the rampage, which is just as incapable of emancipating the individual in

The only limited point being made here is that the transition to socialism becomes impossible without breaking with some of the fundamental ideological perceptions and cultural practices of the old community. In a world where this break is not "spontaneously" effected through an actual destruction of the old community itself, as happened under classical capitalism, it must be attempted through cultural intervention by the "organic intellectuals" of the new community. Establishing the foundation of a new community on the basis of such liberation is the alternative scenario of conservative conformism.

Cultural intervention must, of course, aim at activating the people against exploitation by making them aware of their true predicament; that goes without saying. However, it also has the task of fighting against the ideological perceptions and cultural practices of the old order so that the individual is freed from suppression and can thus acquire the theoretical comprehension to become free of the mechanism that produces communal, caste, and gender op-pression. The goal of such an intervention must be to break with patriarchy, exclusivism, anti-minorityism (including "communalism" in our case), xenophobia-xenophilia, and all manifestations of narrow localism.

The reason I haven't brought up this point yet is because the current paper aims to challenge this very understanding. This argument may seem strange at first glance. Surely, the goal of a progressive cultural movement in a society trying to transition to socialism must be to introduce socialist cultural values.

All previous modes of production have been characterised by the fact that their arrival has involved a dichotomy between what people set out to achieve when they revolted against the pre-existing order and what they actually achieved. Since socialism is not a mode of production on par with the earlier modes of production, the transition to socialism cannot be a simple replication of the historical experience of transitioning to other modes of production.

of production, in short, have entailed human-kind being trapped within a movement of history over which it has had no control. Socialism, by contrast, entails an escape from the 'trap of history', a significant and increasing measure of coincidence between the intentions behind people's collective historical actions and the actual outcome of such actions. It marks the end of 'spontaneity' through collective action that is founded upon a correct theoretical comprehension of the human condition. Socialism, for this reason, is not inevitable, not a denouement towards which history by its own movement will push humankind. It has to be worked for, on the basis of praxis that is grounded upon a correct theoretical comprehension. The struggle for socialism, it follows, is marked by an intense theoretical endeavour on the part of every individual, and not the filling of people's minds with pebbles called 'socialist values' or 'socialist culture'. To be handed out something called 'socialist culture' or 'socialist values' that must be imbibed militates against the acquisition of a subject role by the working people; it implicitly entails viewing them as 'objects' rather than 'subjects', which defeats the very purpose of Socialism.

To put it another way, "socialist culture" or "socialist values" are what people will come to through theoretical praxis, which naturally requires that the political formations involved in theoretical praxis and the leading elements of the proletariat start the conversation about what these terms might entail. However, to view them as "things" to be spread among the populace in the name of facilitating the march to socialism would actually slow that march. What is needed to develop a "socialist culture" is liberation from the oppression of the old community, a liberation of "reason" from the deadweight of tradition.

I have discussed the shift to socialism thus far. What can be said about nations like India that are not undergoing this shift but are instead following a path of capitalist development, and that too with significant vigour?

The capitalism that is emerging here, and in other third-world countries, is a remarkable paradox. While it is brutal in the way it squeezes petty producers (over two lakh peasants in India have committed suicide in the last ten years), it is incredibly limited in its ability to increase the active army of wage labourers. As a result, either the petty producers continue to work in their traditional occupations in even more distressed and miserable conditions, or they migrate to cities to join the reserve army of labour, performing odd jobs in what has come to be euphemistically referred to as the "informal sector."

The old community is not destroyed as long as the distressed petty producers continue to engage in their traditional practices due to a lack of opportunities in the capitalist sector. The encroachment of capitalism on the livelihood of petty producers and the push for petty production to the point where even simple reproduction at the custodial level of subsistence becomes impossible do not result in the destruction of the old community as classical capitalism did. Additionally, the formation of the new community is stunted as long as the size of the active army of labour employed by capitalism remains small, which further contributes to the continuation of the old community's cultural practices and ideological perceptions.

In summary, the ideology and cultural practices of the old community are not sufficiently undermined despite the vigour of capitalist development and the material pressure on petty producers. Lastly, as the size of the reserve army of labour increases, often under the guise of "casual work" or "informal sector employment," an underclass or lump-proletariat is created that is easily susceptible to communal-fascist and exclusivist ideologies, or can be coerced into

becoming the flag-bearers for movements that adhere to these ideologies. These ideologies are "modern" in one sense (certainly in the sense that they typically enjoy the active support of finance capital), but they have roots in the old community's ideological perceptions.

Therefore, even the formal duty of releasing the individual from their caste or communal roots—something capitalism is historically associated with accomplishing—remains unfulfilled by the capitalism emerging in the country.

nations like India, despite their robustness demonstrated by high GDP growth. Since this formal release of the individual from enchantment with the old community is a key characteristic of "modernity," capitalist development in India, no matter how quick, fails to bring true "modernity"; instead, it creates a kitsch where khap panchayats and female foeticide coexist with swank shopping malls and oversized automobiles, with some of the people who frequent the malls or drive the cars being khap panchayats and female foeticide.

Classical capitalism's ability to introduce such 'modernity', which in turn hinged upon its ability to ensure that the destruction of the old community did not just result in magnified unemployment and underemployment, is usually attributed by Marxists to its inherent dynamism. But this does not necessarily, in my view, represent a correct reading of the historical situation. The fact that the destruction of petty production simply did not swell the reserve army of labour was due largely to massive emigration from the countries where classical capitalism developed to countries of the so-called 'new world'. For nearly a century until the First World War, for instance, around half the increase in Britain's population every year emigrated to the temperate regions of white settlement, such as the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In the period between the middle of the nineteenth century and the First World War, 50 million persons from Europe emigrated to these temperate lands, where they drove the local inhabitants off their lands and started cultivating these lands.

These lands' accessibility and, thus, the comparatively high calibre of

What is attributed to the so-called innate historical dynamism of capitalism often turns out to have been caused by capitalism's ability to establish its control over the rest of the world; the current case is one example of this phenomenon. A higher standard of living that could be enjoyed through such emigration also explained the increase in wages that the workers at home obtained from their capitalist employers. Of course, it also made it possible for the old community to be destroyed and for the individual to be freed from its thralldom.

Therefore, the fact that capitalism has no more room to colonise the world is linked to its incapacity to formally free the individual from thralldom to the old community in nations like India, where the task traditionally accomplished by bourgeois development, namely the

No matter how quickly capitalism advances materially, it cannot destroy not only feudal property but also the old community itself; instead, the forces fighting for the socialist system must accomplish this dual goal.

"The progressive cultural movement associated with these forces must thus fight, on its own territory, not only against the exploitative order led by the bourgeoisie, which is allied with the rich landed interests, but also against the ideological perceptions and cultural practices of the old order, against caste, patriarchy, communalism, and all forms of individual suppression by the so-called 'traditions' of the old community. This latter struggle is a permanent one that extends from the present until the establishment of a new order, but since the process is not a final one that ends on a specific date, it is an ongoing one.

The idea of a nation delinking itself is completely rejected by many Western Marxists.

from the current global order as part of a revolutionary process of transition to socialism. The nationalism that must ideologically underpin such delinking is suspect in their eyes because it is inward-looking and therefore potentially reactionary. (The examples of Slobodan Milosevich and others are typically given to drive home the point.) However, if globalisation under the hegemony of international finance capital (for which the term 'imperialist globalisation' is frequently used as a shorthand expression) is to be opposed, then there is no alternative to such struggles being nation-based, and thus, delinking being a central part of the agenda. In fact, there is little coordination in the working class's struggles across nations; the question of coordination of the peasantry's struggles has not even come up.

As a result, the sole tool for combating imperialist globalisation and

To say this, however, does not mean ignoring the concerns expressed by the Western Marxists; rather, it means that the hegemony of international finance capital, which underpins it, is achieved through a worker-peasant alliance in individual countries with an agenda of delinking from this global order in order to essay changes in property relations within these countries.

Progressive cultural movements, as part of a permanent cultural revolution, constitute a key element in any such revolutionary praxis. However, it is difficult to overcome the possibility that the revolutionary break will be overwhelmed by its isolation and end up strengthening reactionary tendencies rooted in the old community.

Remarks

First draft of Marx's letter to Vera Zasulich.

The Political Economy of Growth by Paul A. Baran, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1957.