

'Privileging' the Working Class?

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Insofar as one is dealing with the relationship of social movements to the larger project of general emancipation then one is talking of those progressive movements that mobilize and fight against the oppressions and injustices that exist for various sections of society. Social movements usually operate within the nation-state framework but sometimes they have knock-on mobilizing effects on other societies. More rarely transnational social movements arise. Social movements are sectoral in character, i.e., they are what can be called the 'politics of the singular' but which have at various points of time and place been welded into a more general and wider 'politics of the universal' which historically speaking have taken three forms --- Nationalism, Democracy, Socialism (in the sense of seeking to transcend capitalism). While the last two are potentially transnational, the first is not. And insofar as the era of struggles for national liberation is largely though not completely over, national-popular movements in recent times have all too often been an expression of right-wing populism and anti-emancipatory in their thrust and aim.

This leaves Democracy and Socialism as the main banners signifying a wider emancipatory politics. But the attraction of socialism has greatly diminished. Traditional forms of class-based politics and struggles seem to have been replaced in their frequency, spread and depth by all sorts of social movements based on specific identities or issues as the main route taken by progressive politics worldwide. This has affected the theorizing and practice of emancipatory politics and of how best to situate progressive social movements in the pursuit of that project.

1. The overall thrust in radical, critical and progressive circles in India and worldwide then has been to stimulate a growing attack on Marxism as (among its other faults) being on one hand in epistemological terms Eurocentric and therefore incapable of adequately grasping the nature of very different non-European societies; and on the other hand exaggerating the importance of class struggle and therefore of arrogantly privileging the role of the working class in the project of collective emancipation. This privileging, it is said, diminishes the importance of other identities and the struggles around them; indeed class should simply be seen as one identity among others not having any privilege over them. Insofar as capitalism is seen by many such progressives as a structure of injustice, it should take its place among other structures of injustice. Capitalism here is not seen as a totalizing phenomenon or drive as is often claimed. Rather, it is argued, that there is much that is 'outside' of the domain of capital and not even in uneasy symbiosis with it.

One progressive current of thought goes even further – class should not be seen as an objectively determined position but as a matter of 'classification', i.e., a constructed subjectivity that imprisons one in particular roles and positions that inferiorise you. In this respect, other oppressed identities can also be considered as classes and their struggles class struggles. Such thinking is of course strongly influenced by particular understandings of Foucault and by what can be called theories of the post-condition – post-structuralism, post-modernism, postcoloniality. Even as some versions in this broad school of thought do recognize certain material bases of oppression, the common emphasis falls overwhelmingly on the cultural construction of the 'social markers of power'. From this it follows that the key to emancipation must be the de-stabilisation of such 'markers of power' – the refusal to accept assigned identities -- which prevent us, the oppressed, from realizing just how powerful we actually are.

2. Three other views of theory and practice have thus taken hold of much critical thinking. (i) The presumed exaggeration of the totalizing power of capitalism is apparently paralleled by a similar exaggeration of the importance of state power when in fact power is everywhere and pertains to all oppressive social relations. Being much more de-centred, this overall ‘structure of power’ is also much looser and amorphous. (ii) It follows then that the way to combat this looser and more diffuse structure of overall oppression is not, like Marxists, to privilege the working class and its struggles but to form a more egalitarian network of struggles by different social movements waged by differently oppressed social groups. Instead of being obsessed by seeking to combat and overthrow the existing state or by seeking to capture government via a progressive party or coalition of parties whether by elections or otherwise (this of course does have its place) we have to struggle on a much broader front and not strategically (as distinct from tactically) prioritise any one point or section of this collective front. Emancipatory progress will be gradual, incremental and cumulative which is a very different perspective from those who would give primacy to the narrower question of state overthrow or capture. (iii) The overall banner representing our goal must be that of Democracy and the goal of a capitalist transcending socialism for those who still believe this is necessary must be subsumed within this larger and deeper goal of a Radical Democracy with a capital D.

What can be the response then of that particular Marxist tradition almost wholly absent in India that has always been anti-Stalinist and non-Maoist, a current that has been among the fiercest critics and opponents of the bureaucratic and anti-democratic character of the regimes that claimed to represent actually existing socialism?

- a) Take the issue of ‘privileging’ as opposed to a supposedly more egalitarian non-privileging of different subject positions. In the various struggles that people are engaged in, there can be no question of the moral privileging of one cause over another. We need to fight all oppressions and the choice of what and who to fight against must be left to the individual. But different struggles nonetheless have objectively determined ‘privileged’ and yes, strategically speaking, central actors. Should we reject let alone dispute the idea that lower castes – whatever may be their existing levels of consciousness – are necessarily the central and privileged agency, indeed the key strategic asset in overcoming caste oppression? Or that the same principle applies to women even as they may be divided along liberal, socialist, radical feminist lines, or that they will have alliances with feminist men in the struggle against gender oppression? The point is simple. The working class – understood in the broadest sense even as it is today more divided within than ever before by various demarcations of skill, gender, race, region, language, religion, etc. – remains the ‘privileged’ agent, the central strategic actor in the effort to overthrow capitalism and capitalist rule. Nothing more but also nothing less!
- b) What about the relationship between Socialism and Democracy? Claims that the latter must subsume the former ignore the fact that democracy does not stand alone or above the socio-economic structure either nationally or globally. That socio-economic order is basically capitalist which because of the substantial but never complete separation between the economic and the political, permits (but does not enable) the possible

emergence of a bourgeois democratic political order. This is a bourgeois democracy because some crucial rights (but not all important ones) sustain the reality of class supremacy while the institutions on which rights rest e.g., parliament, judiciary, press, bureaucracy, etc., are certainly themselves class-biased. Capitalism by its very nature *limits* democracy. A capitalist transcending socialism is a necessary stepping stone to make democracy itself much deeper and meaningful.

- c) A similar relationship exists between the pursuit of socialism and the pursuit of a much more comprehensive emancipatory order; between what in the 1960s and 70s was called the 'short' or 'narrow' revolution (the post-capitalist inauguration of the socialist project) and the 'long' or 'broad' revolution, namely the transformation of all oppressive relations. The former is the necessary but not sufficient condition for the latter. Precisely because Marx understood this dual process of transition is why he called the working class in the broadest sense of the term, the bearer or carrier of universal emancipation. For the working class is the one social category that suffers from *all* oppressions in addition to capitalist exploitation. The oppression of women pre-dates the advent of class societies but women is not a category that suffers from all oppressions. Citing some other social category that can claim to suffer from all oppressions, like the 'multitude', simply sidelines the question of class and therefore also sidelines and diminishes the importance of a capitalist reality, and of the need for its transcendence as the only way station to reaching the final destination of a much fuller emancipation.
- d) What then are the implications of recognizing the importance of transcending capitalism? Most crucially, that unifying the working class to successfully fulfill its historic role cannot be done without fighting all forms of oppression; not by prioritizing so-called class struggle over so-called non-class social movements, but by a collective recognition of the falsity of this artificial binary. Rather, there is the unavoidable imbrication of and therefore simultaneity of all such struggles.

But the organizational form for carrying out this simultaneity cannot be a loose network. It would be disastrous not to recognize that for all the spread of various power relations through and within society, state power does constitute not just another node in some wider 'web of power relations' but is a site of concentrated and centralized power that not only plays the role of key coordinator and protector of the ruling classes and their varied interests pursued through mechanisms of oppression and exploitation; but that it exercises a punitive force which is distinct from all other forms of coercion. The latter which comes in many forms restricts or even denies altogether the freedom of agency of the oppressed and exploited. But force threatens the very existence of the agency itself. To defeat state power as the last-resort weapon of the enemies of socialism and emancipation will require developing ways of centralizing and democratically sharing the experiences, understandings and lessons of the multiple struggles from below so as to forge a counter-power capable of defeating that state.

Historically, the organizational form taken by all successful efforts to carry out the 'short' revolution has been the revolutionary party or the United Front of revolutionary parties. We can certainly be more open and more creative about the organizational forms we will need to adopt and build to create that counter-power but it will not be the network model of 'radical pluralism' involving the mere stitching together of disparate groups, movements and other progressive entities. In some ways we have

still to become contemporary with the best lessons of the struggles of the past hundred and more years!

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