

Democracy in the Global Interregnum

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The meaning of democracy is becoming unmoored. Since the end of World War II, the U.S. claimed the banner of democracy, while it underwent profound transformation at home through the civil rights movement and other popular struggles. At the same time, the U.S. allied with repressive regimes abroad, ostensibly to defeat communism. The concept of democracy, however, should not be conflated with the U.S.'s own imperfect and, especially in today's context, increasingly precarious democracy.

Historically, the U.S. has represented the attempt to make democracy synonymous with capitalism. In turn, critics have pointed out that the conjunction of democracy and capitalism is a highly contingent arrangement. They argue that in the late 1970s, neoliberalism dismantled the class compromise between capital and labour that enabled the modern articulation of democracy with capitalism. Today, looming ecological catastrophe further attenuates this relationship. Nevertheless, the structure of modern thought continues to be based on the assumption that democracy can only be realised through exclusive access to private property.

In contrast, Marxists historically attempted to show that democracy's full potential could not be realised under bourgeois regimes. As Ralph Miliband noted, "... It is clearly the case that the struggle for reforms in a bourgeois democratic regime was never taken by classical Marxism to be incompatible with the advancement of revolutionary aims and purposes. On the contrary such a struggle is an intrinsic part of the Marxist tradition" (Miliband 1977: 160). It was only later when Stalin's Soviet Union emerged as the supposedly indisputable alternative that communism became associated with totalitarianism.

Yet even in the bleak times of the Cold War, dissident Marxist intellectuals managed to sustain the argument that realising democracy's fullest potential

meant transcending capitalism. These experiments, most famously in Chile under Salvador Allende, were crushed by imperial intervention. But they were also ground down by the "dull compulsion of economic relations", to use Marx's phrase, within a surprisingly durable global capitalism. Consequently, the neoliberal project remade the world in its own image. It reached its apex in the seemingly unassailable belief that the U.S. represented democracy's triumph over the USSR, which marked the end of the Cold War.

More recently, however, challenges to U.S. hegemony, along with the recurring dysfunctions endemic to capitalism have once again reignited debate about what democracy means, and which countries can claim it as their own. The concept has been stretched to encompass systems of enormous variety and scope. China, in response to being snubbed at the most recent 'Democracy Summit' that the Biden administration organised, for example, attempted to justify its regime as more democratic than that of the U.S.

The point, however, is not to argue that there is a profound ideological divide between the U.S. and China that requires countries to fall into one camp or the other; for example, those countries that place an emphasis on supporting liberal democracy over Statist authoritarianism versus those which prefer strong States over disorganised markets. Instead, we must ask: how can we still think of democracy as the method of a radical politics capable of transcending capitalism?

Of course, to pose this question, democracy, even in its current limited form, must first be defended. While the world is experiencing profound disruption, this creates space for the potential re-emergence of exceptional States that thrive in times of polarisation between hegemonic powers. As Karl Polanyi argued during the Great Depression of the 1930s, what he referred to as *haute finance* (international banking) contributed to the unravelling of the world order it had created.

In countries that embraced fascism, nationalists attempted to contain the fallout from financial crises. Or as Polanyi put it: “The frantic efforts to protect the external value of the currency as a medium of foreign trade drove the peoples, against their will, into an autarchised economy. The whole arsenal of restrictive measures, which formed a radical departure from traditional economics, was actually the outcome of conservative free trade purposes” (2001: 28). The danger of the renewed global trend of rising nationalism is that it can provoke conflict between the geopolitical actors that are hegemonic today.

We can contribute to Polanyi’s analysis by identifying the ways in which the domestic resurgence of the nationalist Right in countries of the global periphery may attempt to take advantage of heightened ‘strategic competition’. They may be able to insulate their regimes from scrutiny, or otherwise facilitate chaos and breakdown within their respective countries. The dangers are many.

But there is also hope that through varied attempts to articulate working people’s politics at a global level, we can continue to reassert democracy in a way that transcends the narrow Western bourgeois horizons of its origin. This alternative politics can only be understood as it is embodied and lived by real people, especially working women who perform unpaid labour in households and who also bear the brunt of social and economic dislocation.

A Return to the Cold War?

Before we can proceed to analysis, we must deconstruct the reigning assumptions about what is happening today. Like the way in which comparisons between the U.S. and the USSR drove previous mainstream political commentary, once again many people are deploying similar arguments comparing the U.S. to China. In defence of the U.S., many argue that China, like its Soviet progenitor, is totalitarian. Others emphasise the fact that China’s development has apparently proceeded by leaps and bounds, thus demonstrating the success of ‘market socialism with Chinese characteristics’. This is supposedly epitomised by the predominant role of the Chinese State in the economy.

Unlike the USSR, however, China no longer nominally seeks to export revolution abroad. Instead, the specific dynamics of the relationship between the Chinese State and society reflect a conscious attempt to manage the systematic distortions of capitalism, without necessarily transcending the profit motive as such. There

are clear regional and class contradictions that must be analysed in the Chinese case, much like in the USSR’s. The lack of democratic space may further constrain attempts to manage these contradictions as time passes. More importantly for our purposes, the fact that China increasingly presents itself as a model of development *within* the global capitalist system is not the same as a concerted attempt to win over countries to a new system that would defeat global capitalism as such.

The debate over the USSR’s claim to the latter, of course, is what inspired much of the dissident thinking within the Marxist tradition, and thus recurring attempts to reinterpret the legacy of the Bolshevik Revolution. The high watermark of this thinking was the attempts by theorists to grapple with Eurocommunism during the 1970s and 1980s. This approach informs more recent scholarship that has tried to analyse the constraints and limitations of Left-wing populist movements. Part of that tradition has meant taking democracy more seriously as a concept than when it was initially summoned in the classic debates of the Second and Third Internationals by people such as VI Lenin, Leon Trotsky, and Rosa Luxemburg. As Miliband put it:

Regimes which do, either by necessity or by choice, depend on the suppression of all opposition and the stifling of civic freedoms must be taken to represent a disastrous regression, in political terms, from bourgeois democracy, whatever the economic and social achievements of which they may be capable. Bourgeois democracy is crippled by its class limitations, and under constant threat of further and drastic impairment by conservative forces, never more so than in an epoch of permanent and severe crisis. But the civic freedoms which, however inadequately and precariously, form part of bourgeois democracy are the product of centuries of unremitting popular struggles. The task of Marxist politics is to defend these freedoms; and to make possible their extension and enlargement by the removal of their class boundaries. (Miliband 1977: 189-190)

In contrast, debates over the Chinese model do not have the same existential significance for the Left today as debates about the USSR did in the past. Even those countries that are most politically and economically aligned with China must still justify their own rule in terms of the ideological traditions of their respective countries. Controversies about China’s experience may bubble up. For the Left, however, they can hardly be the fountainhead of its own strategic direction. Accordingly, we must take seriously the need to ideologically frame indigenous experiments in a global language that can allow us to communicate results across cultural, social, and political boundaries.

The Programme and Strategy of the Left

To begin, we need to have a clear sense of what we are trying to communicate for the purposes of developing that language. Fundamentally, the question of radically transforming the relationship between State and society beyond capitalism can no longer be found by referring to the trajectory of a hegemonic power, whether previously that of the USSR, or now, that of China. Instead, for the Left in places such as Sri Lanka, thinking through a path beyond capitalism requires a much deeper interrogation of indigenous applications of Marxism. These have programmatic and strategic dimensions. Only by directly engaging these questions can we infuse perceived controversies about Sri Lanka's tilt toward one hegemonic power or the other with actual meaning.

First, we can start by conceiving policy experiments within a general framework of resolving the disjuncture between production and consumption created by capitalism. The alternative is to frame this relationship in terms of the daily requirements of working people's social reproduction. Another way of describing such a form of production that engenders its own consumption, or "productive consumption" as Marx described it at various points in *The Grundrisse*, is self-sufficiency.

Productive consumption refers to the fact that, from a purely theoretical point of view, production and consumption are inter-related concepts. Under capitalism, however, the act of producing a commodity is separated, in time and space, from the act of consuming it. This leads to recurring crises in the capacity of the system to 'realise' value in the products that are created through the exploitation of labour.

At the same time, in addition to Marx's original definition, we can also use productive consumption as the name for the alternative system in which the question of consumption is consciously inserted into the organisation of production itself. People could produce what is needed, instead of producing goods for an abstract market. Regardless of whatever this approach may require in terms of specific forms of planning, in general it means reframing the goal of production to directly approximate working people's consumption. For example, cooperatives could link production to distribution in such a way that producers appropriate a greater share of the value that they produce. Meanwhile, consumers could satisfy their needs by using increasingly de-commodified methods, such as food subsidies. These possibilities must be fleshed out in concrete proposals, but the point is that in general, whatever is produced must be understood in relation to the way in which it is consumed.

Marx further pointed out that "the tendency to create the world market is directly given in the concept of capital itself" (Marx 1993: 408). There is a direct contrast between the world market and self-sufficiency. At the same time, we can also distinguish our articulation of the latter as a concept from the parochial "self-seclusion" that Marx and Engels initially portrayed it as in *The Communist Manifesto*. Instead, we can redefine self-sufficiency as an ideologically self-conscious approach to mediate production and consumption.

This involves prioritising the evolving needs of working people themselves, as opposed to capital accumulation for its own sake. The fact that these needs necessarily reflect a "historical and moral element", as Marx put it, means that the horizon is flexible. Moreover, it cannot be anticipated either by a central committee or a group of economic planners that claim to be able to divide the needs of the masses. The transformation of working people's livelihoods depends on ongoing debate about what the community needs, and the necessity of institutional spaces to openly discuss these challenges.

Accordingly, we must distinguish the concept of self-sufficiency from the classic model of import substitution industrialisation. Recently, some have attempted to put a spin on this model by describing it as a way of building up geo-strategic power to compete with the capitalist West. Such an approach reveals a top-down, instrumentalist bias toward promoting 'strategic industries' in peripheral countries. The reason is supposedly to enable them to defend themselves more effectively from imperial intervention. But as scholars such as Samir Amin pointed out, the economic concept of development is inadequate at its core.

As Amin pointed out, "The analysis thus brings us back to the fundamental question: development for whom? To the extent that we regard development as meaningful only in so far as it integrates the masses and serves their interest, the model of dependent peripheral capital accumulation is a dead end" (1974: 16). As he added, revisiting the priorities of development requires rejecting "assumptions of profitability within the system", focusing instead on the priorities that reflect the needs of the masses.

In the current Sri Lankan context, rather than fight on the same terrain of economic assumptions of those elements within the Opposition who are calling on the government to sell off public assets to resolve the crisis, we must change the entire debate to encompass the relationship between State and society. The alternative cannot be viewed merely as a question of switching, as Amin put it, between "'forms' of the economy:

industrial diversification versus a simple export; public ownership versus foreign capital, etc.” (Ibid)

Defining import substitution simply as a way of accumulating capital, an objective condition that supposedly exists outside any kind of social process, embodies the blockage Amin described. In contrast, we must argue that self-sufficiency is intrinsically related to democracy because it requires the support and mobilisation of working people through representative structures that can define their own priorities in negotiation with, as opposed to wholly subordinated to, the State.

The corollary is the absolute centrality of civic freedoms, or democratic space, to this question. For example, given the atmosphere of intimidation toward the Muslim community and the use of the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act to detain writers—such as Ahnaf Jazeem, who was only recently released on bail—and other public figures, it should be crystal clear that defending civic freedoms demands the Left’s participation in these basic struggles.

Second, in strategic terms, we must revisit the representative role of the Left in relation to working people. This includes the urgent need to foreground the question of gender when attempting to achieve political representation for the working people as a class, in all its diversity. The long-term goal involves articulating these demands within a party that can capture State power and a movement that can simultaneously transform the State, as theorists such as Miliband have sketched. These twin tasks demand that we specify the productive tension between party and movement.

Above all else, as a comrade pointed out in conversation, this means recognising the pitfalls of a radical party assuming power too quickly, without first meeting two key preconditions: having both a mobilised national base that can hold it accountable, and international cover to defend against domestic and international forces of reaction. To achieve this conjunction requires building a diverse national coalition by simultaneously comprehending it within the construction of a pluralistic, democratic global order.

The Next International

We can now return to the global context with a clearer perspective. We must raise the question of international orientation in an ideologically disciplined way to recognise the dangers of the domestic resurgence of the nationalist Right in places such as Sri Lanka. The latter will attempt to find new patrons among whichever hegemonic power of the day is willing to accommodate

it. To combat this danger, the Left must also be able to affirm a positive alternative, by sharply distinguishing substantive engagement with the concept of democracy from its instrumental use by global powers, especially by the U.S.

Instead, the Left must define democracy in terms of working people’s struggles. Even if the Left works toward urgent short-term objectives, such as defending existing forms of bourgeois democracy, by strengthening its own internal perspective the Left can guide its engagement with other political actors. It can simultaneously continue working toward the ultimate goal of transcending capitalism. The other side of this argument is that if there is any hope of reviving democracy on a global level, including in the West itself, we must begin by recognising the pivotal role of working people in countries around the world.

We cannot frame the resulting policy experiments that they inspire simply as a way of achieving material equalisation with the West. Of course, that itself is already a major challenge in the context of an extremely unequal recovery from the global recession triggered by the COVID19 pandemic, and the structural dynamics it has exposed. But articulating the counter-hegemonic response in terms of ‘catching up’ ignores the question of the democratic transformation of the relationship between State and society.

Only by engaging directly with the latter can a progressive regime negotiate the crisis-generating dynamics of capitalism, thereby becoming politically sustainable in a far more meaningful sense. To transform social relations, as Marx and Engels originally theorised, requires acknowledging the ways in which self-sufficiency can only be achieved by expanding democracy.

This perspective will enable us to gain our bearings on the international level. Right now, many analogies proliferate about the global threat to democracy. In the shadow of looming conflict between the U.S., China, and other powers, it may seem that the era of competitive inter-imperialist rivalries that led to World War I is telescoped within the existential conflicts of World War II.

But we must go back even earlier, to a moment when the struggle against capitalism was first articulated at a supra-national level, during the inauguration of the First International in the 1860s. Rather than a clear ideological divide manifesting in the struggle between hegemonic powers today, our similar task is to establish one by polarising global politics along the demands of working people.

Previously, Marx and Engels, among the other initiators of the International, sought to convert the rise of European power politics into a debate about the tremendous potential for expansion of workers' movements in their respective countries. The historical parallel with today is not that we are necessarily at the end of the process of the ideological construction of an alternative, but instead only at its beginning.

Unlike the original formulation of working-class politics in the European context, however, the benefit of our historical perspective is that we can conceive the construction of radical politics within a global horizon. We can bracket the concerns and preoccupations of existing hegemonic powers, to consider the long perspective of 'peoples without history'. This vision inevitably draws from the era of decolonisation, or when non-European peoples were finally recognised as geopolitical actors in their own right. As Frantz Fanon put it:

If we want to turn Africa into a new Europe, and America into a new Europe, then let us leave the destiny of our countries to Europeans. They will know how to do it better than the most gifted among us. But if we want humanity to advance a step farther, if we want to bring it up to a different level than that which Europe has shown it, then we must invent and we must make discoveries. If we wish to live up to our peoples' expectations, we must seek the response elsewhere than in Europe. (2004: 239)

The tasks posed by this initial declaration of the Third World project have yet to be resolved. That project must now be rebuilt on the conscious attempt to articulate

working people's politics at a global level. A core aspect of this politics requires acknowledging the role of social reproduction and thus the critical question of gender, along with the generally pluralistic social ethos it implies.

That means reclaiming democracy. Not as the teleological endpoint represented by a Western democracy increasingly susceptible to internal and external challenges. Or even a (post)communist utopia made possible by material conditions within 'advanced countries'. But instead as a method for constructing multiple pathways without historical precedent to radically transform the world system. Only by reviving democracy in this way can we begin to see the growing uncertainty around its meaning as a potential opportunity, not only a danger.

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