

Socialism and the Peasantry

Prabhat Patnaik

One of the greatest insights of Karl Marx was his perception of the capitalist system as a self-acting, self-driven and “spontaneous” order. Far from being a malleable system, where intervention by the State could be used for bringing about basic changes in the mode of its functioning, in which case of course the need to go beyond capitalism to a socialist order would never arise, Marx saw the actions of the capitalist State itself as being governed by the dictates of the “spontaneous” economic order underlying it¹. In short, instead of politics being used to rectify the ills of the economy, the range of possible political interventions was itself determined by the immanent tendencies of the economic realm, from which it followed that “authentic” politics was possible only in a socialist society which had transcended the “spontaneity” of capitalism. Or putting it differently, people’s choices with regard to the *economic* universe they wish to live in, exercised necessarily through the realm of the *polity*, could acquire any effectiveness only when the spontaneity of the capitalist economic universe was transcended.

The transition from capitalism to socialism according to this conception therefore entailed a double break: from the spontaneity of the capitalist order, rooted in its immanent economic tendencies, to an order that was intrinsically malleable and hence amenable to conscious intervention; and correspondingly from a world of “inauthentic” politics to a world of “authentic” politics, or from a world where the people were “objects” to one where they acquired a “subject” role which they exercised through politics. This perception incidentally underscored both the flawed nature of democracy within the bourgeois order, and also the centrality and, indeed the sheer possibility, of democracy under socialism.

But a basic question arises here: who are the “people” whose “subject” role is under discussion? While in an idealized universe of exclusive sway of capitalism, the term “people” becomes synonymous with the working class, in any real capitalist economy, which is necessarily ensconced within pre-capitalist modes of production, not of course in their pristine state but altered through interactions with it, the “people” must mean a structured alliance of classes with specific relations between them. This alliance must be led by the working class imbued by the socialist world outlook, as distinct from its own empirical consciousness, because the working class is best-placed to absorb the socialist

¹ True, there may be historically exceptional circumstances when the very survival of capitalism may be in jeopardy and the capitalist State, given the correlation of class forces, may be forced to play a more pro-active role than is “normal” for the system. But within this phase too the immanent tendencies of capital play themselves out, and with the passing of this conjuncture, the system reverts back to its “normal” state. It is argued below that the post-second world war period constituted such an exceptional conjuncture.

world outlook owing to its objective position within the production process. But it must include the peasants, the petty producers, the agricultural labourers, the semi-proletariat and the petty bourgeoisie. The boundaries of this alliance are of course not fixed: depending upon the country in question, whether it belongs to the metropolitan home-base of capitalism or to the third world where it has been at the receiving end of the depredations of metropolitan capitalism, the boundaries of the term “the people” will be different; these boundaries will also keep changing over time in the course of the struggle for emancipation itself (or in the course of the struggle around the acquisition of the “subject” role itself).

The above proposition about the necessarily changing nature of the class alliance in the course of the revolution itself was expressed by Lenin in his famous remark in *Two Tactics* about the future dynamics of the Russian revolution: “The proletariat must carry the democratic revolution to completion, allying to itself the mass of the peasantry in order to crush the autocracy’s resistance by force and paralyze the bourgeoisie’s instability. The proletariat must accomplish the socialist revolution, allying to itself the mass of the semi-proletarian elements of the population, so as to crush the bourgeoisie’s resistance by force and paralyze the instability of the peasantry and the petty-bourgeoisie.”

A question may immediately be suggested by Lenin’s remark: is the progress of the revolution characterized simply by dropping one ally after another? As the stage of the revolution moves closer towards socialism, the spectrum of classes, other than the proletariat, which can, by their objective role in the production process, be considered potential allies of the proletariat will go on shrinking; is the march of the revolution then marked by a mere process of the shedding of allies by the proletariat? True, the march itself will bring about objective changes in the position of many of these class allies, e.g. the size of the proletariat itself will expand relative to the other classes as modern production forms grow relative to the older ones within the context of a “planned economy” (such as factories growing relative to the domestic system and those employed in the latter getting absorbed into the ranks of factory workers, etc.); but apart from this, will there be no other change except the dropping of allies one after another?

This remains a central and yet inadequately discussed issue in Marxist theory. Lenin himself, after his exposition in *Two Tactics*, never discussed the question except in the concrete context of the travails of the Soviet Union in the years of “War Communism” and the NEP. He was categorical about the necessity of preserving the Worker-Peasant alliance (*schmytschka*) for the defence of the revolution, an alliance which he felt had got damaged during the years of “War Communism” but whose restoration was the essence of the NEP. Interestingly, the distinctions he drew within the peasantry in the context of

the NEP were not distinctions in clear class terms between “rich peasants”, “middle peasants” etc., but distinctions between the “peasant huckster” and the “honest peasant”, i.e. distinctions that took into account who was defrauding the revolutionary regime and who was not, which might suggest an alternative approach compared to the *Two Tactics* formulation on the boundary of the alliance. The nature of the worker-peasant alliance continued to be hotly disputed between Bukharin and the “Left” during the great Industrialization Debate, until the “collectivization” drive imposed from above put an end to it.

Let us look at the issue a little more closely. It is obvious that the rich peasants *as a class* cannot be the permanent ally of the proletariat in the march to socialism; it is obvious that the middle peasants *as a class* cannot also be a permanent ally in this march; and the same holds for a host of other classes with whom the proletariat begins its march. If they are not to be shed from the alliance as the march continues, then they must shed their own class characters. *The real question is: which of these sheddings do we emphasize?* The simple formal answer to this question would be: “both”; in fact classes from the initial alliance which do not shed their class character and therefore stand in the way of the onward movement of the revolution, will have to be shed from the alliance itself.

But while this answer is clear and indisputable, it has two obvious problems: first, it is a merely *formal* answer that says nothing about the historical possibilities. And secondly, *why should classes that know in advance that they are going to be shed from the alliance led by the proletariat at all join this alliance in the first place?* True, their victimization by metropolitan capitalism may incline them towards the camp of the proletariat, but this inclination can lead to their joining the alliance only if it promises them a material improvement in their condition.

In short, while the march to socialism must be characterized by a change through time in the complexion of the alliance led by the proletariat, there must be more to this change than mere “shedding”, of one kind or another. The historical prospects of these allies in the camp of the proletariat must be far better than in the camp of the bourgeoisie. Or putting it differently, the approach of the proletariat to all these classes must be altogether different from the approach of the bourgeoisie. And since, capitalism being a “spontaneous” system, the approach of the bourgeoisie towards all these classes is not a matter of mere volition but the outcome of the immanent tendencies of the system, socialism must consciously treat all these classes differently from the way that capitalism spontaneously treats them. Putting it in yet another way, *socialism must consciously deal with petty-production in a manner fundamentally different from the way that capitalism spontaneously deals with it.*

This is not just an argument of *convenience*, for *facilitating* the journey towards socialism, though that is the way it has been set out in this paper till now. Since the bulk of the world's population is engaged in the domain of petty production, not in its pristine form of course but enmeshed with capitalism, *the case for socialism itself* must be that it deals with this enormous area of petty production differently from how capitalism, given its spontaneity, does. But then how does capitalism deal with it? How has it done so in history?

II

To say that capitalism undermines petty production is to state the obvious. The question is how? One mechanism is the sheer replacement and supplanting of petty production by capitalism. The classic example of this is provided by the decimation of crafts and pre-capitalist industrial production, which is referred to as “deindustrialization” in the Indian nationalist literature. This process is well-known. It was discussed by Marx as part of the process of primitive accumulation of capital; it was mentioned by Engels in a famous letter to Danielson; and it figured prominently in Rosa Luxemburg's writings.

There is a myth that the petty producers displaced by capitalism eventually get absorbed into the ranks of the proletariat, a myth propagated above all by David Ricardo but held by many Marxists despite Marx's strong rebuttal of the Ricardian proposition on the matter. Ricardo set out his views in the modified chapter “On Machinery” in the third edition of his *Principles*, where the argument proceeded as follows: the introduction of machinery, Ricardo admitted, would cause unemployment in the short-run (he had denied even this possibility in the earlier editions of his work); but, over time, since the rate of profit would have gone up (for otherwise there would have been no cause for the introduction of machinery), so would the rate of accumulation, and with it the rate of absorption of labour with the given machine-using technology. The reduction in employment therefore would be short-lived, and indeed over time the employment path with machinery would overtake the employment path, as it would have been, without machinery. Though Ricardo's argument was couched in terms of the introduction of machinery, it clearly carries over to the case of machine-using capitalist production replacing traditional artisan production.

The problem with this argument is that it assumes only a one-shot introduction of machinery, not a continuous process of introduction of machinery, or of technological progress as such. With continuous technological progress, the rate of growth of employment within the capitalist sector depends not just on the rate of growth of output in this sector but also on the rate of growth of labour productivity within it. An increase in labour productivity on the other hand does not itself necessarily raise the rate of

growth of output, for at least two reasons: the first is the problem of demand and the inducement to invest (Ricardo never saw this because he was a believer in Say's Law and hence in the proposition that all savings are necessarily invested, so that a rise in the rate of profit according to him necessarily raised the growth rate); the second is the fact that even as labour productivity increases, the wage rate in the capitalist sector may not remain tied to a subsistence level, and may even increase *pari passu* with labour productivity, in which case the rate of profit, and with it the rate of growth of output, need not increase at all (Marx even famously visualized the rate of profit to be falling); Ricardo's view that technological progress would not occur at all unless the rate of profit increased because of it, derived from a basic confusion between *ex ante* and *ex post*: a new technology may appear more profitable at the prevailing prices compared to the existing one, but this is not the same as saying that it would actually turn out to be more profitable after its introduction (since the prevailing prices may cease to prevail once it has been introduced). In short, there is no necessary reason why the displaced petty producers would get absorbed into capitalism's active labour army.

True, empirically, the displaced petty producers in the heartland of capitalism did not linger on as a vast unemployed mass (as happened in the tropical colonies), but this was because of large-scale migration from Western Europe to the temperate regions of white settlement where the "natives" were driven off their land and the immigrants settled upon it. This in turn not only kept the "reservation wage" high in the heartland of capitalism, but, by keeping the unemployment rate restricted, allowed some increase in the wage rate along with the increase in labour productivity, creating the impression that this was an inherent *internal* characteristic of capitalist growth everywhere.

There was however a second type of interaction between the capitalist sector and its pre-capitalist environment. While the migrants from Western Europe to the temperate regions used their newly-acquired land at the expense of the "natives" to produce a range of primary commodities for the metropolis, for the latter this was not the only source of such supplies. The densely-populated tropical colonies which saw deindustrialization also had their peasants being "forced" to produce primary commodities for the metropolis. Of course, deindustrialization itself would release commodities like raw cotton, which were earlier locally-used by domestic producers, for meeting the demands of the metropolis. But the hallmark of colonialism was that these "released" commodities were taken by the metropolis largely *gratis*, as the commodity-form in which the surplus (mainly tax revenue) was appropriated by the ruling metropolitan power (mainly Britain). In fact the types of commodities which needed to be produced to serve the requirement of the metropolis, actually came to be produced, and thereby came to constitute the commodity-form in which the appropriated surplus was siphoned off, through an inter-linked system of "traders' advances" to peasants, and the rigidity of revenue payments by particular

times, within the new regime of property rights introduced by the ruling metropolitan powers.

What is noteworthy is that none of this required an increase in the output of the peasantry and primary producers, and very little such increase actually occurred (except in rare instances of land-augmentation, through irrigation, such as the Punjab “canal colonies”). Out of the existing produce, the surplus previously appropriated by the domestic rulers, and used partly to sustain a domestic artisan class, could be taken away (in an appropriate commodity-form), as the metropolitan powers replaced the domestic rulers, with the unemployment of artisans an inevitable sequel. In addition, to the extent that the peasants themselves replaced, within their own consumption basket, imported industrial goods for local artisan products, there was further deindustrialization combined with the release of needed commodities for the metropolis. Thus, no output increase was necessary in the colonies for meeting the metropolitan needs; no land-augmenting technological progress was necessary towards this end either. As the metropolis’ requirements grew over time, either a geographical extension of the colonial empire or an intensification of colonial exploitation (through a rise in the tax incidence), was adequate for meeting this growing requirement.

Moreover, since a *non-increase* in the output of those producers who were servicing the requirements of the metropolis, i.e. the peasants and primary commodity producers, was accompanied by a *reduction* in the output of those producers who were competing against the colonial imports, i.e. the artisans, *the tropical colonial economies had a tendency to witness actual output contraction*. The observations of a host of writers from William Digby onwards about the *impoversishment* of “British India” were not as off the mark as colonial propaganda or naïve economics have made them out to be.

While the impact of capitalism upon the surrounding pre-capitalist sector was thus different for different segments of pre-capitalist producers, and while it had a tendency towards impoverishing this sector as a whole without necessarily absorbing the huge labour reserves it created there into its active army, there was one period which stood out as being different in this respect, and this was the post-second world war period. In this period, the output of the agricultural sector, notably of peasant agriculture, increased over much of the third world; labour reserves located within the metropolis dwindled sharply in size necessitating even labour immigration from the third world into the metropolis; and even within the third world itself, the relative size of labour reserves in the total population did not show an increase. In short, even leaving aside the socialist countries, which of course experienced labour scarcity over this period, within the rest of the world, consisting of the metropolitan capitalist segment and its third world environment, the

relative size of labour reserves declined over this period, even as the output of peasant agriculture showed some dynamism.

This period, from the beginning of the fifties to the early seventies, however, was exceptional in many ways. It was marked by the pursuit of Keynesian demand-management policies within metropolitan capitalism, and of *dirigiste* policies within the decolonized third world. Both these developments were not “normal” features of capitalism but were imposed upon it by the peculiar correlation of class forces on the world scale in the aftermath of the war itself, and as a consequence of it. The socialist camp spread widely and even within the metropolitan capitalist countries the social and political weight of the working class increased substantially at the end of the war. So different was the behaviour of capitalism in this period from its “normal” behaviour that many argued that “capitalism had changed”. But the tendency towards centralization of capital continued to operate even during this period, resulting eventually in the emergence of finance capital in a new, international form, which undermined the capacity of nation-States to intervene in the “spontaneous” operation of capitalism, and hence overcame both Keynesianism and *dirigisme* to introduce neo-liberal policies reminiscent of the pre-war period, within an overall process that came to be known as “globalization”. “Globalization” once more re-established the “spontaneity” of the capitalist system which had become unsustainable in the immediate aftermath of the war (a consequence of this re-establishment of ‘spontaneity’ is the current world crisis); it also re-established the state of stagnation of world peasant agriculture and of its intensified expropriation (no longer of course through colonial taxes but through more general mechanisms of “income deflation”) for meeting the primary commodity requirements of capitalism.

The real question however is: to what extent can keeping peasant agriculture stagnant and meeting capitalism’s requirements through expropriation in various forms be considered a necessary inherent tendency of capitalism? Why can capitalism even in its spontaneity not work in a manner where the capitalist and the peasant agriculture segments grow in tandem in a balanced fashion? This question remarkably has scarcely been discussed in economics. Ricardo had talked about the constraints on capital accumulation arising from “diminishing returns” in agriculture, which is a misnomer since the reference clearly is to the fact of the *scarcity* of land rather than to the nature of technology. Nicholas Kaldor, more than a century and half later, while discussing the limits to the functioning of markets arising from the specificity of agriculture, once again fell back on “diminishing returns” to explain the impossibility of sustaining a balance between agriculture and the other sectors. Both Ricardo and Kaldor (in this specific instance) visualized capitalist agriculture, and looked at *sectoral imbalances*. But even assuming that *sectoral balance* in this sense can be maintained, and that scarcity of land or specificity of technology are overrated factors, *a balance between capitalist industry and peasant agriculture is an*

impossibility. The maintenance of *sectoral balance* requires the invasion of agriculture by capital, and such invasion can occur only at the expense of the peasantry, through its dispossession, and through the acquisition of control over land by capital. The only thing that can obviate this necessity of invasion is if the peasantry is expropriated to provide the requirements of capital; but such expropriation, necessitated by the stagnation in peasant output, also in turn necessarily keeps this output stagnant.

It follows that capitalist industry and peasant agriculture can never grow in tandem in a balanced manner (save in exceptional historical circumstances referred to earlier). Either peasant agriculture lags behind and is expropriated to serve the needs of capital, or it is merely supplanted by capital, which also requires a dispossession of the peasantry. In either case the peasantry is squeezed in the process of capital accumulation. This is immanent to capitalism, and constitutes the most powerful case for socialism.

III

The basis for the worker-peasant alliance must be this immanent tendency of capitalism, whence it follows that the road to socialism must be marked by an alternative and better deal for the peasantry than what capitalism has to offer. Socialism in short must be premised on the support, protection and nurturing of the peasantry and petty producers as opposed to their decimation which is what capitalism promises. This does not mean an accommodation *in perpetuity* with petty private property, for that would run counter to the goal of socialism; it means that the transition from petty private property to more collectivist forms of property, which are more in tune with socialism must be gradual and based on the latter's palpable technological and material superiority over petty production, *which induces the peasants and other petty producers to make the transition on their own*, without any coercion. The non-decimation of the peasantry in short does not preclude its transition to more co-operative and collectivist forms of property, but this transition can be effected only through the obviousness of the perceived superiority of these collectivist forms in ensuring better material conditions for the peasants themselves.

The question of transition to collectivist forms of property in the march from the democratic revolution to socialism has always been discussed in purely *political terms*, i.e. in terms of the need to remove the impediment arising on this march from the class nature of petty, individual private proprietors. But the fact that this transition, which is politically necessary, can become politically possible, only when collectivist forms of property become more conducive to the material advance of the peasantry and petty producers, because of the nature of technological progress, has received scant attention. The march to socialism in short requires a trajectory of technological progress, not just in industry and other spheres where the occurrence of technological progress is taken for

granted, but *inter alia* in agriculture as well. The fact that such technological progress in agriculture would generally require larger-scale of production may perhaps be contested by neo-populists who mistakenly attribute the peasants' *capacity to survive*, by cutting into their own subsistence, to the "efficiency" of peasant production. But the fact that larger scale of production offers a variety of advantages, ranging from deferred-wage-based capital formation projects to a more orderly system of water management, which contribute to its economic superiority, can scarcely be doubted. The transition to collectivist forms of property must be based on such a trajectory of technological progress, if the march to socialism is not to be subverted.

Herein lies the real answer to the debate among the Marxists. This debate has generally been conducted, as noted earlier, on political lines, i.e. on whether the consolidation of *kulak* property should be permitted by the revolution or not. And here the point at issue has been that while such consolidation may improve production in the short-run, making industrialization that much easier, it strengthens a proto-capitalist class that would derail the march to socialism. But the possibility of making this class transcend its own class position and accept collectivist forms of property because of the inducement of technological progress, has not been adequately taken cognizance of. Technological progress in short offers the chance to cut through this particular debate. Of course, even within collectivist forms of property there would be an attempt by proto-capitalist elements to utilize such property to their own exclusive advantage, but that, requiring political intervention within collectivist forms of property, is an altogether different problem. The "elimination of the kulaks as a class" as a precondition for the establishment of collectivist forms of property *on the basis of existing technology* is altogether different from the "elimination of the kulaks as a class" through their voluntary acceptance of collectivist forms owing to technological progress, though even in the latter case vigilance against private appropriation of collectivist property must be exercised.

We have so far talked about the march to socialism from the democratic stage of the revolution. But the understanding just referred to must permeate the preparation for the democratic revolution itself. In other words, the political formation that brings theory from "outside" to the proletariat must work from the outset, and continually, for the formation of a worker-peasant alliance, instead of falling prey to any crude and *simpliste* "stage theory" which postpones the formation of the worker-peasant alliance to a later date on the assumption that the "time for it has not yet come". The "right" time for taking the initiative to form this alliance arises the moment the theoretical need for it is realized.

IV

The foregoing argument has a significance that should be clarified. The argument for socialism has traditionally been expressed in terms of the proletariat's self-emancipatory project, the implicit presumption being that capitalist development increasingly pushes the bulk of the working population into the ranks of the proletariat. In history however we find, especially in third world societies, that the pace of expansion of the numerical strength of the proletariat is extremely tardy. Even after half a century of liberation from direct colonial rule and the initiation of capitalist development under the aegis of the domestic nation-State, the third world consists predominantly of peasants, agricultural labourers, who belong more to the category of landless peasants than to the category of a rural proletariat, petty producers, self-employed workers, and so on. The modern proletariat proper still constitutes a small segment of the population; and this situation is not likely to change, for reasons which have already talked about earlier. The argument for the transition to socialism, the contours of the transition to socialism, the entire perception of the process of transition to socialism must take account of this fact. To do so is not contrary to Marxist theory but its essence, for Marxist theory is necessarily "open-endedness" and accepts the scope for "theoretical development". In fact, one can argue that such a shift within Marxist theory has been occurring for long anyway, owing to the fact that the theatre for revolution has shifted to the third world where it is a democratic rather than a socialist revolution that is on the agenda. But this shift needs to be given a more explicit theoretical focus. And this shift would more emphatically locate the case for socialism not just in the proletariat's self-emancipatory project, but in the fact that the proletariat alone is capable of playing the agency role in the emancipatory project of *mankind* as a whole that is faced with the prospect of decimation under capitalism.

Implicit in such a shift are a whole lot of other changes, such as for instance the need to distinguish between Marxism and mere "productionism" (expressed for instance in Alexei Kosygin's dictum about socialism equalling seven percent growth rate, which, if anything, has gained currency of late, because of the trajectory of development being pursued in China). But the shift I am talking about is a shift away from *a particular conception* of Marxism, and not from Marxism as such; indeed it is far more in consonance with Marx's image of the proletariat constituting a modern Prometheus.

This perception of socialism as the mode of production which alone can take mankind, comprising largely of peasants, farm labourers and petty producers to emancipation and advancement, as against capitalism that destroys their livelihood without even absorbing them into the active ranks of the proletariat, i.e. without even creating the condition for their inclusion in any self-emancipatory project of the proletariat, can also claim a historical lineage in the tradition of the alternative enlightenment. Indeed one can even

argue that socialism viewed this way, as against the crude “productionism”, which gained currency initially because of the travails of the Soviet Union and later because of the specific nature of the Chinese experiment, is the ultimate consummation of the alternative enlightenment project. In contrast, the process of primitive accumulation unleashed during the genesis of capitalism, never abandoned throughout the history of capitalism (as Rosa Luxemburg had pointed out), and acquiring, if anything even greater vigour during the recent period of so-called “globalization”, can be seen as carrying forward the *weltanschauung* of the bourgeois enlightenment.

Just as nature is seen in bourgeois enlightenment as the inert entity which is there for exploitation by capitalism, likewise societies and races with a “lower level of productive power” are seen as being closer to nature, and hence sharing with the latter some of the same inertness that makes them worthy candidates for capitalist exploitation for the sake of the development of the productive forces. One may even venture the suggestion that the attribution of inertness to nature is derived from a *weltanschauung* whose primary role is to justify primitive accumulation of capital, rather than the other way around. But this point need not detain us here; the basic idea is that bourgeois enlightenment’s conceptions, including of nature, provide a theoretical universe within which the process of primitive accumulation of capital can be made justifiable. (Lawrence Summers’ infamous remark about locating polluting industries in the third world shows how little has changed in this regard).

But this perception of socialism, while carrying forward the critique of the alternative enlightenment, is also superior in my view to all other theoretical progeny of the alternative enlightenment, since it recognizes with Marx the *spontaneity* of capitalism, and hence rules out any possibility of “reforming” capitalism or of invoking some form of a humane capitalism as the historical *denouement* of the alternative enlightenment. In addition of course it locates, in common with the entire Marxist tradition, the course of the struggle for the alternative order in the concrete historical process, rather than in an abstract change of heart, in praxis rather than in conversion to “truth” through sheer illumination. It is in this sense that I believe that the agenda of socialism that consciously sets before itself the liberation of mankind as a whole, under the leadership of the proletariat, which plays a Promethean role in this process, represents the real *denouement* of the perceptions of the alternative enlightenment.