

A Conversation between Arun Patnaik and Ranabir Samaddar on Theme of Governmentality

[Below we produce excerpts from an exchange of letters between Arun Patnaik and Ranabir Samaddar on the theme of governmentality. The exchange begins on an innocuous note, but takes several turns, and suggests further avenues of thinking. Readers are invited to join the discussion.]

From: "Dr. ArunPatnaik" <akpatnaik1@yahoo.com>, Sunday, December 04, 2011 8:29 AM

Subject: a query on governmentality?

Dear Ranabirda

Did you notice that Michel Foucault could be seen as a post-modern Bukharin? Gramsci criticised the modern Bukharin. So also, in the postmodern Bukharin, there is nothing outside power, challenging and contending it. There is no instability inside power: technologies of domination – but over whom? Technologies of self are a bit more complex than he assumes? Is there is nothing in self in challenging power and contradicting it or using power to expand the self – restricted by power? To be fair to Foucault, he talks about limits of power: only outside limits posed by self (self=individual). His silence on collective self and the limits of power is very disturbing. Like Bukharin, Foucault's theory of power can be called as sedimentary notion of power/rationality? There is no structural agency at the top here besides, say, the government at the top? After discovering new technologies of power, he transgresses back to sedimentary conception of power: He is not able to overcome Bukharin's problematic on the question of subaltern autonomy, for there is no subaltern subject for him, though for Bukharin there is a subaltern subject. I got this idea during the early morning today and thought that I should share with you.

Arun

--- On Sun, 12/4/11, Ranabir Samaddar wrote: Sunday, December 4, 2011, 2:05 PM

Dear Arun,

You are right. Foucault's power almost exhausts itself by spreading thin, so much so that at the end it is without violence even!

Ranabirda

From: Dr. Arun Patnaik, Date: Sun, 4 Dec 2011 06:11:02 -0800 (PST)

Subject: Re: a query

Dear Ranabirda

Governmentality without immanent contradictions?

I have begun to realise that Foucault's governmentality can be absorbed within hegemony project by altering its epistemic foundations. His assumptions are rooted in liberal individualism (his self is a pure individual); the denial of collective self like class/caste/region/gender - all collective identities; so the denial of agencies of power; the denial of subaltern autonomy (for the existence of subaltern is denied); the denial of contradictions within each social category; the denial of antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradictions; the individual seems to be the only unit/subject of power relations: all technologies of power are focused on the individual; sophisticated liberals should be very happy with this. For Foucault, everybody is an oppressor/exploiter/repressor engaged in the multiple sites of power; this is = liberal pluralism + power discourses. The only agency which is visible is the individual, his/her subjectivity, his/her subordination to power; the only collective agency which is visible is a moving population or the ensemble of moving individuals? Instead of expanding Marxist conception of agency of power, he denies its existence (agency) and degrades into a liberal individualistic theory of plural powers

While I concur with him that power (control/domination/oppression) is everywhere and involves every individual's subjectivity, such a discourse is organised by systemic agencies, yet victims may have to be prepared to accept that they could be culprits of power of a new type. For there could be many interlocked sites of power relations, discourses, rationalities and so on. I concede, his concept of power may give us a powerful tool for self-criticism or introspective judgment for the resistance movements which are out to emancipate us from power. My only problem with him is his denial of multiple agencies of power embodied in each one of us, and thus the collective agency. Let us for the moment leave aside his silence on the contradictions forged around power relations which are always unsure and unstable.

If we reject some of the above epistemic beliefs of his governmentality thesis, there is much to learn from him for a Marxist or neo-Marxist project. Do you think I am providing enough teasers to Foucault's power and the writings of his Indian admirers? S has invited me to visit Kolkata to speak on political societies and states of development. My guess is that the existing idea of political society in India is trapped within Foucault's governmentality problematic and its epistemic roots! We need to explore alternative models of political society that seek "integral autonomy" of subaltern classes/communities in India today.

Best

Arun

--- On Sun, 12/4/11, 10:32, From: ranabir@mcrgh.ac.in Subject: Re: a query

Arun,

Once again, you are right. When you were writing the paper on Ayodhya this was the reason why I had asked you to site the argument of dialogue in an interlocked theory of passive revolution (thereby extending Gramscian insight), hegemony, and governmentality. If this inter-relation is forgotten, you get the liberal Foucault - as you rightly say - dear to individualists. Read RN and you find the liberal Foucauldian. This is also the point I raised in "The Emergence of the Political Subject" where I speak of the collective subject...Methodologically the problem with Foucault is that he neglected contradiction and thus dialectics, while he loved to treat politics as a field of forces, whose order was for him constituted by a discursive framework and institutional genealogies. He did not understand what contradiction is...

Ranabirda

From: "Dr. ArunPatnaik", Monday, December 05, 2011 12:40 PM

Subject: Re: a query

Dear Ranabirda

Thanks for your encouraging words. You are right in asserting that one needs to foreground dialogue in relation to a theory of passive revolution in India. I could have done that. In fact, as I was writing my paper on the Ayodhya dispute, I was constantly thinking of India's passive revolution or Passive secularism. My next paper would be on this theme as we rightly sensed that this theme was absent as if we were waiting for it to unfold in a future work. My present paper on Ayodhya misses this enquiry. That will help me evolve a longer answer to the question which always haunts me: Why are critiques of passive revolution silent on a classic two line struggle: war + dialogue, but cling on to the same legal state with a model of one line struggle focused on either war (CP mentalities, if I may say so) or dialogue (Gandhian mentalities, if I may say so) to promote secularism? This question remains unasked and unanswered in my present paper. Some questions probably need to be kept secret. This is also a dialogue strategy. For dialogue is part of war. However, you got me standing on my feet by knocking at my head!

Arun

From:

"Dr. ArunPatnaik", Thursday, December 08, 2011 8:50 AM

Subject: on Foucault again?

Dear Ranabirda

I am bothering you once again. Foucault's talks about alternative forms of governance in France or Belgium and so on where socialist governments came in but lost an opportunity to do so. Did he write something on this? If so, where do I look for it?

Second, towards the twilight of his life, he talks about limits of power. It implies limits of governmentality too. But, did he explore such a possibility in any of his last writings? I do not find such hints in the otherwise very lucid writings of Nikolas Rose or Mitchell Dean on governmentality.

arun

From: Ranabir Samaddar, Re: on Foucault again?, Thursday, December 8, 2011, 12:39 PM

Dear Arun,

Yes, Foucault does not detail out his suggestions on socialist governmentality, though he suggests the need. Most of the current commentators have not been able to study the final Foucault very much. They are caught in governmentality as dogma or as hyperbole. But if you ask me why the socialist governments in Europe could not govern in a different way, my answer is that they did not have any alternative vision. Here we go back to Lenin who had powerful ideas of constituent power and the power that is to be constituted. He wrote "State and Revolution", but more important he had to find ways to cope with the dialectics of transition. Governmentality can be understood only against the recurrent reality of regime changes, particularly violent and revolutionary regime changes. Once again the dialectics of active and passive revolution, and the need for a constituent power to acquire hegemony and practise a new art of governmentality which we know by the name of constituted power...Does the constituent power die? My answer as I wanted to explain in the Biography of the Indian Nation is that it is of course minimized, marginalized, or made secondary, but it re-surfaces. The contradiction resumes.

Ranabirda

From: "Dr. ArunPatnaik", Thursday, December 08, 2011 2:20 PM

Re: on Foucault again?

Ranabirda,

By Lenin's constituent power do you mean the following?

1. Power to soviets; (state setting up powerful soviets in industry/agri/agro-business – a de-centered governance system)
2. Inner-party democracy published in party's newspaper; (the ruling CPSU must practice this so that people outside party would know that there is democracy inside it - new form of governance)

3. Non-party intellectuals critiquing party's policies in party's open forums including newspapers; (also applicable to a ruling party: a new form of governance)

I could recall these three quickly. Do you have more principles in mind? At various stages of his life, he practised all this. All of these were outlined by Lenin during revolution and also after, until the last conference of the CPSU presided by Lenin by which time all of these practices were given up temporarily by him. He died before he could realize its outcome. His temporary ban gave a huge fillip for what could be called authoritarian governmentality of the CPSU to be shaped under comrade Stalin. The CPs in India are yet to recover from this damage done to communist movement globally. They have not even realized the inherent problems in authoritarian governmentality. We may have to shove Foucault into their brains!

arun

--- On Fri, 12/9/11, Ranabir Samaddar wrote at 11:41

Arun,

These are crucial. But the central thing here is that for Lenin power meant power to reconstitute the society, and his politics was to augment that power –hence the theory of the party, soviet, inner party democracy etc., and several other things. This is constituent power or constituting power. Althusser had correctly grasped the point in "Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays". But when society has been constituted, that is re-constituted, power undergoes metamorphosis. It becomes constituted power that depends on the constitution and the functioning of the government. The question is: What is taken away and or added in the organic composition of power (metamorphosis from constituent to constituted power)? Lenin being the supreme theorist and practitioner of power was coming to terms with that challenge. Hence in his later writings we find a blend of the two - a realization that constituted power acts through the mechanisms of government and hence those mechanisms have to revised, changed, transformed, etc., while the "spirit" must live on...the constituent power of society. This is the dialectic of active/passive revolution, revolution/governmentality, the cataclysmic/the everyday...This dialectics is brought about by the reality power faces namely, how to govern a society it has conquered? Mao, Gramsci – all faced this question. Gramsci's theoretical insight must have been great because he anticipated it before Italian communists were victorious. He could because he had the prism of hegemony, and he was an ardent student of power through his grasp of Italy's monarchical-republican history. Of course this is a simple rendition. Things are and were much more complex...

Ranabirda

From: Dr. ArunPatnaik, Fri, 9 Dec 2011 06:38:44 -0800 (PST)

Re: on Foucault again?

Dear Ranabirda

In an abstract/concrete sense, Foucault also believed in the constitutive notion of politics/power: power is everywhere from life to death. Only problem with him is that he has no theory of counter-hegemony or active revolution, which you and I believe in. Am I right? I could not understand our common friend's recent take on this whole thing, she being a onetime Marxist-Leninist with a fondness for Gramscian project. The moment of everyday class struggle is missing in her work on passive revolution as you mentioned in your book on Indian nation and now in her writings on political society. Her intellectual project remains a puzzle for me. She draws our attention to a problem, inspires us to pay attention to it and then dampens our spirit - be her conception of autonomous domain of popular consciousness or now her concept of political society or governmentality.

Now that I have grown little older, I should share the following with you. If the *Social Scientist* had not witnessed a debate between CP and JA on a theory of popular consciousness, if the JNU student movement had not happened in 1983, if I had not encountered poor dalit peasants in Ganjam district during my M. Phil work in 1984, I could have not written that paper on Gramsci's common sense. These three crucial moments of life taught me the significance of Gramsci who sought to avoid a romantic or rationalist resolution of a problematic. I never wrote about this, though. My elder has now gone back to a rationalist problematic or has moved ahead with Jyotibabu's concept of political society through Michel Foucault's governmentality. I believe her political society can be traced back to the policies under Jyoti Basu's non-sectarian leadership in Bengal in the early period of LF rule. Did you notice this trajectory in her? She herself concedes such a trajectory without acknowledging Jyotibabu's influence. While subaltern interests are kept in mind in that problematic, there is nothing much to say on the subaltern autonomy. She chooses rather to deny it via governmentality.

ARUN

From: ranabir@mcrgh.ac.in, Saturday, December 10, 2011, 8:55 AM

Dear Arun,

Your hunch is right. What they lack is dialectics, but as you have pointed out, an organic connection with people through the experience of being with people is crucial...

Ranabirda

From: Dr. ArunPatnaik, Sat, 10 Dec 2011 03:57:08 -0800 (PST)

Subject: dialogue continues...

Dear Ranabirda

With so much agreement, where do you disagree with me? Say at least you do not agree. But more seriously you should not join the chorus that Marx's mode of production perspective is historicist, tinged with Hegelian telos, and so on and is irrelevant today. If Marx gives up his MOP what remains of Marx's original contribution? If CPs of India wrongly applied a Marxian perspective, this perspective itself is not incorrect. If our times are different, then Marx's MOP perspective needs to be applied differently. That is already assumed by Marx. The poor Marx denounced orthodoxies developed around him. I would agree with you if you say we need a new format in which the MOP perspective may be developed and applied today. That is a different point.

If Marx's MOP is irrelevant, his class analysis would also be irrelevant; his notion of class contradictions would also be redundant as his notion of contradiction between privatisation and socialization inherent in capitalist mode of production. People say that it implies Hegelian telos and also historicism. Where are evidences in Marx that these contradictions necessarily move in one definitive direction emanating from one definitive historical condition? On the contrary, he rejects all such assertions attributed to him by his followers in Germany, France and Russia as well. By nodding with others on this issue, you gave a wrong signal to some of us at least. That is why your followers restlessly moved up and down.

At least say that I am off the mark now. I will be too happy. The dialogue still continues...

Best

Arun

From: ranabir@mcrg.ac.in, RE: dialogue continues ..., Sunday, December 11, 2011, 4:40 PM

Arun,

It was not clear to some in that evening roundtable discussion because we are used to non-dialectical thinking on the theme of mode of production, and we are forever short of finding a satisfactory balance in our understanding between the production of economy and that of the subject. We are in equal measure trying forever to get a satisfactory understanding of power. Thus the idea of labour power never reaches us as power of labour. All these result in choosing between Marx or another materialist thinker, say Foucault. Yet, eschewing this either/or way of thinking, one can with Marxist insight take from Foucault what one can. With Marx by one's side then one can learn always from this world that as the subject of history is continuously evolving, throwing new un-theorized experiences, at times un-theorizable even in short run! Therefore what is more important is not whether we confirm our lineage, but whether we have been able to collect something new in our understanding from each encounter and engagement. This exchange of views for the last few days is valuable for me (and thanks to you for provoking and initiating this exchange) for this reason in as much as the engagement in Kolkata on that evening

on the theme of primitive mode of accumulation. BD and others of course missed the stake altogether.

Ranabirda

From: Dr. ArunPatnaik, Sat, 10 Dec 2011 22:34:20 -0800 (PST)

RE: dialogue continues...

Happy to note that you are back to assert a mode of production+ perspective. That was not clear from the podium that day evening. So you have disproved all our apprehensions. Any way thanks for staying with this dialogue. We will resume when I get restless with some ideas.

best

arun

To: akpatnaik1@yahoo.com, Sunday, December 11, 2011, 11:05 AM

Subject:RE: dialogue continues ...

Dear Arun,

Talks lead to more talks! Leads lead to more leads in discussion. This is good and necessary today in order to gain a greater theoretical perspective.

However we also have to zero in on what was at stake in this continuing discussion. So while your letter offers an opportunity to branch out to newer directions than the ones we have covered till date, I shall concentrate on the main point at stake. Marx's idea of mode of production is central to all we are saying here – at the level of production of the material world including production of economy; and at the level of the production of the subject (and not subjectivity, which is the vulgarized expression by cultural theorists). Therefore class, that stands at the cusp of the two - material world including the economy on one hand and on the other hand the ontology of the subject. Or we can say that class, at once objective and subjective, unites within it the two aspects of production. Now what was at stake in the discussion on primitive accumulation was not, whether it continues, but its modern (see the dialectics here again - modern appearance of the primitive!) dynamics. For me SK's point was not the main thing to engage with, he was indeed simplistic on some points, but to show its modern dynamics. This was perhaps SK's aim too but he missed it by speaking too much of countervailing factors and then with that simplistic assertion, that with democracy things would be solved...On the other hand I was trying to show the role of the state, of the "economic" factors, of migration, etc. in the so-called extra-economic process of primitive accumulation, and tried to argue that all these can be traced back to Marx. It was attack on "political economy" – I was trying to emulate Marx, certainly weakly and ineptly.

In any case it was in that spirit that I explained that Foucault (with all his inconsistencies and non-dialectical understanding) can help us to understand the brute origin of capital - because we want to see the genealogy of capital as a social relation. A non-genealogical understanding of capital will miss the essential question of primitive accumulation. Now how does it relate to what we are discussing now? To me we are trying to master dialectics - not a science (with formulas) but the art of dialectics aimed at grasping the contradiction of forms, pointing out the limits, and working on those limits, exactly what Marx did with regard to political economy, which is a creative task, thereby again producing, "critique". All this is possible if we go back to the issue of two fold nature of production - of the materiality and the subject. CP and others miss this. Because they do not try to dialectically handle the issue of experience, they waver on this side or that...as you said, sensing the point at stake, and then failing to analyze the concrete point in a revolutionary perspective (that is the perspective of social transformation). Lenin therefore remains our guide for ages to come.

Ranabirda

From: Dr. Arun Patnaik, Sun, 11 Dec 2011 17:15:40 -0800 (PST)

RE: dialogue continues...

Dear Ranabirda

One of the reasons why we need to have positive spirit first or what I call Gramsci's expansive mood or dialectical sensibility, is that without this many dialecticians have gone haywire. Dialectical sensibility is probably the first precondition for dialectical reasoning. All great philosophical reasoners have good common sense or sensibility. That is why their reasoning appeals to our sensibility before we comprehend their reasoning. Dialectical sensibility that Roy Bhaskar talks about is a precondition of dialectical reasoning. You ought to be in an expansive mood to hear new things, absorb new ideas, listen to common sense, and take out the positives from the regressive, before we build dialectical reasoning.

Sensibility precedes reasoning. Without sensibilities, the rules of dialectics may still be known to you. But for their application, you need sensibility or right kind of mood. Otherwise, this gives rise to mechanical understanding of dialectics or its rules of contradictions. There could be other forms of dialectics as well. But in my view, you need to be in an expansive mood to comprehend and admit all these various forms. The expansive mood is always a positive mood, not a negative mood which is its actual opposite: restrictive mood. Initially and ultimately as well, we are creatures of our mood or sensibility. Only in the middle part of our consciousness or in search for pathways we need the power of reason or understanding. That is why Gramsci says workers with the help of good sense can begin to make a political revolution. To do so, however, they would need a Karl Marx or a Lenin. But if they lose sight of good sense, their reasoning with Marx or Lenin may become mechanical. Capital tries to restrict their good sense, confuses them, makes them wonder if others would support in their struggle and in this way capital gains hegemony over them, as it cannot march the sensibilities of a class it has created. But, without good instincts workers cannot liberate themselves, let alone lead the rest of the world. I am not

romantic to say that good sensibilities are enough. With good sensibilities you can only begin a counter-hegemony project.

The initial spurs of resistance are only provided by dialectical sensibility. More often than not, the vanguard tends to ignore and undermine these spurs of moment in order to gain access in counter-hegemony domain, in their anxieties in order to short circuit history of oppression/exploitation. That is the chief problem. Not paying sufficient attention to dialectical sensibilities. My tributes are to the great man- Antonio Gramsci for discovering this in Marx's Capital as well as in the history of the present. Althusser too returns to this sort of understanding towards the end of his life. Only if Bukharin or Foucault or the CPs in India were to understand all this! My present dialogue with you began with this initial remark: the great Foucault being the post-modernist Bukharin! For him governmentality assumes that power normalizes and absorbs the oppositional sensibilities of subject population. This is his chief problem.

The present understanding of primitive accumulation by neo-liberal capitalism however would have been a lot better if only theorists were in an expansive mood!

Arun

On Mon, 12/12/11, ranabir@mcrgh.ac.in wrote at 8:54 AM

Dear Arun,

I could not agree with you more! Stay well,

Ranabirda

Arun: Monday, Dec 12, 2011.

When do you disagree with me, Ranabirda? Hope you are not pampering me too much with your agreements. I must however confess that through disagreement with you in the past, I have moved to agree with you later. Reference: the discussion on xenophobia, if you recall from the Shillong workshop of the CRG in 2008. Now I think you are right: there could be at least Indian xenophobia as part of Indian fascism, after what I saw in Kandhamal. So much for our disagreement! But dialogue is necessary to clarify.....

best

arun