

The RADICAL

Vol 2, No 2, October 2021

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Editorial

At this time it is the developments in Afghanistan that have hogged the international headlines. Which is why this newsletter, our fourth, carries an article providing a broad historical sweep of changes from the initial establishment of a monarchical Afghan state in 1747 to the current 'Islamic emirate of Afghanistan'. A Statement released by Radical Socialist group in late August [<http://www.radicalsocialist.in/articles/world-politics/932-radical-socialist-statement-on-afghanistan-a-double-tragedy>] welcomed the end of the US occupation and the overthrow of its client regime but also expressed, in solidarity with the people of Afghanistan, clear opposition to the reactionary Taliban forces that have replaced them and are now in the process of forming their own government to carry out their programme.

Two matters need to be separated here. Howsoever repressive the Taliban---past and present---one must not fall into the trap of bemoaning the US departure let alone defending its initial utterly unjustified invasion in 2001 and the subsequent occupation and control of Afghanistan via puppet regimes. During the Cold War the ideological banner mostly used by the US for its imperialist behaviour, which included military interventions in other countries, was "Protecting the Free Word from the Communist threat". After the collapse of the Soviet bloc and China's turn to state capitalism, the US has had to resort to other ideological banners. One of these has been

"Humanitarian Intervention" to justify its military assaults and invasions. This is why we carry here a short but focused dissection of the different moral-legal arguments put forward so as to identify clearly what should be the most honourable political stand to adopt.

As for responding to the Taliban takeover, a dual-track approach is necessary. Given the terrible economic situation prevailing in Afghanistan, there is need for massive unconditional aid to flow in to meet basic welfare needs like food and medicines as well as repairs and construction of vital infrastructure and other public facilities. At the same time there is definitely a place for tying political recognition and material forms of support not just to evacuation of one's nationals and to the free flow of refugees (a must) but to Kabul's commitments and practices regarding basic human rights especially those relating to women, girls and LGBTQI. Here, if we are to go by what Taliban leaders have said and the way in which their forces have so far behaved, the situation looks grim. This is not the same Taliban that ruled between 1996 to 2001 but what have they learnt from that earlier period of international isolation and internal tensions? It seems that they want wide political-diplomatic recognition from countries and good relations from powerful neighbours, notably Pakistan, Iran, Russia and China. The latter two can provide massive investments for exploiting the country's mineral wealth. So control over domestic

radical Islamist groups to prevent export of insurgency actions in Central Asia, XinJiang and elsewhere would seem to be a must as well as avoiding the return of a civil war situation with further dramatic displacement of a war-weary population. How successful they might be in these efforts remains to be seen. But on the domestic social, cultural, gender and political fronts the prospects are frankly dismal.

The remarkable farmers struggle continues but the Centre still refuses to rescind the three farm laws even as outside North India it is pursuing piecemeal changes in accordance with those very laws. Both sides appear to have in their sights the coming assembly elections in 2022 particularly those in Punjab and UP. In the former the Congress government has replaced Amarinder Singh as Chief Minister by a Dalit, C.S. Channi to hopefully capture most of the 31% Dalit vote. The farmers organisations believe they can exercise major influence to topple the BJP in UP but it is not clear what their electoral intervention will be in Punjab where the resignation of Sidhu as Chief of the Congress party there (his ascension to that post was meant to signal his rise as the new and rising face) has created some turmoil to the likely benefit of AAP. The Sangh Parivar/BJP will undoubtedly seek to play the politics of promoting communal polarisation not only in the states facing elections but more generally. The rise of the Taliban will be used to spread the fear of radical Islamist groups within the country that are presumably inspired by this and are supposedly being backed by forces from outside, notably Pakistan. Should the BJP nonetheless feel that this is not enough and that it faces some serious electoral reversals especially in UP then there might be some chance of a mediated agreement between the government and the farmers that makes partial concessions to the latter. But this remains in the realm of speculation.

We carry here the second part of an

ongoing series dealing with why capitalism will always suffer from major periodic crises. The first part looked at the responses, utterly inadequate, of conventional economic thinking in trying to understand why this happens. Here, reasons are given for why the Marxist approach is so much superior in this regard. However, the first foundational step in the Marxist approach to explaining such crises requires grasping the 'labour theory of value' (LTV) or why profits---the driving force of capitalism-- originates from the capital-labour relationship. So the LTV has to be and is explained in simple and clear terms.

Unlike the mainstream or Maoist influenced Indian left, Radical Socialist (RS) does not accept their characterisation of India as semi-feudal/semi-colonial nor the 'four class' set of alliances that is supposed to bring about the first stage in a two-stage strategy of revolutionary change. According to this approach the current goal then is to try and achieve this first stage of establishing some kind of popular democracy. This will be a prolonged period during which capitalism will become the dominant mode of production, a majority working class will be formed and the stage then set for the next 'anti-capitalist and socialist' revolution. A short note on why semi-feudalism/semi-colonialism is a mischaracterisation of the Indian economy is given here. India is a backward capitalist country and since capitalist development is always uneven and combined there are various admixtures of the old and new with respect to labour processes, technologies and social relations and cultural attitudes.

Also featured here is a brief report on RS activities in West Bengal including the Hosiery workers' struggle and our regular 'Conversations on the Left' segment that gives links on worthwhile readings to follow up.

Afghanistan: From 1747 to the End of US Occupation

Achin Vanaik

How should revolutionary Marxists and progressives more generally respond to the latest developments in Afghanistan where the much desired end of the US occupation has been brought about by the clearly oppressive forces of the Taliban? How did this happen? What is the history of Afghanistan that has made it the supposed “graveyard of foreign empires”? What now faces its people and where is that country heading? It is these and other questions that this article will seek to address.

Early History: 1747 to the Saur Revolution

In 1747 chiefs of different tribes---each controlling their own lands, water sources and fortifications---came together in an historic council meet or jirga to appoint an overlord of what would be the first Afghan, largely Pushtun state. He was Ahmad Shah Sadozai also known as Ahmad Shah Durrani and Ahmad Khan Abdali. Under his Kingship, the Afghan state expanded through territorial conquests (he was the victor against the Maratha army at the third battle of Panipat, 1761) but after his death in 1772 internecine fighting between tribes, branches and amidst various claimants to the throne would continue for more than a century. The Tsarist and British empires growing in these regions also sought to expand their own territorial control and political influence with rulers in Kabul. In this geo-political game London rather than Moscow mostly got the upper hand.

In the war of 1839 the British military was able to enthrone Shah Shuja, one of the Afghan claimants as their puppet. But having influence on the nominal ruler in Kabul was one thing, controlling the country, the

various tribal chiefs and warlords with their fiefdoms or the general public, was another. Three years later British forces, not willing to suffer the high costs in either personnel casualties or financial expenses, were ousted. This was to be a pattern repeated throughout the 19th century. The British looked for foreign policy acquiescence from the Kabul Court and kept it dependent on stipends they disbursed, but steered clear of the fractious and fiercely independent domestic political arena. Over time the British also acquired substantial territories so that a large part of the Pushtun region became part of British India (later the Northwest Frontier Province or NWFP of independent Pakistan) and this was formalised through the 1893 Treaty that made the Durand Line the international boundary. However, no Afghan government would accept the Durand line as a permanent feature. This overall arrangement of power-sharing between Kabul and London suited the latter fine but even this state of affairs would come to an end in 1919 with another military defeat and British acceptance of the full sovereignty and complete independence of Afghanistan under its new ruler Amanullah Khan.

Khan, a modernizing nationalist, had been influenced first, by the Persian Revolution of 1906 which introduced a limited form of electoral democracy and some associated civic rights while retaining royal power and privilege; second, by the secular-modernizing thrusts of Kemalism in Turkey; and later by the 1917 Russian Revolution. His reign lasted ten years till his forced abdication in 1929 under pressure from internal opponents abetted indirectly by the British who feared the impact his rule and reforms would have

on their rule in India, whose own struggles for independence greatly accelerated after the Jalianwala Bagh massacre of 1919. In these ten years Khan set up the 1923 Constitution which declared a range of individual civic rights, sexual equality, free universal education, reduced the power of the Ulema and of Islamic law, pronounced newer rights for ethnic minorities while also centralising more powers in royal hands so as to carry on with his modernizing aims. In a society still without a reasonably sized bourgeoisie, let alone a progressive one, these changes hardened all sides of the opposition to him. Amendments in 1925 and in 1931 scaled back secular and social reforms, retracted references to women and reasserted Islam as the country's religion while making official the Hanafi school of jurisprudence. Two houses of 'parliament' were also created with no lawmaking but only advisory powers to the King.

The new King, Nadir Shah was assassinated in 1933 and his son Zahir Shah, a mild nationalist, reigned for the next forty years. He tried to balance between the West and Soviet Russia, sought aid from all sides while remaining neutral in WWII. Some modernization and capitalist development had taken place; an educated class had risen with Kabul the seat of a University where students were becoming radicalised in different ways. A republican movement was growing and given how in West Asia and North Africa, traditional kingships had been overthrown by movements from below, Zahir Shah saw merit in moving toward a less autocratic constitutional monarchical system. In the 1964 Constitution, though Islam remained the country's religion, formal sovereignty was now vested in the people and statutory law and a separate judiciary superseded Sharia which ruled where statutory law was absent. There would be full adult suffrage

every four years for elections to the lower House of the People while deputies of the upper House of Elders would be appointed by the King, a Provincial Council and by the Chairman of the House. Formal equality of men, women and all tribes was declared. But actual executive power rested with the King alone and his chosen advisors even as all other members of the Royal family were now constitutionally barred from taking part in politics. Parliament could ratify treaties, oversee the national budget and make laws provided these got passage through the unelected and controlled upper house. Opposition parties were allowed and could make themselves widely heard. The global youth upsurge of the 1960s and 70s left its mark here too, with Kabul students divided between Communists attracted to the USSR and its version of Marxism and the less numerous others attracted by variants of an Islamic code covering the organisation of political, social and personal life. This divide would provide key cadres and leaders of the future political-organisational conflict between the two radicalising (secular versus religious) forces.

The PDPA, formed in 1965, always had two main factions, the larger Khalq (Masses) and Parcham (Flag). Mohammed Taraki of the former was made General Secretary and Babrak Karmal of the latter, the First Secretary. The cadres of the former came largely from rural middle peasant and poorer backgrounds; those of the latter from urban middle and upper class sections and were less radical in their modernising demands, less in a hurry to achieve the socialist goal and therefore more willing to work with other conservative and religious groups seeking a stronger and more materially developed Afghanistan. This small party, ideologically and organisationally closed, got three out of eight candidates elected to the lower house

in the 1965 polls. Subsequent left student demonstrations met with state violence and the paper brought out under the name 'Khalq' was closed. Accusing the majority faction of unwarranted 'left-adventurism' Parcham led by Karmal split from the party in 1967.

The generally bad economic situation after 1967 dramatically deteriorated in 1971-72 because of the worst famine in the country's history causing at least half-a-million deaths. The moment was opportune for Mohammed Daud, cousin of Zahir Shah who had also served in key ministerial positions under him and was upset by the Constitutional political ban on the Royal family. With the help especially of the Parcham and Soviet trained and influenced army officers, he carried out a coup in July 1973 while the King was in Italy. Daud's his first act was to establish the Republic of Afghanistan subsequently annulling the 1964 Constitution. Personally ambitious and promising reforms, Daud began to move against his erstwhile supporters and by 1975 he had removed Parchamites from his government as well as the army officers who enabled his coup. In foreign policy he shifted away from the USSR towards the Shah of Iran and his secret police (SAVAK) who promised aid and constituted a counter-balance to Pakistan with whom relations were deteriorating. This was because Daud, a Pushtun himself, began promoting a cross-border Pushtuni nationalism now seemingly more conceivable since Bangladesh had earlier successfully broken away while nationalist resistances in both Baluchistan and NWFP had escalated around the same time. Alongside these trans-border ambitions, Daud also pursued a renewed repression of local Communists leading to the re-unification of the two wings of the PDPA in 1977. Though Daud formally abandoned his support for a greater Pushtunistan, as Pakistan and the US wanted, it would not

save his rule.

The Saur Revolution; Soviet Invasion; Departure and Aftermath

The Saur Revolution began in response to an attack by Daud. On April 17, 1978 the assassination of the number two Parcham leader, Akbar Khyber Khan later followed by arrests of the top leaders of both wings triggered the PDPA self-defensive coup carried out with the help of key officers of the 4th Armoured Corps and of an air force squadron. As it was, the continuing failures of economic development had alienated the public and the rest of the armed forces did not come to Daud's rescue. The sudden propulsion to power in Kabul on April 27 did not heal the tense differences between Khalq and Parcham but these were papered over for the time being by appointing Taraki Prime Minister, Karmal as one of three Deputy premiers with the other two going to Hafizullah Amin (Taraki's rival within the Khalq) and to Mohammed Aslam Watanjar who had commanded the Corps. Central Committee and Cabinet positions were equally divided between the two factions. Though the PDPA was pro-Soviet, Moscow was nonetheless taken by surprise by the Saur Revolution.

The combined membership of PDPA was well short of 10,000 and it had no real implantation amidst the mass of soldiers, among the bulk of government personnel while beyond Kabul it had a negligible presence in a predominantly rural country. Henceforth, as a Stalinist one-party government, it sought to carry out a programme of agrarian and social reforms in a purely top-down manner by decrees implemented through the administrative apparatus. This, unsurprisingly, created popular hostility, which in turn exacerbated the existing differences between the

two factions. The internal jockeying for positions within government went the way of the Khalq which by November 1978 had largely succeeded in pushing out its rival. The Soviet-Afghan "Treaty of Cooperation and Friendship" in December 1978 was an acknowledgement of the socio-political isolation of the PDPA but would not stop this rivalry nor prevent growing tensions within the Khalq as expressed in the conflict between Taraki and Amin.

What about the proposed reforms? Some 4% of the population owned around 41% of the total 19 million acres of arable land. Land reforms did initially help a section of the rural poor as did debt cancellations. But the absence of rural credit facilities and of infrastructural support in the form of seeds, fertilisers, marketing and other vital facilities meant that newly empowered land holders could not sustain themselves or their families. So the alienation of the supposed beneficiaries of land reform was added to the anger of big landlords and tribal chiefs. Cultural-linguistic rights of ethnic groups were acknowledged and TUs were legalised but there was no right to strike. On the social front, child marriages were banned, gender equality legalised, bride price reduced to a nominal amount and mutual consent required for wedlock. Co-education at all levels was made compulsory, a literacy campaign inaugurated as well as plans to build education and medical centres that over time saw limited and geographically uneven fulfilment. Without a significant cadre base, let alone mass popularity, such an ideological-political onslaught on entrenched Islamic beliefs and structures and criss-crossing power-centres, especially in the countryside, only aroused massive opposition and anger. Resistance by tribal chiefs, local commanders, ethnic warlords and a range of Islamist leaders rose against the

atheistic PDPA. This was abetted by flows of funds and military equipment from the US, NATO allies, Pakistan and Iran, each of these states having their own 'axes to grind'. This external support would dramatically expand after the Soviet Invasion in December 1979 and included US material backing for Bin Laden and Al Qaeda.

The implosion of the Saur Revolution began with the assassination of Taraki, organised by the ambitious Amin (whom Moscow suspected of possible US connections). The ensuing instability triggered a Soviet military intervention, a chain of events underwritten by the 1978 treaty with the Soviets. Amin, barricaded within the Presidential palace and surprised by the Soviet intervention against him, was found shot dead once the dust settled. A reluctant Moscow, always partial to Parcham's more cautious approach, brought back Karmal to head the PDPA. While some 100,000 Soviet troops sought to control cities, large towns and major garrisons, the party had no real base outside the capital. There, a welter of uncoordinated Mujahideen rebel groups dominated the countryside. To try and change this, Soviet armed forces launched a serious bombing campaign including the use of landmines to basically de-populate the rural hinterland. Not only did this cause even greater public embitterment, it failed to dislodge the Mujahideen whose acquisition of shoulder-held anti-aircraft missiles (supplied by US and UK) successfully countered Soviet airpower.

Accompanying this military stalemate was the increasing financial and personnel costs for the Soviets---they lost 15,000 soldiers and many more injured---a higher count than that for the US later on. The brutality of the increasingly senseless Soviet occupation was, however, significant. Afghan casualties, civilian and otherwise were in the

range of one to two lakhs though probably considerably more. Around 2.8 million fled to Pakistan---they would be the principal source-bed for the recruitment and formation of young Taliban students who unlike their parents and elders had lost all connection with traditional ties and loyalties and were to be ideologically united by inculcation of an extreme variant of Deobandi Islam. Leave aside huge numbers internally displaced, another 1.5 million fled to Iran. Faced with opposition, Moscow slowed down the reforms and moved towards seeking greater compromises and accommodations with the forces rebelling against the occupation. This caused differences even within the now predominantly Parcham PDPA. Karmal was replaced as head by Najibullah Khan in 1986, the year Gorbachev decided to withdraw, a decision completed in mid-February 1989. In this interregnum of 1986-89, a "National Reconciliation" programme was set up along with a National Assembly to which elections were held in 1988. Islam was made the "sacred religion" of the country. There were abortive proposals to form a coalition government with opposition parties. In April 1988 the Geneva Accords were signed between Pakistan and Afghanistan wherein both sides committed to non-interference allowing refugees to voluntarily return. These Accords were supported by the US and USSR, each promising non-interference in the two countries while a timetable for full Soviet withdrawal was also finalised.

Rise of the Taliban

Part of the reason why Gorbachev decided to withdraw was his effort to bring an end to the wider Cold War face-off itself. Successive US governments, however, emboldened by the subsequent Soviet and East Bloc Collapse in 1991, had no hesitation in betraying the Geneva Accords and continuing to funnel arms and money to

the Mujahideen opponents of the PDPA. The PDPA, meanwhile, adopted the new name of Homeland Party in 1990 and dropped all references to Marxism-Leninism. The next year the government crumbled, but the various Mujahideen groups, despite US-backed Saudi efforts, were unable to come together and the civil war continued between the rival Islamic forces. Refugees continued to flock to Pakistan and Iran as well as massive internal displacements. The main battle line in this civil war was now between the largely Pushtun Taliban, officially formed in 1994 and backed by Pakistan, and the Northern Alliance of different warlords. By 1996 Taliban had captured more than 80% of the country and entered Kabul.

It established the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" and enforced its own very strict interpretation of Sharia law. Jobs for women outside segregated healthcare were banned. Closeted dress codes were imposed for women in public where they had to be accompanied by a male relative while girls were denied access to school and college education. Various cultural and recreational activities were designated as anti-Islamic and would elicit severe punishments. Shias, non-Muslim religious communities, as well as ethnic minorities faced serious discrimination and cultural restrictions. Nor was the Taliban able to adequately address the terrible economic condition of most of the population ravaged by years of war. Only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and UAE recognized the new regime which meant prospects for securing much needed outside development aid and humanitarian help was limited. The stability of Taliban rule was a result of public exhaustion rather than active consent. Armed resistance was confined to small pockets in the north.

Initial US attitudes and policies were not hostile to the Taliban regime. Though no

formal diplomatic recognition took place, an Afghan 'office' was set up in New York for contact. Clinton approved of Taliban's opposition to Iran which had backed the Hazaras the Taliban had earlier fought against. Washington was also angling for the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) oil-gas pipeline project to be given to an American-led consortium of companies against an Argentinian rival. The deal did not fructify and in 1998 Al Qaeda was suspected of carrying out US Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. Clinton responded with attacks in Sudan and Al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan. From that point on relations steadily deteriorated but did not prevent a deal in 2000 whereby the US paid \$43 million to the Taliban for burning poppy fields under its control; which incidentally enabled the Northern Alliance to have a monopoly on opium revenues.

The US Occupation

The 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington constituted international crimes against humanity. But this was not how the US government saw it. That would mean designating the culprits (of the 19 hijackers, 15 were Saudis and none were Afghans) as criminals as also the Al Qaeda network; and going after specifically those responsible. Instead, the US government declared 9/11 a first salvo against it by terrorists in a global war. Moreover, it was immediately affirmed that there would be no distinction between the culprits (and terrorists more generally) and the country(ies) that housed them. This served the much wider foreign policy goal of the US because it transformed a conflict against a non-state network into a conflict between itself and a range of states which could now in self-justification be attacked and invaded. An official list of countries arbitrarily and selectively said to be housing terrorist groups as well as a list of terrorist

organisations (the Taliban was now for the first time added to this list) were filled up.

Over the next two decades, in the name of the Global War on Terror (GWOT), the US under different presidents (Clinton, Obama, Bush) would attack nine Muslim majority countries creating the conditions for deaths in the several millions. The Taliban head, Mullah Omar condemned the 9/11 attacks and offered to hand Bin Laden over to the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) to be put on trial. US interests, however, were only partly to do with getting Bin Laden or destroying Al Qaeda. Wider ambitions were at play. In keeping with post-Cold War strategic objectives, controlling Afghanistan would mean a dramatic geo-political and military advance, implanting the US in a region bordering its three most important potential or actual rivals---Russia, China, Iran---as well as giving it much greater access to the then largest untapped sources of hydrocarbon wealth in the Central Asian Republics.

Starting on October 7, 2001 there was a six weeks stretch of intense bombing including use of lethal 'daisy cutters' and cluster bombs followed by a major influx of troops. By the end of 2001 the US was in full command. How was this possible? The key was US pressure on and threats to Pakistan. The latter persuaded the Taliban to preserve its fighters, give up political control, melt into the countryside and to Pushtun lands on both sides of the Durand Line; and thus be able to fight another day if and when required. Even after this swift victory the US basically ruled through proxy, setting up a government representative of the various socially brutal factions of the Northern Alliance and headed by Hamid Karzai. To the wide scale bombing were added US 'search and destroy' missions against a physically unknown enemy which would therefore result in mass level

brutalities against rural families causing ever greater bitterness among wide sections of the population. The subsequent boom in poppy/opium production and exchange had to be tolerated since it was a major and growing source of wealth for the Northern Alliance groups. In short, the US ruled through corrupt puppet regimes whose ‘loyalties’ spread only as far as their patronage could reach while leaving the masses in the countryside subject to the complex criss-crossing of traditional power centres in which the subterranean forces of the Taliban were now being inserted and expanding.

Over the next twenty years most of the over \$2 trillion brought in from the US would be spent on the occupation forces, related personnel and networks of support. Much of the rest was drained off by Afghan collaborators. Some development took place in the cities and foreign funded NGOs, domestic and international, became (in salaries and facilities) ‘high self-maintenance’ service providers to some sections of the population. Afghanistan in overall terms remained poor but more grossly unequal in income and wealth. Its 2019 country ranking was 148 out of 183 (life expectancy), 166 out of 191 (infant mortality), 165 out of 191 (under-5 mortality), 176 out of 178 (youth not in school or employed). The 2004 Constitution set up an American-style elected four-year Presidential term and restored the two parliamentary chambers. Some civil and political rights were given and the judiciary was to be separate from the executive. But the crucial drawback was that all laws and rights were made subordinate to Islamic law for this “Islamic Republic of Afghanistan”. This meant that the powers which ruled at the central and provincial levels and what their religious views and beliefs were, would decide what practices and rights of behaviour would be acceptable. In 2005 the Bagram

airbase was handed over to Washington for as long as it would want.

From 2004/5 onwards the Taliban started to revive. Their puritanical strictness meant they could act locally as relatively incorruptible arbiters of various disputes as well as the only or main opponents of the foreign invasion, the corrupt government and its factotums. It was not the ‘virtues’ of the Taliban or ideological loyalty to it that gave it growing popular support but much more the negativities---economic, social and political---of the really existing situation for which the current regime was held accountable. Between 2005-09, the Taliban now willing to moderate its socio-cultural programmes and practices, and seeking recruits from among Tajiks, Uzbeks and even Hazaras, expanded territorially from its main strongholds in the south. It was also able to infiltrate the Afghan police and army and its guerrilla actions were beginning to turn the tide. On the one hand there was this reorganisation of the Taliban and on the other hand the growing venality of the Afghan government and the members of the Northern Alliance. In this situation for more and more people the issue became simply one of choosing between two sides---a resistance howsoever puritanical, and a corrupt regime unable to address developmental problems for the majority of the public and backed by foreign invaders.

The twenty year war in Afghanistan has, however, also destabilised Pakistan. The US, perceiving the Taliban’s revival from the mid-2000s, decided that it had to attack the Taliban’s “safe refuge” in Pakistan’s North West Frontier Province. To this end, Washington brokered the return of Benazir Bhutto with Musharraf in 2008. The terms of that agreement meant that he would remain President for a third term, while corruption charges against her would be dropped. She

and her Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) would participate in elections, which would almost certainly propel her to premiership, and both would endorse the US making the conflict an "Afpak" war by carrying out drone and bomb attacks in NWFP and especially the more autonomous hilly Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). In the course of the election campaign Bhutto was assassinated. Riding a wave of public sympathy and a popular upsurge against Musharraf led by lawyers, Bhutto's husband Asif Zardari led the PPP to victory in 2008. Musharraf was forced into exile and Zardari took over as President of the country, committed to the deal with the US involving the attack on FATA. The Pakistan army had serious qualms about US bombings, acutely aware that this would alienate the public, stir up Pushtun nationalism, and also help turn the Pakistan-based Tehrik-e-Taliban (an auxiliary force to the Afghan Taliban) against the government and army. Despite US material and monetary pay-offs to the army and government, and extended bombing and drone warfare in FATA, none of these efforts could prevent the steady advance of the Afghan Taliban. The human toll on the people in the region, however, rose steadily and the US assault has created, as a more lasting feature, the enduring hostility of the Pakistan Taliban to both Islamabad and Washington.

By the middle of the second decade of the 21st century the US faced three choices. Should it continue to buttress the Afghan military (which was showing no real fighting capacity) and the puppet regime whose main leaders---Karzai, Abdullah, Ghani---were at loggerheads with each other? Should it take a longer term wait-and-see-attitude and all that this would entail in terms of further investment of personnel and resources? Or should it begin the process of winding down and getting out? First Trump and then Biden

made deals with the Taliban which, except for face-saving gestures of recognition for the exiting Afghan government, effectively meant abandoning them. But the crucial question remains---why ultimately did the US choose to leave?

The Vietnam war is, in this writer's view, the pivotal turning point. The US death toll there, leave aside those injured, was over 58,000. Ever since, no US government has been able to sell to its own public their willingness to sacrifice family lives amounting to even one-fifth of that total. The fact that the US retains immense firepower and an unrivalled capacity to inflict long distance killing on a massive scale means that it is able to make initial breakthroughs on the battlefield with considerable ease against opposing militaries in most parts of the world. This is what happened in Afghanistan in 2001 and in Iraq in 2003. But it is when it becomes an occupying force that has to work on the ground amidst an alienated public, that the real dilemma can emerge. The US cannot, after Vietnam, easily suffer too high a level of casualties of official personnel that can happen during a prolonged occupation over many years if there is an equally determined armed guerrilla resistance carried out through rural and urban support confronting it and willing to fight for no matter how long. Paid local armies or foreign mercenaries to replace official US military personnel in actions will not suffice if the death toll among the latter (and them) becomes too high and the locally backed government is unable to establish its writ in a manner that is both stable and supportive of US interests, economic and political. In the Iraq of today and yesterday, the ruling Shia regime is closer to Iran than to the US and internecine fighting continues. In Afghanistan the succession of pro-US governments have never had the public backing to even promise future stability let

alone an end to the ongoing resistance. In short, the political and economic returns (does anybody except self-deluding liberals believe that the primary motive of the US's foreign incursions is the export of democracy, human rights and gender equality?) have proved too low in comparison to the monetary and physical costs of maintaining high-level occupation. If Iraq has provided this lesson to the US, in Afghanistan the retreat is even starker and more complete.

In the face of this retreat, the Taliban was assured victory on the ground though the speed with which this took place was a surprise. At the end of August 2021, the Taliban and its rulers had taken over most of the country including Kabul though pockets of armed resistance remained. In this period of occupation US deaths (soldiers and contractors) have been around 6500. In contrast, extremely conservative estimates from American university sources, state that total Afghan deaths up to the end of 2019 (government soldiers/police, opposition fighters, civilians) were around 160,000. Other sources closer to the present which try to take account of unreported deaths, have estimates of civilian casualties alone running from a few hundred thousand to a million or more. Around four million Afghans have been internally displaced with some 2.7 million becoming external refugees.

Now What?

Future developments in Afghanistan are obviously uncertain. How other countries especially the major neighbouring powers of Pakistan, China, Iran and Russia will behave---leave aside India and the bordering Central Asian Republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan---will in one way or the other be shaped by what happens in the shorter and medium term within Afghanistan. It is true that this Taliban has

learnt from its earlier international isolation and recognizes that over two decades since it last ruled there has been absolutely and proportionately the rise of a larger section of people, especially but not only in the cities and large towns, seeking the benefits of greater modernization, namely more material well-being, education, gender equality and personal freedoms. The signs so far are that economically the Taliban knows it needs both foreign aid and investments to develop its quite substantial mineral wealth as well as needing to do something to resolve their serious agrarian and unemployment/under-employment problems. Even as its current interpretation of Sharia law and Islamic 'dictates' may be somewhat less puritanical and extreme in regard to the rights of women and girls, it remains a very misogynist force that will continue to lay down prescriptions for public presence and behaviour e.g., segregated education, controlling job avenues and positions therein, restrictions on clothing and socialising. Revealingly, it seems that the Cabinet being established is going to be an all male one. The Taliban will no doubt impose censorship on the print, electronic and social media.

There will not be any move to install a democratic set-up (not that this properly or truthfully existed before) and will likely be seriously discriminatory to Shias, other religious and ethnic group minorities. Politically, the key shorter term question is will there be a shift towards a civil war? If this is not avoided then one can be sure that outside powers will again start supporting their particular proxies in the struggles for advantage and supremacy. How far will the Taliban go towards power-sharing arrangements with leaders of other ethnic groups, with warlords and provincial leaders? And how much distribution of spoils will there be? Can some kind of

longer lasting, though loose and coalitional, system of rule through most of the country be secured? Latest indications are that while some others may be accommodated at more junior government and administrative levels, Pushtun dominance will remain.

The perspectives of the key foreign powers will rest on how effectively the Taliban are able to contain the many long-term conflicts within Afghan society and prevent radical Islamist groups committed to fomenting strife in other countries from operating. Another issue is also of key importance in this respect. Can the top Taliban leaders like Habitullah Akhundzada and Mullah Baradar control the Haqqani faction within and forces like the Islamic State outside? Both Haqqani and IS are anti-Shia and hitherto strongly committed to the export of their variants of radical Islam? This will be a sticking point even for non-US powers following Afghan developments. Take China: it already has major mining investments in Afghanistan; will promise aid and further major investments for extraction of minerals especially for lithium.¹ Further expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to and through Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran is another project awaiting fulfilment.² Geo-politically the consolidation of a “counter-quartet” of China, Iran, Russia and Pakistan against the US-led alliances aiming to squeeze each of these countries would only be facilitated by strong relations with an Afghanistan that has its own reasons to fear future reprisals and pressures. Kabul’s responsibility towards Beijing, however, is that it must not allow the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) which exists in

1 Lithium is a key raw material for the hardware of the Information Age and Afghanistan has the world’s largest reserves with China being the world’s number one consumer of Lithium.

2 The BRI is a China-led project and is considered a centrepiece of China’s strategic and economic expansion into other parts of Asia.

Afghanistan to carry out support actions, armed or otherwise, for the Uyghurs being repressed in China’s Xinjiang province across the border.

Historically, Pakistan was the one Muslim majority country that, comparatively speaking, had the most battle-hardened army, the widest pool of skilled technicians and experts, the only one with the nuclear bomb and was the more or less faithful long-serving ally of the US. It served the latter’s interest in West Asia with its close military and political ties to Saudi Arabia as well as being a counter to Iran. It was also, because of its influence in Afghanistan, a launch pad for US ambitions in Central Asia. Pakistan has now lost most of its geo-political relevance for the US. The recent US-backed “Abraham Accords” between Israel on one hand, and UAE, Oman and Bahrain on the other (with the silent assent of Saudi Arabia whose inauguration of formal diplomatic relations with Israel will most likely await the ascension to the throne of the current Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman) represents a significant shift in the region. In this new re-arrangement of powers, symbolising above all the implicit unity of interests between Saudi Arabia and Israel against Iran, Pakistan is no longer an important ally for US interests regarding West Asia. The loss of Afghanistan also weakens Islamabad’s relevance with respect to Central Asia while India, the South Asian rival, gets much higher billing, economically as well as geo-politically, for containing China in the Asia-Pacific region. Pakistan is willy-nilly being pushed by circumstances towards greater consolidation of the counter-quartet mentioned earlier. Its army policy of having ‘strategic depth’ vis-a-vis India means it wants to maintain close relations with the Afghan Taliban but does not want a situation where it once again suffers a major refugee influx, extension of the opium trade,

or further stimulus to Pushtuni nationalism.

Russia like China eyes economic opportunities and also sees virtues in the consolidation of the counter-quartet---perhaps with Afghanistan's presence, better called a quintet. Moscow's main concern is maintaining its 'sphere of influence' with respect to Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, especially the latter which is most under its influence. These three hard line secular states are also highly authoritarian with the result that the resistance within these countries, whether strong or weak, is led by Islamic fundamentalist forces. These resistance forces will look to their ethnic counterparts in Afghanistan for support. If Kabul wants better relations with Russia and the economic and political fruits thereof, the task before it is clear---control those Islamist groups. Shia Iran similarly is keen to work with the Sunni Taliban regime but like Pakistan wants no influx of refugees or the opium trade and certainly no assault on the Shia Hazaras.

Where do the US and India come in? The US will continue to seek access to Central Asia not so much for hydrocarbon wealth (fracking has substantially augmented fossil fuel reserves within the US) but for geopolitical purposes. It had established military bases in the region with the consent of the governments of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. These governments withdrew their consent in 2005 and 2015 respectively. If fundamentalist insurgencies rise up to significant levels again, however, Washington has reason to hope that these two countries (especially Uzbekistan the more wary of Russia) will be prepared to invite military support as a balancing act vis-a-vis Russia and Afghan insurgents. The US has not, and will not, abandon its effort to remain the globally preponderant power. For the American hard right this is a constant imperative. For the less hard line advocates

of 'liberal internationalism' this relative supremacy over all other powers is the only way to establish a 'benign world order' over which America is supposedly destined to preside. Pursuit of this global hegemony has created global chaos and mass suffering, and will continue to do so.

As for India, the most distinctive characteristic of the Modi government's foreign policy as compared to that of previous governments, is his use of external stances and rhetoric to promote domestic ideological hegemony. That is why Pakistan must be seen as an enduring enemy whose machinations constantly threaten the country. Unfolding events in Afghanistan are, therefore, said to have extended Pakistan's 'strategic depth' and emboldened it to become more aggressive towards India. Anti-Pakistan sentiment brings together all kinds of Indian liberals (and even much of the mainstream left) and therefore runs wider in its appeal than anti-Muslim sentiments. New Delhi may well extend diplomatic recognition to Kabul ahead of the US, but pursuing better relations will basically follow the cues from the future trajectory of the US-Taliban relationship. The Indian relationship with the US is far more important than that with the Taliban. However, for domestic purposes the 'internal' threat posed by the Talibanisation of Afghanistan will be played up for all it can be worth. Some Muslim organisations and voices will be dubbed actual or potential fifth columnists adding to the stigmatization of Islam and Muslims that is so central to Hindutva ideology. There will be greater talk of Afghan insurgent groups in Kashmir to justify the brutal repression by this (and previous) governments in the Valley. Foreign-backed insurgency has always served as the excuse to cover up the fact of deep alienation of the Muslim majority in the region from the Indian government; now

further reinforced by Modi's elimination of whatever limited autonomy the region had through the unconstitutional annulment (silently accepted by the Supreme Court) of Article 370 in August 2019.

Conclusion

For Marxists and progressive revolutionaries, our positions, perspectives and actions don't proceed from the 'national interests' of structurally biased class states. We must, instead, begin from the question of how we can help and support the Afghan people. The invasions by the USSR and the US were never justified and had to be resolutely and unconditionally opposed. That the US occupation has ended is good. This does not mean, however, that we should in any way endorse the Taliban which is a reactionary force that stands against gender equality, personal freedoms, political democracy and is ethnically and religiously sectarian and discriminatory. We must fight within our countries as well as in associations with progressive international civil society groups and individuals to raise as much as possible public awareness and support for a range of necessary measures. Governments should open their borders to allow full access to those seeking refugee status or asylum. They can discuss among themselves how best to share this collective responsibility. Here the record of the Indian government, especially this one, is bad. India was and remains a non-party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol which among other things rejects refoulement (forcible return of refugees to their places of displacement/persecution). This Modi government has already carried out such repatriation of Rohingyas simply because they are Muslims. There are Afghan students in India that must get extended visas and stay here as long as they feel it is necessary. This hostility to Muslims and Islam is also reflected in the

Citizenship Amendment Act (applicable to Afghanistan) which provides fast-track naturalisation only to non-Muslims.

Economic sanctions have invariably created suffering for ordinary people, while leaving the rich and governing elites unharmed (or even strengthened), wherever they have been applied. We must not support such a course of action. The US has no business freezing the \$9.5 billion that belongs to the Afghan Central Bank, and should immediately release these assets. In fact, there should be a widespread global call for the US to pay massive reparations to the country. Of course, Washington is not going to do this. But if nothing else, this call is a counter to the motivated efforts by many governments and media houses and commentators seeking to shift blame from the iniquities of US occupation and to hide this past by diverting the general discourse to future terrorist and other dangers. Provision of humanitarian aid routed through progressive channels of all kinds, whether by governments or non-state actors, is a must. Such economic support should be unconditional in vital areas of food, health, shelter and many other basic needs. But there is also a place for forms of conditional economic support. These are not the same as sanctions that hurt by imposing suffering but are additional offers of help that by being conditional put pressure on the Afghan government to take measures in the domain of human rights and peace-making that it would otherwise not do or be reluctant about doing. So yes, there is a role for the exercise of political, diplomatic, cultural and some forms of economic pressure but not for any military threats, actions or forms of pressure.

We must say no to imperialism, no to the Taliban and must extend our solidarity to the people of Afghanistan in their effort to build a brighter future!

The Issue of Humanitarian Intervention

Achin Vanaik

The establishment of a basic set of human rights was a product of modern history. But it is now accepted that these are universally applicable to all humans and derive their sanction from the fact that humans are moral beings and simply by virtue of being human all individuals are owed such rights. In this respect human rights must from now on be seen as trans-historical and transnational. Since nation-states are historically contingent phenomena the rights of nations such as national self-determination cannot in principle override such universal human rights. We do have an obligation to intervene across national boundaries to promote human rights. This much is not really in dispute as a normative attitude, principle or injunction. It allows for all kinds of external initiatives--diplomatic, cultural, humanitarian, etc.--to correct wrongs and to promote justice. But the real point of dispute is not the legitimacy or morality of such kinds of intervention but whether *forcible military* intervention from outside the country in question to secure human rights or prevent human rights violations is justifiable?

The greatest act of global political emancipation of the last half of the twentieth century was decolonization and the institutionalisation of the formal principle of the equality of all nations and therefore of the right of national self-determination or national sovereignty as the supreme legal principle of the international political order. If not always in practice, then at least in law this was and is a crucial form of protection for the weaker and newer emerging countries vis-à-vis the more powerful countries. Existing international law in this respect, particularly the UN Charter (Article 2(7) on national sovereignty being the supreme legal principle) formally accepted by all states who

are UN members, represents a major gain for global peace, security and justice. There are then, three positions in regard to the issue of external military intervention in the name of human rights or what has also been called the "Imperialism of Human Rights".

Abide Strictly by the UN Charter

The first position is of those who would defend existing law against such interventions. They have powerful arguments on their side.

a) It is naïve and false to believe that the main motivation for powerful states to intervene elsewhere is for humanitarian reasons.

b) Sovereignty is supreme and citizens are the exclusive responsibility of their state and their state is entirely their business.

c) The two exceptions provided in the UN Charter must not be extended. These are contained in Article 2(4) and in Chapter VII (Article 51). The former concerns a country's 'right to self-defence' against the *official* armed forces of another country(ies) that attacks or threatens to attack that country. Even that threat must pass a certain 'threshold of gravity', namely, of it being imminent or inevitable and not just possible or probable. The second exception requires the authorisation of the Security Council to militarily rectify a 'breach' of international peace as a 'last resort' measure, which does require that there be no veto by the Permanent 5 members. This exception does allow for the P-5, if they agree with each other, to manipulate other non-permanent members of the SC to justify the unjustifiable e.g., the endorsement of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. But it remains something of a legal barrier to frequent external military intervention with the sanction of the UN. To

make the correction of human rights another 'exception' is to ensure that there will be more abuses in the name of this exception.

d) There will always be a selective application of the principle of forcible humanitarian intervention. Therefore, there will always be an inconsistency in the execution of this policy.

f) There is no agreed consensus between the states of the world on what should be the principles on which forcible humanitarian intervention would be justified. The level of order and justice currently provided by upholding the principle of non-intervention that already legally exists is far better than allowing the disorder and injustices that would result from accepting periodic violations of this non-interventionist principle in the name of human rights.

In the Name of Human Rights

Among those who have defended the various interventions in whole or part that have been carried out by the US since the end of the Cold War, there have been those who have sought to make a normative case for their position. This is the second position. Those who are now advocating military intervention in the name of human rights would not dispute that this is a violation of international law but would insist that it is nevertheless morally justified. Their main arguments are listed here.

a) They claim that promotion of human rights is at least as important, if not more so, than international peace and security. They prefer to cite Articles 1(3), 55 and 56 of the UN Charter claiming this is more important than Article 2(4) that limits military actions to self-defence. However, all these three Articles referring to the promotion and defence of human rights "without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion", explicitly declare this pursuit to be operating within the framework of accepting 'national sovereignty' and co-operation among

nations.

b) They claim that morality must trump legality and moral considerations demand such intervention whatever be the legal position internationally. Morality, they say, may require in certain cases forcible humanitarian intervention to end slaughter. The existence of a legal right enables action but cannot be said to determine it.

c) Whatever be the motives of interveners, they say, it is outcomes that are more important and if the intervention ends the human rights violations then this is what is most important. Since there are both short-term outcomes and longer term ones, the first can justify external military intervention to end a crisis; the second can justify longer-term occupation and even regime change. Michael Walzer, like many Western liberals who describe themselves as leaning to the left, coined the term "justice in endings". Thus an intervener, say the US, that initially made an unjustified intervention, e.g., in Iraq (which Walzer first opposed) can nonetheless justifiably stay on (Walzer supported this) to bring about democracy. (Walzer 2012, 35). The judgement of how long the occupation must be will rest, of course, on the judgement of the intervener.

Rare Exceptions

The third position is the one that should be held by revolutionary socialists and even by genuine progressives. This position is closer to the first than to the second. But it does allow for military intervention in the name of human rights under very specific conditions, by their nature much rarer in their occurrence and therefore of little comfort to those who advocate imperial behaviour by the US or other powers, great or small, in the name of democracy. This third position bases itself on the normative principle of respecting the freedom of peoples. It is morally founded, not just legally founded. This view recognises and respects the fact that we live in a world

where different peoples are constituted as different nations. It therefore insists that we must *respect the right of peoples to overthrow their own tyrants!* That though we may oppose colonialism or apartheid or authoritarian dictatorships and provide help from the outside in myriad ways, including material forms of support to a just cause (even arms supplies) to those fighting such evils, we are not justified in carrying out external military interventions to overthrow the Shah of Iran or the White South African apartheid regime or British colonial rule in a particular colony. In brief, we are not entitled to substitute ourselves for the oppressed peoples in question, for to do so would be to deny them their agency, their freedom to fight against their own tyrant. That is to say, the suffering people have a right to claim our support but they themselves must be respected as the primary agency of their own future.

In normative terms then, there are only two qualifications to this injunction which can call for external military interventions. First, if one side in a civil war or conflict calls for and gets external military help in the form of direct intervention on its side, then the other side can be entitled to do the same. This happened, for example, in Angola in 1975 when a left-nationalist guerrilla force, the MPLA or Movement for the Liberation of Angola, which had been the leading force in the struggle against Portuguese colonial rule, came to power after the departure of Portuguese colonial rule. Precisely because it was a left-nationalist regime, the guerrilla insurgency force called National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) ranged against it, was supported by the US and the apartheid regime of South Africa. UNITA asked for and got White South African troops to militarily intervene in Angola on its behalf in order to try and overthrow the MPLA government. At the request of the

MPLA, Cuban troops were invited to come in and fight with the government against the South Africans and UNITA. The latter were then decisively defeated.

The second qualification is even more important. To respect the right of a people to overthrow their own tyrant is to presume that the people can, in the first place, *exist*. That is to say, their very survival as a people is not at stake. If their very existence as a people is at stake then military intervention is called for regardless of the motives of the intervener. Mass expulsion of a people does not qualify as a justification for such intervention. A people in exile retain their agency to struggle for justice.

Here one must be careful. Those subscribing to the second position and imperial powers wishing to expand their foothold can, and do, talk of preventing “genocide” to justify their military interventions. Unfortunately, the definition provided by the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which runs as follows:---”.....acts committed with the intent to destroy in whole or in part a national, ethnical, racial or religious group”---is of no help. How “substantial” a *part* threatened or killed would justify the label genocide? Should this be some absolute cut-off number above which genocide is occurring or has occurred? Or should it be assessed in relation to, and in proportion to the overall size of the targeted population? If it is the very *existence* of a people that is the criterion then clearly the threat or killing must be of a scale that is significantly proportionate to the overall population. Of course there is a grey area here. In the face of an ongoing massacre when should one call for an intervention? There is no fool-proof standard for making such a judgement call, but at least this emphasis on proportionately does rule out a host of interventions which by claiming genocide were nevertheless utterly

unjustified, unwarranted and invariably served other geo-political/economic interests of the invader. In 1999 the US-led NATO, supported by much of the Western media claimed that a genocide was being carried out against Kosovar Albanians when some 1500 to 2100 were estimated to have been killed by Serbian-Yugoslav forces. US-NATO then carried out bombing attacks *without* UNSC sanction since neither the principle of self-defence (Article 2(4)) nor that of Article 51, Clause VII could be used as justification. The avowed justification put forward by the supporters of the bombings was 'humanitarian intervention' even as this air assault caused fatalities and destruction well in excess of what had earlier been made the excuse for this action.

In the last five decades there have been three such occasions when it could be said that the scale of massacre was such that the existence of a people was at stake. In 1975, East Timor was suffering a massacre from Indonesian troops determined to hold on to East Timor though it was waging a just struggle for national liberation. One-third of the population (over 300,000 out of a total of around 800,000) was massacred once the US had given the go ahead for the invasion to one of its most faithful allies---Kissinger left Jakarta a day before the military campaign was launched by Indonesia in January 1975. There was in fact no intervention to save the East Timorese.

A second example when such intervention was called for was in Rwanda in 1994 when a majority of the Tutsi people were being massacred. Before the massacres they constituted 14% of Rwanda's 7 million population of which 85% were Hutus. Estimates of the Tutsis killed were at least 400,000 but probably considerably more. Again, neither the US nor any European power had any interest in intervening to prevent this slaughter since Rwanda unlike

the Balkans had no strategic-political value for the West. This was despite the head of the UN peace-keeping force, the Canadian Lt. General Romeo Dallaire desperately calling for at least 5000 more UN troops which could, he was certain, put an end to the ongoing massacres.

Finally, there is the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea in 1979 to put an end to the execrable Pol Pot regime that decimated more than half the population of Kampuchea. Whatever the motives behind the Vietnamese action, it was an outcome devoutly to be wished for. Both the Chinese and the American governments, for political-strategic reasons, bitterly opposed the Vietnamese action and in fact continued to militarily and politically support the remnants of the Pol Pot troops in exile or underground.

By the moral standard embodied in this third position, all the US military interventions in the nineties in Balkans, West and Central Asia, Central America, the Caribbean were unjustified. That there is a need to set up a truly impartial and international force not beholden to or acting on behalf of any power or concert of powers and capable of intervening to maintain international peace and security is obvious. Many have hoped, rightly or wrongly, that the UN could be moved in this direction. But the conditions under which even such a force can militarily intervene would remain strict. We are, of course, far from securing such a force. But the whole point of this discussion about normative principles is that what the US empire-builders and supporters have done, in the name of humanitarian intervention, must not be allowed to cloak itself in the garb of moral rectitude and integrity.

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Theories of Crisis Part II—A Very Short Primer on Marxist Economics

Stephan A

The first article in this series argued in favour of the political importance of understanding economic crises, and delineated the theories and the limitations of neoclassical and Keynesian approaches to understanding them. I will try to underscore, in this part, what distinguishes a Marxist theory of crisis from the non-Marxist ones, and their relative advantages. Following this, the article will take the reader through some fundamentals of labour theory of value, which is a necessary prerequisite for any Marxist discussion of economic crises. The third part in this series will appear in a forthcoming RS Newsletter.

What is Marxist about a Marxist theory of Crisis

There are, broadly speaking, two important distinctions of a Marxist theory of crisis from non-Marxist ones. The first is that a Marxist analysis is founded upon the understanding of the historical specificity of the capitalist mode of production. Non-Marxist explanations often naturalize capitalist social relations, and speak of their inevitability or allude to the trans-historical character of many of their aspects. A Marxist analysis insists on a historical understanding of social reality where existing social relations are class relations, and are the product of long historical processes. For example, mainstream economic theories, following Adam Smith, contend that exchange of commodities is a direct outcome of human nature. If we claim, like mainstream economists do, that exchange relations are a result of human nature, and hence eternal—then we are relieved of the burden of having to explain them. Marxists, however, contend that there is nothing natural or biological or eternal about a commodity

producing society. Exchange relations, which is the dominant and visible economic activity in a commodity producing society, is simply a specific outward expression of the underlying social relations of that society. Thus, they are burdened with the task of explaining that which mainstream theorists take for granted—the eventual rise of capitalism, a particular type of commodity producing society.

This is directly related to our discussion on crisis. Economic crisis or disruptions in a pre-capitalist society were primarily ones of scarcity or shortages often brought about by natural calamities like floods or droughts—what one might call supply side problems of underproduction. On the contrary, crises in capitalism are typically one of abundance or overproduction relative to demand—we have too many automobiles produced than what people can buy with their income; we have empty homes as well as homeless people; we produce more food to feed the whole world and yet hunger is on the rise worldwide (Holt-Gimenez 2012). The problem of overproduction is a social problem which cannot be understood without explicitly discussing capitalist social relations.

The second distinguishing characteristic of Marxist theories of crisis is that they are structural criticisms—this means that the genesis of the crisis tendency is located in capitalist social relations. Non-Marxist theorization of crises stress on the conjunctural and exogenous elements leading up to the crisis, and insist that every crisis is distinct from the previous one emphasizing more on the uniqueness than the features that are common to all of them. Marxist theorization, on the contrary, typically try to identify the origin of the crisis in capitalist

social relations recognizing that different crises may have been triggered by different conjunctural factors and that different crises may have different dominant mechanisms. There is another way to argue that the existence of economic crises is endemic to capitalism.

events but must be traced back to the dynamic of capitalist accumulation.

As an illustration of the earlier argument, consider Fig. 1. A steady decline in the rate of profitability in the advanced capitalist countries in the late 19th century ushered in the Great Depression of the 1870s. This crisis was ‘solved’ by resorting to imperialism. Less

It is argued that there are different

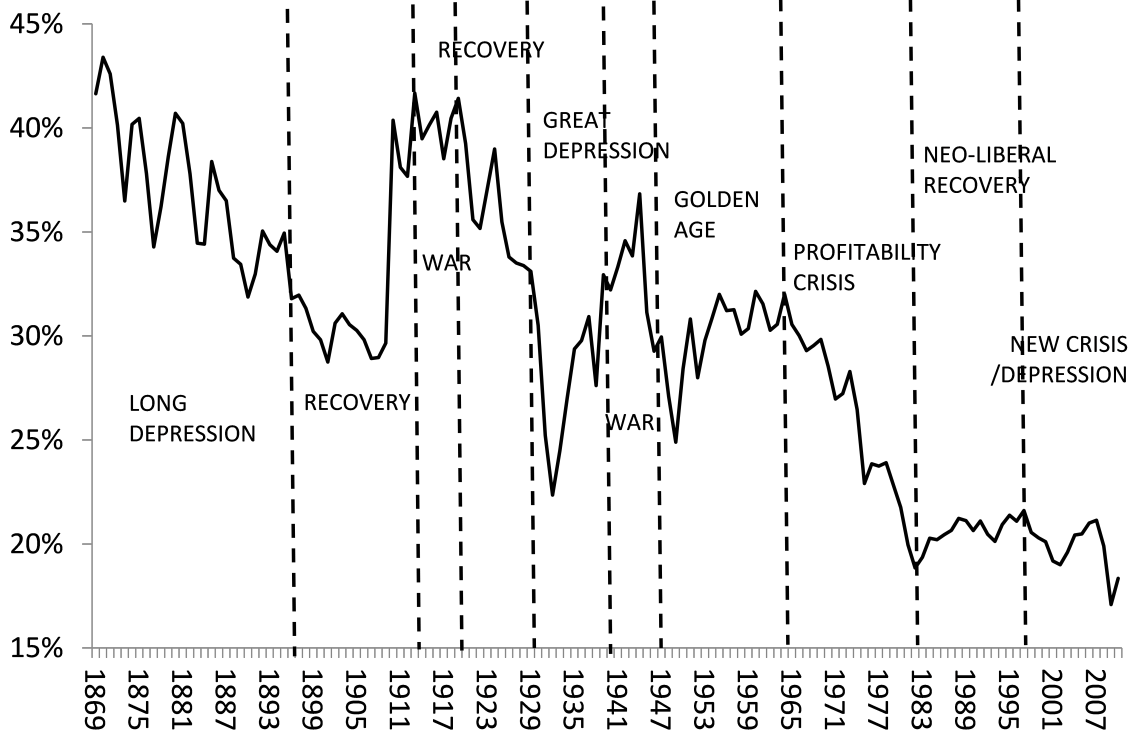


Fig. 1. World Rate of Profit (Simple Mean) of 14 countries (%)
Michael Roberts (2020) adapts this from Esteban Maito

stages or phases in capitalism (for more on this argument (Wright 1975)). The different stages in capitalism have different “dominant constraints” on the accumulation process. When these constraints are unmanageable it leads to a rupture in the process of capitalist accumulation, and hence they must be overcome. The solutions to overcome the crisis in the previous period themselves become the dominant constraint in the following period—hence evincing a contradiction in the process of capitalist accumulation. Thus crisis tendency can no longer be attributed to just conjunctural

than 10% of Africa was colonized in 1876, but by early 1900s more than 90% of Africa was colonized by imperial Britain, France and Belgium along with Germany and Italy—often referred to as the scramble for Africa (Harman 2008, 393). This age of empire led to inter-imperialist rivalries and wars which created impediments to the accumulation process. After the Great Depression of 1929, the world order was reorganized, and a key component of capitalist accumulation was the Keynesian state managed capitalism with deficits and government spending playing a key role in maintaining employment. The

post-war period saw unprecedented levels of growth and profitability but that wore off from the middle of the 1960s. The same Keynesian demand management policies that were at the centre of the recovery in the previous phase now put a drag on capitalist accumulation. After the crisis of the 1970s (collapse of Bretton Woods, Oil Crisis, the emergence of inflation and stagnation in the economy at the same time—a phenomenon known as stagflation), the favoured strategies of demand management by the active role of the state were inadequate to generate sustained levels of profitability, and this ushered in a set of policies worldwide as a political response from the capitalist class which today we call neoliberalism¹. The current crisis that we are living through is attributed to neoliberalism and the set of austerity policies associated with it—a point even conceded by the IMF (Ostry 2016). If major crises erupt periodically, and the solutions to the conjunctural factors

1 There is no common agreement on the meaning of the term neoliberalism among Marxists. It is sometimes, misleadingly in my opinion, if understood as the non-intervention of the state in the affairs of the market. In my view, neoliberalism has two essential features. Firstly, it is the very opposite of the state stepping back to let the operations of the market have a free reign (as indicated by the available evidence that countries following neoliberal prescriptions since the late 1970s, have had an increasing government spending and not the other way round). The state actively intervenes to expand and deepen the reach of the market, and accelerates the further commodification of life and nature (land grabs, setting up of SEZs in the name of industrialization) to restore profitability of capital which is almost always accompanied by crushing any hint of an opposition from organized labour movements. Secondly, it works to shield the policies pertaining to economic activities of profitability and finance from any democratic accountability. If a policy is favoured by the managers of the central bank or the leading sections of capital or finance in the country, then these policies will be pushed through even if their policies are bitterly disliked by the population at large. This lack of public accountability is sometimes justified by proclaiming the independence of the central bank from the government or in other cases by pointing to the real dangers of capital flight. Yet no measure is ever taken to curb the power of finance capital suggesting that it will hurt 'business sentiments.'

themselves operate as dominant constraints to bring about crisis in the following period, then we can claim that crises are endemic to capitalism.

We have thus far established that a Marxist theory of crisis will ground its analysis on an understanding of the capitalist mode of production. This means we need to define and have a working understanding of capitalism before we can proceed any further. Only with an understanding of what is capital and capitalist accumulation can we investigate the origins, causes and mechanisms of crises, which are nothing but ruptures in the accumulation of capital.

Capitalism

We try to identify a few key features a society must have in common for it to be capitalist notwithstanding different historical trajectories, distinct institutional structures, and cultural lineages. The first important feature of a capitalist society is that it is characterized by generalized commodity production. A commodity is anything that is produced for the purpose of exchange². The vast majority of useful things, that human beings need, are exchanged and can be obtained in the market as commodities. Exchange is no longer peripheral or incidental as it was in pre-capitalist societies, rather exchange is the primary economic activity in a capitalist society. That explains why mainstream theories of economics

2 As a logical corollary, there is a lot of human effort that is devoted towards the creation of useful things or services but these activities are not discharged for the purpose of exchange or market transactions. These human efforts correspond to non-production activity. In the political economy literature this is called, somewhat misleadingly, unproductive activity and the labour associated with it is called unproductive labour, which perhaps more appropriately should be termed as non-production labour. For example, domestic work (typically performed by women) or leisure activity are crucial for the sustenance of human beings—hence crucial to reproduce labour-power and hence crucial for capitalism. But these human activities are not production for market exchange and hence can be considered non-production labour.

revolve around exchange. Unlike mainstream theorists, we will not presume exchange as ‘natural’ or inevitable, but understand it as a dominant social feature emanating from the centrality of commodity production in capitalist societies.

An especially important corollary of generalized commodity production is that, for the first time in history, labour itself becomes a standardized commodity to be rented out. The capacity of human beings to discharge labouring activity, called labour-power, is a commodity that can be bought and sold in the market. The human beings themselves are not up for sale. Capitalism is characterized by formal freedom, unlike pre-capitalist societies, where labour, in many instances, was unfree. Because labour is formally free, the deployment of direct force or coercion to extract surplus value from the labouring activity of human beings is no longer possible in capitalism, at least not to the extent it was possible in pre-capitalist society, nor is it required. While the primary mechanism of extraction of surplus in pre-capitalist society involved direct violence, in capitalism, surplus value is extracted in the market place! This, however, can only be possible if the vast majority of people do not own the means of production—resources, like land, tools, and equipment, that are used in the production of commodities. Thus, the vast majority of people must lose ownership of resources while they gain formal freedom, and the only thing that they own is their capacity to labour, that is their labour-power.

All production (for the market, because human activity not directed for the market is non-production) is directed for exchange and not for the end of consumption because profit is the primary regulating variable of economic activity. The capitalists’ preoccupation with profit is not an argument about personal traits, preferences, individual

morality or human nature. It is simply enforced via competition—a more efficient firm with greater profits will be better placed to invest in reducing unit costs and drive the incumbent out of the market. Marx, like his predecessors Smith and Ricardo, believed that the labour theory of value is the fundamental conceptual building block and key to understanding the dynamics of capitalist accumulation. Hence, we now turn our attention to the labour theory of value³.

Labour Theory of Value - A Brief Excursion

We begin by asking why Marx starts his analysis of capitalism from the conceptual category of a commodity. The vast majority of things that we need and want are exchanged in the market for a price, i.e. they are commodities. Commodities are the elemental building blocks of our society, and hence Marx begins with the commodity. There is another reason. The interaction between capital and labour takes the form of a commodity exchange, and the starting point of interaction between capital and labour is a fundamentally distinctive feature of Marxist theorization.

The Marxist method proceeds by making distinctions in levels of analysis. Marx talks about abstractions or determinations which can be described as “aspects of reality that are separated from and purified of their relations to the whole complex of factors that make up the concrete instance” (Foley 2009, p. 3). We have an ordered layering of abstractions. Some determinations are fundamental or more important than others. The most fundamental abstractions, even if they are

³ What follows is a very brief discussion of labour theory of value so we are able to arrive at some of the categories that we will need for our discussion of crisis theories. For elaborate discussions on the topic readers will have to take up other readings on political economy. If Marx’s own writing is too daunting for the beginner, a very readable and short statement is by Deepankar Basu (2017), besides the classics by Paul Sweezy (2018), and Duncan Foley (2009) for more emphasis on economics.

not immediately perceptible, continue to operate at all times and are responsible for causing long-term patterns in society. To give an analogy from the physical world, one can think of this as akin to gravitational force. There are often other countervailing forces operating, and at times their impact might outweigh the fundamental force. Even at times when one sees that an object is floating or moving away from the ground, the gravitational forces continue to operate, and the long-term aspects of reality are better understood by positing that the gravitational force is a more fundamental form of force. In capitalism, so goes the Marxist assertion, the most fundamental of determinations is the contradiction generated by the capital-labour relationship. This often elicits the criticism from anti-Marxists of all stripes—whether right wing defenders of capitalism or other non-Marxists on the left—that Marxism is reductive and economistic. This is not the place to elaborate on this, but a short comment on this is in order because I am going to use this framework, and I do not believe that this is reductionist.

The counter argument to the above is that there are different axes of oppression, and depending on the situation one oppression might be more fundamental than the other. We have oppression along gender, caste, race, ethnicity, religious minority, disability etc. Which one is more important really depends on the concrete circumstances, and hence is an empirical question. Thus, having a grand metanarrative theory such as Marxism not only is not useful, in fact it can be misleading. The Marxist understanding argues against such democracy of all determinants. The Marxist argument posits that the production relations in a society is causally more fundamental than others, and therefore key to explaining social reality. If everything affects everything else, and they are all equally important, then we have a

description of reality and not an explanatory theory. Firstly, there can be other higher order abstractions constantly affecting the more fundamental (or lower order) abstraction of capital and labour, like competition between many capitals to mention just one. Looking at the liberalization of India in 1991 one can argue that this was beneficial for capital in general, at least in the long-run. But, at the time domestic capital in India surely were not happy at the prospect of facing competition from foreign capital, and to have a meaningful description of reality one has to incorporate an analysis of different fractions of capital and not simply a contradiction between capital and labour. Thus the first assertion about long-term trends are fundamental abstractions, and the addition of higher order abstractions are important to understand concrete realities but does not negate or go against the fundamental abstraction. Thus it remains meaningful to ground our analysis in an understanding that the more fundamental and long-term regulating effects will be produced by the contradiction between labour and capital. Furthermore, the claim made by Marxist theory that the production relations of a society are causally fundamental neither collapses into economism or reductionism nor necessarily has to ignore other social oppressions because production relations themselves are often socially and politically constituted and are not determined just by economic categories⁴. For instance, production relations can be mediated, or stronger still, constituted by race relations (Post 2020).

The two sets of agents behind the fundamental abstraction, capitalists and

⁴ To use a phraseology often deployed in Marxist theory, the base (relations of production) is not just economic, it can be politically and socially constituted. But by claiming that production relations are causal explanatory in nature, we avoid reducing Marxist theory to being simply descriptive. See (Wood 1995) chapters 1 and 2 for a clarification of this argument.

workers, are formally free and legally have equal standing. The interactions between workers and capitalists are technically among equals, and take up the form of exchange. The worker sells the only commodity they own, their labour-power, which is their capacity to work, in exchange for money. Hence, Marx begins by analyzing the commodity, which is produced for exchange in the market.

A commodity has a dual property. It has, firstly, a specific use-value. A use-value, or utility in neoclassical theory, is the usefulness of the commodity which is a physico-natural property. One can wear a piece of clothing to keep themselves warm and use a pencil to write on a piece of paper, but not vice versa. The utilities derived from the two commodities, clothing and pencil in this case, depends on their physical properties and not on any social relations, presuming the technology for producing the commodities exist. The fact that one cannot use a pencil to keep themselves warm or use an article of clothing to write on a piece of paper is true as much in a slave society, as it would be in any other society. The quantum of utility one derives from the consumption of a commodity is also subjective in nature—a person can love ice-cream while another person might have lactose intolerance. These two properties—that use-values are not social and that utility can be subjective in nature—make it a perfect starting point of analysis for neoclassical economics, the utility theory of value⁵.

The other property which makes something a commodity is its exchangeability, i.e. it has

5 It has the great advantage, for neoclassical economists, that all observable outcomes in this theoretical set up can now be dissociated from social structures and instead can be attributed to individual tastes and preferences. If it is at all indicated that there are social ills, they can now safely be attributed to individuals and their shortcomings and not the social form—a point discussed in the first part of this series. A Marxist theory must have a social category for its starting point.

exchange value⁶. Exchangeability is a social property of a commodity. Potatoes growing in an agricultural land does not become a commodity because of any of its physical properties but because of the kind of society where it has been grown for exchange. Exchange value is a social property, and it has an objective monetary measure. But by definition, exchange involves multiple commodities. When two commodities are exchanged with each other something is equated; something that is common to both the commodities. This third thing, common to the two exchanging commodities, must be a social property because it only exists when the exchange takes place, which is a social act. If exchange hadn't taken place, then we would not be talking about what is common to the two commodities. Thus if we are able to exchange four potatoes for three pencils, logically it must be the case that there is something in both potatoes and pencils that are comparable and commensurable. This third thing only springs into existence when the exchange takes place, which is a social arrangement. All commodities exchange (or at least are produced with the intention of exchange), and thus must have this social property which makes them exchangeable. Marx calls this value—a social substance that inheres in commodities. Since it is social in nature, it is not directly observable or immediately amenable to measurement. Exchange value is simply the expression of value⁷. Exchange value can be measured and hence is the quantitative aspect of value.

But what endows commodities with value? Clearly, from the title of this section's

6 This is not exactly correct because exchange value is not a property of the commodity, but exists only when the commodity is brought in relation to other commodities (exchange). More accurately, the commodity has value which can only be expressed as exchange value.

7 Here we simply presume that exchange value is always equal to value. We can do this because we are operating at a level of fundamental abstraction of capital and labour, and not allowing the possibility of many capitals.

sub-heading, it must be labour, but it is not immediately obvious why. One can argue that commodities are endowed with value because of the number of atoms it has, or some other property all commodities may have. Marx is not interested in any physical characteristic, even if it were possible to build a theory of value on the basis of something that is common to all commodities. Marx is interested in constructing a theoretical structure which has social relations at its core. The only social aspect that is common to all commodities is the labouring activity that goes into producing them. Hence, we speak of a labour theory of value.

Commodities have value because they have absorbed a part of the total social labouring activity devoted to production for exchange. Thus value can be measured as the amount of average social abstract labour that goes into the production. Commodities have exchange value because they are compared with each other and have value, and they have value because commodities have absorbed social labour. Different labouring activities produce the different commodities that are being exchanged. That means, we have compared different labouring activities that went into the production of the two commodities. The concrete labouring activity that goes into producing food is, of course, different from that which went into producing clothing. But because we have equated the two there is something about the labouring activity that is common and equal.

This common aspect of all social labour (ones that are brought into comparison with each other because of generalized exchange) is called abstract labour. This is a social property of labour, meaning that labour will have this abstract component only if it is exchanged with other kinds of labour (i.e. when commodities are exchanged, and hence this will be prevalent only in a

capitalist society which is characterized by generalized commodity production and exchange). The physical act of labour is independent of the social form and remains unaltered whether exchange takes place or not. That dimension of labouring activity, for example the growing of potatoes, is the physical aspect which equally remains irrespective of whether it is produced under capitalism or slavery, and is called concrete labour. Thus, just as commodities have two properties use value and value (which can be measured as exchange value), labour has two properties: concrete and abstract labour. The concrete aspects of labour correspond to the use-value part of commodity, and abstract labour correspond to the value of commodity. Thus, value can be defined as the socially necessary abstract labour time.

If the value of a commodity can be measured only in labour terms, what about the inputs, raw materials, and other physical objects that go into the production of a commodity? All inputs and raw materials are also commodities, and their value too can be measured in terms of labour. Thus, the value of a commodity is the direct value of labour that goes into producing it and the labour value of all the inputs. Labour theory of value is a macroeconomic theory and holds for the economy as a whole. It is basically the following proposition: the total value produced in the society corresponds to the aggregate of productive social labour⁸.

Of the aggregate expended productive abstract social labour time, the part

⁸ It is not the case that for every commodity, the exchange value, which is the expression of value, is exactly equal to the average socially necessary abstract labour time; but the total value of all the commodities must be exactly equal to the sum of the socially necessary abstract labour time i.e. it is a macroeconomic theory. Since we have not considered many capitals, and we are only operating at the fundamental level of abstraction of capital and labour, the difference between the aggregate and the individual will not matter for us now.

that is directly corresponding to all the commodities that the workers can buy, i.e. that labour which corresponds to the consumption of commodities that is required for the reproduction of labour-power, is called necessary labour. The rest of the expended productive abstract social labour time is called surplus labour. The workers receive back in monetary wage payments an amount which is equal to the necessary labour in labour value terms. The capitalists retain profits in monetary terms an amount that is equal to the surplus labour in labour value terms⁹. Thus, the total value of the commodity (λ) is equal to the indirect labour values (c) i.e. labour values that corresponds to raw materials, machinery and other inputs; and direct labour values which is the sum of necessary (v) and the surplus labour time (s).

$$\lambda = c + v + s$$

We have the existence of profits because the amount contributed by workers in labour value terms ($v+s$) is more than what they retain as wages in labour value terms (v). This is called exploitation in Marxist economics. The term (c) is called constant capital, because it is the part of the value which does not increase in value. This is the value of inanimate objects which is simply transferred to the value of the final commodity, but there is no increment in the magnitude of value. The term (v) is the amount of value that capitalists pay the workers (this is the wage that workers get), and it is called variable capital because this is the part of the value that creates extra value i.e. surplus value (s). The basic arguments of crises theories are often stated in terms of these analytical categories.

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⁹ Here again, because of simplicity, we have used surplus value and profit interchangeably avoiding rent etc.

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The Problems of Characterising India as “Semi-Colonial Semi-Feudal”

Israr

Among the Stalinist Left in general and the Maoist Left in particular, the idea that India is a semi-feudal semi-colonial society has been an article of faith since the late 1940s and especially from 1967 when the Maoists split away. The most recent updating of this position by the CPI (Maoist) twists itself into knots to reassert the relevance of India as semi-feudal semi-colonial:

“The study concluded that although there are considerable changes in the social system (semi-colonial, semi-feudal) of the country, there are no fundamental changes. However the CC opined that the considerable changes that took place in the economy in the interests of the imperialists and the Indian ruling classes, made a strong impact on the social relations and that they underwent considerably sizable changes. It also realized that these changes took place as per the character of unequal development of the semi-colonial-semi-feudal social system of India and that a change be made in tactics accordingly.” (Central Committee, CPI (Maoist) 2021, 13-14)

The three sentences say in order, first, that there are no changes to the Indian political economy, then that there are considerable changes to the Indian political economy and, finally, that the considerable changes to the political economy have led to no fundamental changes but require some adjustment of tactics. A more tortured relationship to understanding social relations cannot be imagined.

In practice, the characterisation of India as semi-feudal semi-colonial boils down to certain critical concepts that are shared within the whole Stalinist Left: landlords as the

heart of the power structure, the salience and nature of the bourgeoisie in India, the nature of imperialism in India and the key agents of revolutionary change. Related to these four, there is a final aspect that accompanies the idea – that the revolutionary process in India will be a two-stage one. Within the tradition of the Radical Socialists there are significant theoretical differences on each of these five points.

What does Semi-feudal Semi-colonial mean?

At the core of the concept of semi-feudal semi-colonial is a characterisation of the material structure of surplus extraction in Indian society. India is thought to be semi-feudal because the key mechanism of surplus extraction is supposed to be through landlordism, merchants and money-lenders, and the employment of bonded or dependent labour. Indeed, it is through the violent domination of landlords and the sly exploitation of merchants and money-lenders that surplus is extracted from the Indian peasant farmer. For the idea of semi-feudalism to have a Marxist meaning it must be a materialist understanding, hence the emphasis by all the Stalinist Left parties on this structure of exploitation.

Along with the structure of exploitation, however, some visible aspects of Indian culture and social interaction are also pointed to by these groups. Most notably, the caste system as a manifestation of feudalism, creates a culture of inequality (apart from a structure of dependent labour which is part of the material structure mentioned above). Similarly, feudalism is supposed to be cause of the pervasiveness of oppressive gender norms in India – violence against women, unequal access to inheritance and a general prevention of freedom of choice for women

in the area of love, sexuality, career, etc. A culture of feudalism is supposed to pervade Indian society, particularly (but not limited to) rural areas. With the pervasiveness of such social attitudes, democracy is impossible.

Semi-colonialism is thought to relate to the more clearly modern parts of the economy – in particular the arena of factories, businesses and offices that are increasingly characteristic of Indian cities and towns. This sector is colonial because the enterprises are either directly controlled by foreign companies or controlled by Indian comprador bourgeoisie. The comprador bourgeoisie are a mere mask for their real masters – a variety of foreign owned firms. The Tatas, Birlas, Ambanis, Narayanamurthys, Premjis, Jindals, etc. are thought to be this kind of comprador bourgeoisie. The more they dominate the Indian economy, the more of surplus value from India is transported to their colonial masters. They are helped in their efforts by the upper echelons of the state and bureaucracy. This sector is semi-colonial because there is no single imperial power which dominates the Indian economy. Instead, it is a concert

of imperial powers – US, British, Japanese, French, etc. – which is thus extracting surplus value. More recently, some Stalinist parties are prepared

to accept that there is also an industrial bourgeoisie, which is not comprador in character. The CPM in particular, sees the Indian state as having a substantial place for an industrial bourgeoisie which is collaborating with international capital in a

more equal rather than dependent capacity.

Ground under the heel of this semi-colonialism are, of course, the entire working class which is employed in the modern sector of the Indian economy. They are natural opponents of semi-colonialism. Also oppressed, however, are the small and rudimentary businesses and workshops owned by the petty bourgeoisie. Lastly, these dominant comprador bourgeoisie, are out to destroy the truly national bourgeoisie – factory owners and industrialists who are not connected to international finance. The CPM, which makes place for the existence of the industrial bourgeoisie, rejects the idea of supporting the national bourgeoisie per se, though some sections of the smaller bourgeoisie might be supported. The cultural manifestation of this semi-colonialism is presented as “Westernization”. Opposing it must mean, therefore, an embrace of a truer Indian nationalism. This allows the Stalinist Left to don the garb of Indian nationalism – at times in ways indistinguishable even from the far Right.

For the Stalinist parties, with some

<u>Oppressors</u>	<u>Revolutionary Classes</u>
<i>Landlords</i>	<i>Small and Medium Peasants</i>
<i>Merchants</i>	<i>Workers</i>
<i>Moneylenders</i>	<i>Petty Bourgeoisie</i>
<i>Imperialists</i>	<i>National Bourgeoisie</i>
<i>Comprador Bourgeoisie</i>	<i>Dalits</i>
<i>Capitalist Bourgeoisie</i>	<i>Adivasis</i>
<i>State/Bureaucracy</i>	<i>Oppressed Nationalities</i>

variations of who is on which side, then, the strategic landscape emerges as follows:

For all Stalinist parties, the people in

the broad sense are the revolutionary section of the Indian population. This dictates that no particular class needs to have primacy in organising efforts. Whether you begin from peasant struggles, or support professional workers, whether you begin in factories

or support the accumulation strategies of small and medium Indian businesses, you are promoting revolutionary struggles. The strategy dictates an orientation towards radical populist struggles rather than a particular emphasis on proletarian revolution. At least in the first phase, the broad mass of the people united together (with a major role being played by the peasantry) will, in fact, be the first revolutionary agent.

The Revolutionary task taken up by “the people” is a two-stage one. The first stage

Landlords, merchants and moneylenders

The clearest refutation of the semi-feudal side of the characterisation comes from analysing the phenomenon of landlordism. A variety of studies – statistical and village level observations – indicate that as a broad all-India phenomenon, control over land does not remain a major means of extracting surplus.

Distribution of households and Area owned by size category (NSSO 2021, 53) (Table -2)

Size of household ownership holdings (ha)	Percentage of Households			Percentage of area owned		
	2002-03	2012-13	2018-19	2002-03	2013-13	2018-19
Landless (<0.002)	10	7.4	8.2	0	0	0
Marginal (0.002-1.000)	69.6	75.4	76.5	23	29.8	34.5
Small (1-2)	10.8	10	9.3	20.4	23.5	24.9
Semi-Medium (2-4)	6	5	4.4	22	22.1	22.0
Medium (4-10)	3	1.9	1.4	23.1	18.8	14.7
Large (>10)	0.5	0.2	0.1	11.6	5.8	3.9

Table - 2

would fight to establish a truly democratic structure. It would be able to develop a genuinely egalitarian culture, and also accelerate the pace of economic development since imperialist exploitation and wasteful feudal expenditure would both be ended. This development would be along capitalist lines, though created through the efforts of the people. This is the New Democratic Revolution of the Maoists, the People’s Democratic Revolution of the CPM and the National Democratic Revolution of the CPI. It is only after a long period of time in which Democratic tasks will be completed that we then embark on the struggle for a proletarian revolution that in due course can usher in socialism and then communism.

This theory, however, fails the test of reality and drives the Indian communist movement into a number of blind alleys.

Consider even the most basic evidence – of the pattern of landholding. The trend, from 2002-2019, is not one of a growing polarization of agriculture with more and more land being held by fewer and fewer people. The amount of area held as medium and large farms in 2002 was about 35%, today it is about 19%. Again, by global standards, this is hardly an increasingly concentrated distribution of land. Many studies at the village level also suggest the erosion of landlord power and their increasing reliance on other modes of wealth generation (often outside agriculture altogether). Tenancy, sharecropping, and forced labour have all tended to disappear as means of asserting landlord power. The power of erstwhile landlords has not disappeared by any means, but it is expressed through a number of other conduits than land, tenancy and

armed retainers – the classic markers of the extra-economic surplus extraction. Absurd formulations seem to arise – a feudalism without landlords and landlordism without land being central.

What about merchants and moneylenders as feudal classes? In fact, credit is one direction that has been taken by erstwhile landlords in rural areas. Is this the new form of feudalism? We must begin by clarifying concepts: the existence of credit and trade is characteristic of both capitalism and feudal social relations. What makes trade/money-lending feudal or otherwise can only be understood from the nature of trade and credit agreements, the rates at which they operate, the implications of default etc. In India since the 1990s, there has certainly been an increase in the amount of informal money-lending. This is largely a result of the state withdrawing from the sphere of institutional credit. Evidence suggests, however, that the informal credit currently circulating in the Indian countryside is not strongly linked to the feudal power structure. It is, in fact, a rag tag bunch of class positions that offers such credit – “traders, school teachers, government servants, lawyers, rich farmers and other members of the petty bourgeois class” (Basole and Basu 2011, 53).

In fact, India is best characterized as having a backward and stagnant agriculture, which plays a decreasing role in mobilizing surplus and with a secular tendency towards subdivided landholdings. For small and marginal farmers, wages constitute an increasingly important component of income. Tensions in the countryside are certainly mounting. The current farmers’ agitation suggests that even in the more advanced capitalist part of India’s agricultural set up, there is widespread disquiet. Indian agriculture has certainly not made the leap of productivity or development that might be expected from a capitalist agriculture. The picture that does

prevail, however, is not of feudal relations of production.

The problems of Semi-colonialism

The idea that India’s capitalist sector of production is fundamentally shaped by colonialism is even less robust. Foreign capital has consistently formed a tiny fraction of GDP – somewhere in the range of 2-2.5% according to RBI. This includes all forms of mergers and acquisitions, new enterprises, etc. As a point of comparison, total gross fixed capital formation (a measure of investment in industry, though the FDI extends across, Services, industry and agriculture) has remained around 25% of GDP (World Bank nd). To imagine that foreign capital controls domestic capital one would really have to imagine that the tail wags the dog.

India’s bourgeoisie, consequently, should not be seen as a comprador bourgeoisie. If anything, this is an increasingly confident section of the global bourgeoisie, at times seeking significant and competitive foreign investments of its own. India’s loudly proclaimed ambition to become a regional power – come packaged with a bourgeoisie keen to follow suit.

What, finally, to make of the CPI and CPI (Maoist) faith in the significance of a “national bourgeoisie”, some sections of which could be expected to stand with the Indian people in revolutionary conditions? Of this, the less said the better. Imagining such a role has repeatedly led these parties into unprincipled alliances (e.g. TMC and the Maoists and the Congress with CPI). The CPI Maoist and the CPI have directly experienced the brutal devastation that has followed these alliances in the form of dead comrades and destroyed credibility. If anything, the importance of a good grasp of theory is, in fact, best demonstrated by the disastrous effects of the idea of a ‘national’ bourgeoisie on the Stalinist Left.

The Indian bourgeoisie is the main oppressor of the Indian working class and requires no Imperialist help to carry out their exploitation.

The Two-Stage Theory and the revolutionary agent

This last point brings us to the issue of the revolutionary agent. For the Stalinist Left, in all its stripes, the position of the working class is fundamentally a rhetorical one. This follows from the two-stage understanding of the revolutionary process. In the first, stage, the revolution is thought to be broad-based within which the proletariat plays the leading role. This is a politics that bases its revolutionary hopes on the broad mass of “the people” rather than supporting the sharpening of the revolutionary instincts of the proletariat.

For the parliamentary left, this emphasis on “the people” takes the form of a concentration on electoral politics. Electoral politics is a game of numbers. Emphasis on the electoral route of mobilising has reinforced the sense that the working class is simply one constituency to be won over among many others. In many ways, in fact, the numerical weight of the peasantry and various stripes of petty bourgeoisie has, in practice, tended to outweigh the significance of the working class. This is certainly true of both Bengal and Kerala where small peasant property is really at the heart of the strength of the Left. Apart from this, theorisations of semi-colonialism have created a repeated attraction for allying with various bourgeois formations among this section of the Left.

The entire history of the Maoist left globally is of reducing the idea of revolutionary proletarian leadership to a mere slogan. Indeed, as Isaac Deutscher once pointed out, even in the complete absence of a working class mobilisation, Mao’s party in 1949 declared itself the conduit for a

proletarian revolution (Deutscher 1964). In this, if nothing else, the Indian Maoists are faithful followers. Most Maoist parties have been fundamentally peasant and tribal-based parties, some have systematically avoided organizing among workers, others have tried to divert urban workers into rural armed struggles and yet others, like the CPI (ML-Liberation) who have a substantial presence in the working class, operate much like the CPI-M in searching for broad populist coalitions with workers forming merely one component.¹

What we have with these Stalinist parties, through a variety of different routes, are different stripes of populism. This is a direct outcome of the two-stage conception of the revolutionary process. One must be careful about not dismissing the need for building broad-based movements, these are important. No democratic revolutionary transformation is possible without broad based support. There must, however, be clarity about the revolutionary role of the working class.

This is the significance of our tradition’s opposition to “stagism” and the linked insistence on the revolutionary role of the working class. The capacity and resources of the most dynamic sectors of the Indian economy lie squarely in the capitalist domain. This is the key to the power structure.² The working class here has a *revolutionary* role to play. A revolutionary role does not proceed through its numerical preponderance, but through the working class’ experience of not

1 Among ex-Maoist groups, there are honorable exceptions to this norm. A number of organizations have focussed on organizing among workers and on sharpening workers’ revolutionary potential at the point of production. Whatever other differences might exist, the emphasis on the centrality of the working class is an important convergence between the activity of these groups and our tradition.

2 The question of how much capitalism or how much pre-capitalism, in this sense is a false one. India undeniably has a dynamic capitalist sector. Even if, for sake of argument, one were to grant that it is not the most preponderant one, it will remain the critical sector.

owning anything and yet creating untold wealth. Not through passively voting in elections, but through its efforts to seize a share of that wealth – initially through struggles over wages and hours but eventually through a growing political understanding of the relation between state power and capitalist wealth. Not through an artificial stitching together different social movements, but through centralizing and understanding that within the working class lie the experience of manifold types of oppression – gender, sexuality, caste, religion, ecological, etc. It must understand and find the best ways to oppose these oppressions. Only a just overcoming of those oppressions can allow the working class to unify and hold out an appeal to other sections to join its fight. Contrariwise, it is for social movements to realise that only the working class can win the material resources needed to achieve their own stated aims. A *revolutionary* fight to achieve a democratic society (as opposed to winning particular democratic aims) is not possible without the working class. Working

class power will manifest as socialism or it will be rolled back into counter revolution. The formulation of semi-colonial semi-feudal blocks this fundamental political orientation and this is its ultimate problem.

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Report on Conditions and Struggles of Hosiery Workers

Pratip Nag

The hosiery industry is one of the oldest and most important industries in West Bengal. The industry mainly produces undergarments, though now-a-days the industry is also producing leggings, T-shirts, cotton garments. The industry is mainly located in and around Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal, spreading to neighbouring districts like the North 24 Parganas and Howrah. Earlier it was concentrated mainly in the northern part of Kolkata. Most of the finished products of hosiery industry in West Bengal are used in domestic market, but some are exported. In this industry there are small, medium size factories and also big modernized factories. The modernized factories are few in number. The big brands

monthly wages in daily rates according to the notification of the labour department, Government of West Bengal. However, the minimum wage is low. As per convention the minimum wages are revised after every five years. But in the current situation the convention has been flouted and the rate was last revised in 2011. There is a Joint Action Committee of Hosiery Unions. The Joint Action Committee repeatedly sent letter, organize deputation to the Labour Department, Government of West Bengal. The Labour Department has not taken any action.

The minimum wages for the period from 1 July, 2021 to 31 December, 2021 including dearness allowances is given below

Categories of Employees	Monthly Minimum Rates of Wages (Rs)	
	Zone A (Rs)	Zone B (Rs)
<i>Unskilled</i>	8,904.00 (Daily 342.00)	7,929.00 (Daily 305.00)
<i>Semi-skilled</i>	9,795.00 (Daily 377.00)	8,720.00 (Daily 335.00)
<i>Skilled</i>	10,775.00 (Daily 414.00)	9,593.00 (Daily 369.00)

like Lux, Rupa and others sub contract to the small factories. The small factories employ from one to five workers. These are run by small entrepreneurs.

There are four stages to get the finished materials from the raw materials. The first stage is knitting. In this stage the yarn is transformed into roll of clothes. Then it is bleached. After bleaching or colouring the rolls of cloth are cut according to the sizes. Lastly, it is stitched. This is the manufacturing process in brief.

There are more or less 30,000 workers working in this sector. Most of the workers do the work by piece rate. Only workers in the knitting and bleaching sections get

Here Zone A means Urban areas and industrial areas of West Bengal and Zone B means rest of West Bengal.

So, from the above table of minimum wages in hosiery industry of West Bengal the precarious condition of workers in this sector can be easily understood. There are also women workers in this industry. They don't get minimum wage. They work mainly as winders. Moreover, the winders category is also not included in the minimum wage list of Labour Department, Government of West Bengal.

The conditions of the small and medium size factories are bad and unhygienic. Generally there are no toilets for the women workers. The factories are poorly maintained.

As, minimum wage is low, the workers have to work twelve hours for six days, eight hours normal work and four hours of overtime. The notified payment for overtime in the minimum wages list is actually not paid to the workers. The wages of overtime is double the wages of normal working hours. In most of the factories the wages for four hours of overtime is the four hour wages of normal working time. In a few factories the wages for overtime is even lower than the normal working hours.

Another issue is inter- and intra- state migration of the hosiery workers. Most of the workers are intra-state migrants. There is a problem of housing for the intra- and inter- state migrant workers. The workers have to pay rent for their housing which is reasonably high.

There is no democratic space for unionising the workers and union activities in some places particularly in the northern parts of Kolkata. After TMC came into power in West Bengal in 2011 they have been using muscle power in connivance with the factory owners. The local lords of TMC openly propagate against strikes, rallies and other union activities. If any labour dispute arises they “reconcile” and of course in favour of the factory owners. There have been cases where the workers are beaten, retrenched.

There is also unfair labour practice.

As most of the factories have one to five workmen, they are denied social security; where there is required number of workers they are also denied of their social security benefits.

Hosiery Workers Unity Centre (HWUC) is a registered independent trade union working among the hosiery workers since 1980’s. HWUC’s memberships are mostly among workers of knitting section and few among cutting section.

After a long struggle the union was able to force the associations of hosiery industry to pay the lockdown wages for one month in 2020 during Covid-19 crisis, in most of the factories.

The union regularly held meetings, distributing leaflets, pamphlets and rallies against the anti-worker labour codes. The Union has to fight regularly against illegal retrenchment and non-payment of minimum wages particularly during the time of pandemic.

In the recent all-India strike called by the Samyukta Kishan Morcha on 27 September, 2021 demanding to scrap agricultural laws, labour codes etc. the union decided to reach out every member. The union also organized a public meeting in support of the strike. Most of the union membership participated in this strike actively.

Report on Radical Socialist activities in West Bengal since February 2021

Members of Radical Socialist work in various mass organisations and networks. Accordingly, participation in public activities are often by individual members through trade unions, gender rights groups, human rights organisations, and issue based networks of various kinds. This report mentions such activities along with direct organisational activities.

Political campaigns and other public programmes by Radical Socialist

1. Radical Socialist published an issue of the Bengali *Radical*, as well as a separate pre-election (West Bengal Assembly polls) pamphlet. The organisation as well as members in various forums campaigned along the lines discussed in the election pamphlet. The stance was—we do not support any bourgeois party. We see the BJP-RSS as fascist, and therefore are for its defeat. But we do not see the dominant political force in West Bengal, the Trinamul Congress, as a progressive force. We therefore do not call for a vote for the TMC. While not a fascist organisation, it is a rightwing populist organisation which has a very bad record, including sustained attacks on the working class, beginning with attacks on trade union rights. Radical Socialist argued that what has been making the BJP the principal opposition voice in West Bengal is the failure of the left to take principled positions and to fight consistently for them. We condemned the purely electoral, arithmetical calculation based alliance that the Left Front had made with the Congress. As the historic party of the Indian capitalist class, as the party that had ushered in neoliberalism, had passed those laws which the BJP in power was now using to trample

upon democratic rights, the Congress cannot be an ally in a real anti-fascist struggle. We called for votes to the Left Front candidates, and to other left candidates were they are contesting, but to not vote for the Congress. Our calls for votes to leftist candidates did not imply that we were aspiring for the 8th Left Front government, but to have some leftwing voices within what was promising to be a deeply right wing Assembly.

2. Apart from our own campaigns, members of Radical Socialist took part in a campaign supporting a number of leftist candidates who had been part of, or had actively championed the cause of the Anti-NRC, Anti-CAA struggles.

3. During and immediately after the elections, Radical Socialist also campaigned over the ways in which the BJP, by using the position of the Governor and also the Central Forces, was seeking to communalise the ground situation, and to overturn the democratic voice of the people. This included our participation, along with many other radical forces, in condemning the firing at Sitalkuchi, which was a blatant case of killing peaceful people, identifying them by community, and trying to polarise subsequent rounds of voting by claiming that Muslims were violent. This also included, in the immediate aftermath of the polls, opposing and condemning as a chicanery and an assault on democracy, the selective arrest of a few elected representatives by the CBI, through taking the “permission of the Governor” over a case which dates back to 2014 and excluding those who had meanwhile gone over to the BJP. At the same time, we campaigned in a forthright manner over attacks on leftists (both the far and

moderate left) by the ruling party, even as we opposed the ugly communal spin being given by the BJP which falsely claimed that these were Muslims attacking Hindus, using fake photos to claim massive violence on BJP, and demanding Central intervention.

4. The next issue of the Bengali *Radical* was published in September, including among other things a full length analysis of the West Bengal election results.

5. Radical Socialist also organised several political lectures. In August, a day-long class was organised on 'Marxism and the State'. This programme was organised in collaboration with *Diligent*, a radical political journal. In September, a similar programme was organised, again in collaboration with the same journal, on the question of 'Marxism and the Party'. This programme covered its history, the significance of a Leninist party, the question of party building in bourgeois democracies and elsewhere, as well as a host of other related issues.

6. Members of Radical Socialist participated in several types of programmes. Among these the most protracted was the month long series of programmes called at an all-India level after the institutional murder of Father Stan Swamy. These included demonstrations, participation in an online convention, and public meetings.

On 15th August, programmes were held all over West Bengal, including several in which members of Radical Socialist took part, calling for the defence of the secular and democratic elements of the (admittedly Janus-faced) Constitution.

7. Members of Radical Socialist, along with others, work in the network *Das Theke Das Hajar*, a gender rights group. DTDH played an important role in organising International Working Women's Day 2021 in Kolkata as a united programme after the gap of a few years. Participating networks and organisations also included Sramajibee Mahila Samity, Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, Maitree (another prominent women's rights network of organisations and activists), Feminists in Resistance, and others.

Members of Radical Socialist also participated in programmes around IWD on subsequent days, in the South 24 Parganas, and in the office of Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee.

8. The most recent engagement of Radical Socialist members was in regard to the All-India General Strike called by struggling farmers and their allies for 27th September. Campaigns were carried out both among government employees, and through the Osongothito Kshetra Sramik Sangrami Mancha among hosiery workers and others.

Conversations on the Left

The coming back to power of the ruling Trinamool Congress in the West Bengal assembly elections, declared earlier in May 2021, have made liberals as well as many leftists to be jubilant. The BJP juggernaut has been stopped but a heavy price has been paid. The left in West Bengal has been completely wiped out. Kunal Chattopadhyay, in a very detailed and meticulous assessment published in the *International Viewpoint* (2021 *West Bengal Elections: Populist Right wins, Fascists Gain and the Left Disappears*), underlines the pitfalls of premature celebration as well as underscores the necessity of independent class based mobilization as the way forward to ultimately stop fascism.

Ashley Smith in his article *Imperialist Keynesianism*, published in the *Tempest* magazine, tries to make sense of the announced public programs by the US President Joe Biden. He concludes that the announcements are a response not motivated by a desire to improve the quality of life of the working poor but to contain the systemic crisis of decline in profitability. Large sections of capital have invited 'fiscal activism' to save the system. The aim of the huge fiscal plan is two-fold: to domestically ameliorate the real anger and frustration of a population riven by inequality and racism, and to internationally contain China in an effort to maintain the global geopolitical order with US at the helm of things. And yet the package might be too little—a point made by Susan Watkins in her article in NLR 128 titled *Paradigm Shift*. Watkins presents a sweeping history and analysis of neoliberalism from 1970s to today in the US and the Eurozone.

Adrian Budd writing for the *International Socialist Journal* (ISJ) 170 reflects on the intensification of the US China relationship. In his article *China and imperialism in the 21st century* Budd traces, in detail, the history of US China relations over a long period—from periods of cooperation (during the regime of Nixon-Kissinger and Mao), through China's induction into the WTO by Clinton, to the present situation of intensification—which many have argued might be a shift from the Washington Consensus to a Beijing Consensus. Arguing against the Beijing Consensus thesis, he points to the ways in which China's actions (though competing with the US) are not a threat to the global order that was established by the US and reminds us that the military and political might of the US is still quite overwhelming.

Alex Callinicos in his ISJ article *Neoliberal capitalism implodes: global catastrophe and the far right today* provides a brief historical sketch of classical fascism with a summary of their key theoretical characteristics, and their similarities and dissimilarities with current situation. He demonstrates the importance of a theoretical understanding by explaining the rise of the number of far-right forces across the world and prescribes the strategy of the united front as key to our prospects of winning against fascism.

2021 marks the passage of 20 years of 9/11. 9/11 led to the disastrous war on terror as well as resulted in a spike in Islamophobia across the world. Haymarket Books has republished a new and expanded version of the excellent book *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire* by Deepa Kumar. Interested readers can watch the book launch

where author Deepa Kumar is joined by journalist Naomi Klein, and scholar-activists Noura Erakat, Jasbir Puar, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor to discuss the endurance and proliferation of racist ideas in the US after 9/11. Joseph Daher, in his article *Struggling against Islamophobia without lapsing into Orientalism* written for Crisis magazine and republished by the International Viewpoint, reminds us that while we fight against Islamophobia we need to bear in mind the twin dangers of either collapsing into crude atheism or of uncritical support for Islamic radical groups who have occasionally been labelled as “anti-imperialist” by sections of the left.

Goran Therborn, in his *Inequality and the World Political Landscape* for NLR 129, produces a summary and assessment of a mammoth study of electoral outcomes vis-a-vis educational and income undertaken by Piketty and his colleagues in their book *Political Cleavages and Social Inequalities—A Study of Fifty Democracies, 1948–2020*. Therborn presents key takeaways as well as drawbacks of their political approach to the wealth of data at their disposal.

The *Socialist Worker* publication of the Socialist Workers Party in the UK has carried a clear and crisp assessment of the collapse of the huge Chinese Real Estate firm and its likely global impact and implications—*Evergrande shows China’s rulers can’t bank on ‘market miracle’ any more*. China’s state capitalist character will not prevent a serious downturn domestically and the impact of this elsewhere but overall state control does also provide resources to somewhat mitigate the negative effects but it is serious enough as it is.

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The role of a newspaper, however, is not limited solely to the dissemination of ideas, to political education, and to the enlistment of political allies. A newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and a collective agitator, it is also a collective organiser.

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