

# The Emerging Left in the 'Emerging' World

JAYATI GHOSH

There is much more dynamism within the global left, especially in the South, than is often perceived. The rejection of capitalism in many of left movements in the South tends to be accompanied not only by imagining alternatives, but also by shifting views about what constitutes the desirable alternative. This, in turn, has meant an interrogation of some previously standard tenets of socialist understanding. This essay reviews several features of emerging left movements in Latin America, Africa and developing Asia that suggest a move away from some traditional ideas associated with socialist theory and practice even as there are two important areas of continuity with the leftist thinking of the past.

This is a slightly modified version of the text of the "Ralph Miliband Lecture on the Future of the Left" that was delivered in the London School of Economics, London in May 2012. I am grateful to C P Chandrasekhar, Abhijit Sen, Prabhat Patnaik, Robert Pollin, Servaas Storm, Prasenjit Bose, Radhika Desai and Alan Freeman, whose comments on an earlier draft have enriched this version.

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The topic "The Emerging Left in the 'Emerging' World" may appear to be an excessively ambitious one. After all, to talk of one single "emerging left" even in any single part of the world is not just brave but foolhardy. Left politics and left positions have always been – and will continue to be – extremely diverse, within and across national boundaries. Given the profusion and variation of the multiplicity of approaches, it could justifiably be argued that attempts to fit all types of progressive thinking in very different parts of the world into a common box would be over-simplistic and even misleading.

This perception is also a reflection of the accentuated fragmentation of "left" positions. For much of the 20th century, it was easier to talk of an overarching socialist framework, a "grand vision" within which more specific debates were conducted. Of course there were many strands of socialism, however defined, and there were also fierce and occasionally violent struggles between them. Even so, they shared more than a common historical lineage – they also shared a fundamental perception or basic vision. At the risk of crude simplification, this vision can be summarised in terms of perceiving the working class to be the most fundamental agent of positive change, capable (once organised) of transforming not only existing property and material relations but also wider society and culture through its own actions.

But in recent times the very idea of a grand vision has been in retreat, battered not just by the complexities and limitations of "actually existing socialism" in its various incarnations, but more recently and thoroughly by the ferocious triumphalism of its opposite. Indeed, it may be fair to say that insofar as any grand vision has existed at all in recent

times, the one that increasingly came to dominate public life almost everywhere in the world by the late 20th century was that of the market as a self-regulating and inherently efficient mechanism for organising economic life. This idea had already fallen by the wayside a century previously, before it was resurrected and dusted off for use in a slightly more "post-modern" format that became the theoretical underpinning for the vast explosion of global economic integration under the aegis of finance capital that has marked the period of globalisation.

In fact this position was never really about reducing the economic role of the State. Rather, it was about changing the nature of state intervention towards more open protection of the interests of large capital in various forms, in ways that Miliband himself would certainly have recognised from his own discussion of "the close partnership of capital and the capitalist state" that generates a very real and formidable concentration of power. This feature was never really disguised, but it became too overwhelming to conceal in any way in the governmental responses to global crises that have characterised the period since 2007. The association of the ideology of supposedly free markets with strong tendencies towards greater concentration of capital and the use of the State to further accentuate these tendencies and aggrandise capital have been laid bare for all to see. That the material processes unleashed by such a trajectory of unevenly shared burdens of crises are no longer seen as socially acceptable is also becoming evident in many parts of the developing world that have experienced quiet or not so quiet revolutions, as well as currently in the European continent.

But even as resistance to global capitalism builds up in both the South and the North, it tends to be accompanied by gloomy perceptions that grand socialist visions of the future are no longer possible. Indeed, much of the popular protest that is evident today in various places is still essentially about "resistance" rather than "transformation", and involves rear-guard action to stem the tide of brutal

fiscal austerity measures that deny the social and economic rights of citizens within the existing economic system, rather than conceiving and putting in place alternative systems. A basic lack of confidence in anything other than capitalism as a way of organising economic life still permeates popular protests in Europe and the United States, such that the purpose of the left is seen to be to somehow exert a restraining influence on the worst excesses of current capitalism – the left as a civilising and moderating force, not so much a transformative (much less revolutionary) force.

### Imagining Alternatives

But elsewhere, in Asia, Latin America and Africa, the discourse is becoming quite different. There is much more dynamism within the global left than is often perceived, and there are variegated moves away from tired ideas of all kinds. So the rejection of capitalism also tends to be accompanied not only by imagining alternatives, but also by shifting views about what constitutes the desirable alternative. This, in turn, has meant interrogation of some previously standard tenets of socialist understanding. There are several features of emerging left movements in different parts of the world – in Latin America for sure, where they are also associated in several countries with state power to some extent, but also in other areas of Africa and developing Asia – that suggest a move away from some traditional ideas associated with socialist theory and practice. These are often not formulated in clear theoretical terms, nor are they all part of a consistent and holistic analytical structure, and many ideas also keep changing with the rough and tumble of everyday political practice. It must also be recognised that the lack of a well-defined theoretical framework or perspective, and the reliance instead on a set of occasionally vague but well-intentioned declarations that generate some practical goals, is a feature of many such left movements.

Despite this, the praxis and the analysis (if not always the explicit theory) of various left movements in different parts of the world increasingly transcend what

could be called the traditional socialist paradigm, with its emphasis on centralised government control over an undifferentiated mass of workers, to incorporate more explicit emphasis on the rights and concerns of women, ethnic minorities, tribal communities and other marginalised groups, as well as recognition of ecological constraints and the social necessity to respect nature. These are rendered explicitly, for example in the new constitutions promulgated in Bolivia and Ecuador. But they are also increasingly articulated by groups as diverse as certain trade unions in southern Africa, “New Left” intellectuals in China, social movements in India, and so on.

### Seven Common Threads

Some critical areas of commonality of these diverse tendencies can be identified. I would like to point to seven common threads that appear in what I have described as “the emerging Left” in what are otherwise very distinct political formations and in very dissimilar socio-economic contexts. These are not always “new ideas” – in fact they are more often than not old ideas that appear new simply because of the changing context and the collective failure of memory or at least selective recall, even within the traditional left. Obviously, these ideas are not necessarily shared by all varieties of leftist thought today: for example, there are Maoists in various parts of the world, including in India, who would not accept several of the positions described below.

### On Democracy

The first is the attitude to what constitutes democracy. In contrast to some earlier socialist approaches in which the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat was misinterpreted (and in some cases, still continues to be so used) to suppress formal democracy, there is much greater willingness of the emerging left to engage with and even rely upon formal democratic processes, and the procedures and institutions associated with “bourgeois democracy”: elections; referenda; laws delivering rights and related judicial processes. Even as left movements and parties recognise

the limitations of electoral democracy, and the increasing (indeed, alarming) potential for effective takeover of democratic institutions by money power and corporatised media, they rely more and more on using these formal democratic institutions in different ways to further the broader cause. The radical governments in Latin America derive their legitimacy from ballot boxes, and much right-wing anger is actually directed towards what are derided as “populist” policies of these left-wing governments that provide often overwhelming mandates from the people. In other countries the emerging left is often the greatest champion or defender of such formal democratic institutions – as well as the most concerned about their corruption and manipulation by entrenched interests and corporate power. The focus is essentially on procedural democracy, and here too, there are attempts to go beyond liberal democracy with new experiments in deliberation, consensus building, etc.

This engagement is quite different from some earlier socialist formulations in which all institutions of the bourgeois state were seen as inherently and deeply tainted, and incapable of reform or of being used to bring about positive change in favour of the people. It is also somewhat more than an extension of the earlier idea of the role of the left in bringing about national democratic revolutions in countries still entrapped by feudal and colonial structures, since it embraces (even if only implicitly) the idea that the process is not unidirectional. Rather, leftist engagement with these democratic institutions and processes can also transform the nature of the left parties and their activities.

Another aspect of the changed approach to democracy is within left parties and organisations. While this tendency is not universal, there is evidence that within emerging left groups there is increasingly a trend towards the rejection of top-down models of party organisation (such as is exemplified in the idea of democratic centralism in communist parties, for example) and moving towards more open, democratic forms of parties and coalition building, such

that within an overarching framework and set of goals, a plurality of opinions within the left is not just tolerated but even respected.

### **On Largeness and Scale**

The second relatively “new” feature is the rejection of over-centralisation. The centralising, homogenising state was a central element of “actually existing socialism” throughout much of the 20th century, and even today it remains embedded somewhere in the consciousness of many of those who see themselves as socialists. Indeed, in the classical Marxist view, scale itself, and the tendency of capitalist production to generate larger and larger scales, were seen as paradoxically positive features, since they enabled the combination of large groups of workers who could be mobilised to alter production relations, and allowed for more rapid and effective transformation of such relations to the benefit of all the people.

In any case, there were good reasons for the socialist celebration of largeness, which are still valid. The social coordination of investment remains an integral feature of a desired economy, even when this is not explicitly acknowledged. Development, in the most essential sense of economic diversification, necessarily requires centralised decisions and large-scale investment that must be planned to some degree to be successful. Strategies of accumulation, the encouragement of socially desirable production of goods and services and the distribution of wealth and income necessarily require not just some but often very substantial degrees of centralisation.

This recognition necessarily means that even in the emerging left, there cannot be a blind or simplistic celebration of everything “small”. Nonetheless, most tendencies in this newer left praxis typically foreground the need to generate or enhance the viability of small-scale production. There is a clear reaction against past attempts at centralised control over all aspects of material life, which have been experienced as rigid, inflexible, hierarchical and lacking in accountability, thereby rendering them into the opposite of what was intended.

It is also true that material conditions have changed to make largeness less desirable or necessary in some respects. First, there is the recent experience of the downsides of largeness (such as banks that are too big to fail, multinational corporations (MNCs) that become so big that they are unaccountable and cannot be taxed, and so on). Second, technology – especially the convergence of information, communication and energy technologies – is opening up new possibilities of productivity growth in decentralised settings, which increase the possibilities for a locally managed, decentralised, but globally connected post-carbon economy.

So the emerging left movements and states in which they dominate do not require or expect centralised ownership and control over all economic activities. Smallholder cultivation and small-scale providers of services as well as of manufactured goods are recognised as worthy of direct state support and of being provided sufficient enabling conditions for their activities. This is quite different from the celebration of informality and of strategies like microfinance, which are beloved of the international development industry. Where economies of scale are known to be significant, there is renewed exploration within the left of forms like cooperatives and other combinations in different manifestations. The aim is to find a balance between large and small, which will obviously differ according to context.

### **On Private Property**

It is already evident that this point of view requires a more complex approach to property rights. This constitutes the third major difference of the emerging left from earlier models of socialism that did away with all private property and only recognised personal property. New leftist thinking is generally vague or ambivalent about private property – disliking it when it is seen as monopolising or highly concentrated (for example in the form of MNCs) but otherwise not just accepting of it, but even (in the case of small producers, for example) actively encouraging it. Increasingly there has been explicit recognition or incorporation of other forms of property rights,

particularly communal property associated with traditional, indigenous or autochthonous “communities” who in turn are no longer derided as premodern relics that have to be done away with.

### **On ‘Rights’**

Just as the emerging left tendencies in the emerging world engage more positively with formal democratic institutions and processes, so they also tend to speak more and more in the language of “rights”. This is the fourth relatively new tendency. These rights are not seen in the individualistic sense of libertarian philosophy. Rather, rights are more broadly defined in terms of entitlements as well as through recognising the need for social and political voice – not just of citizens, but also of communities and groups, in the manner described earlier. In a sense, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with its listing of the various rights of all humans, can be interpreted as a socialist manifesto, since it requires the recognition of this wide variety of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights to be not only inalienable but effectively a way of life. The way that various left governments and political groups have interpreted this in practice has generally been related to demands for citizens’ or groups’ entitlements from the State. There tends to be more explicit recognition of the rights of the elderly, children and young people, persons with disabilities. The acceptance of the rights of indigenous peoples, communities and even “nations” within a country is also much more common within the emerging left. This means that there must necessarily be greater recognition of the wider and more diverse character of the classes and groups identified as the exploited, which in turn requires changing modes of organisation and mass mobilisation.

### **On Class and Identities**

Fifth, the emerging left goes far beyond traditional left paradigms in recognising various different and possibly overlapping social and cultural identities that shape economic, political and social realities. The standard socialist paradigm that emerged in the 19th century

and was developed in the 20th century saw class as the fundamental contradiction within societies, with imperialism as the defining feature of relations across countries. There was a tendency to see other cultural attributes certainly as less important, and anyway more in the nature of subordinate and transient tendencies – premodern or semi-feudal relics of the past, which would be destroyed or at least attenuated by the expansion of market forces and capitalism generally. But the resilience of such socially determined patterns, as well as the capitalist system's remarkable ability to incorporate patterns of linguistic/ethnic/social exclusion and discrimination as factors in commercial activity and labour markets has forced a more nuanced understanding. This has led to the realisation that addressing issues only in class terms is not sufficient, and many strands of the emerging left are now much more explicitly (even dominantly) concerned with addressing the inequalities, oppression and exploitation that arise from such non-economic forces. It is a moot point whether this shift in focus is always justified, especially as class and imperialism still remain such powerful determining forces, but certainly this is an important characteristic of many emerging left movements.

### **On the Woman Question**

The most significant such social/material attribute is gender, which forms the next important aspect that is explicitly incorporated into many emerging left tendencies. A changed attitude to the woman question – and associated with this, a more complex understanding of the nature of exploitation – are features of many such emerging left movements. Of course, women have been part of the working class since the beginning of capitalism, even when they have not been widely acknowledged as workers in their own right. While their often unacknowledged and unpaid contribution to social reproduction as well as to many economic activities has always been absolutely essential for the functioning of the system, it took a long time for women's struggles to be accepted as an integral part of working class struggles

for a better society. For more than a century, trade unions and other worker organisations tended to be male preserves, based on the “male breadwinner” model of the household in which the husband/father worked outside to earn money, while the wife/mother did not earn outside income and handled domestic work.

It has taken prolonged struggle and determined mobilisation to generate greater social recognition of the role of women as wage workers in different forms, as well as to bring out the crucial economic significance of unpaid household and community-based work. The specific social, cultural and political constructions that constrain and mould the lives of women are also better recognised. This is not to say that patriarchy has suddenly disappeared from the ranks – unfortunately this is clearly a longer struggle. But the wider perception of the ways in which the gender construction of society affects both men and women in so many aspects of their lives has now become – at least explicitly if not always in practice – a more serious concern in the emerging left.

### **On the Environment Question**

Finally, the relationship of human societies with nature is undergoing much more comprehensive interrogation than ever before. Traditional Marxists tended to be technology fans, glorying in the development of productive forces as expression of the forward movement of society and objecting to relations of production that thwarted or prevented such development. Of course this need not require an exploitative and aggressive attitude to nature and to the use of natural wealth, but in actual practice this was only too often the case. The requirements of an organic and sustainable attitude to nature were rarely factored into discussions about accumulation and productive expansion. All this has changed quite dramatically in the recent past. Among the primary contradictions of contemporary capitalism are the ecological limits that are increasingly evidenced not just by climate change but by the pollution, degradation,

over-extraction and other destruction shown in nature. These have created undeniably unsustainable patterns of production, consumption and accumulation that are generating open conflicts over resources and forcing societies to change, often in undesired ways. And calls for more humane and just societies therefore have to incorporate these critical concerns.

Today many of those who call themselves socialists see environmental conservation, the protection of ecosystems, biodiversity and the integrity of a country's genetic assets, the prevention of environmental damage, and the recovery of degraded natural spaces as matters of public interest and strategy. Consider this passage from the new constitution of Ecuador, which (like Bolivia) grants rights to nature independent of people:

Nature,... where life is reproduced and occurs, has the right to integral respect for its existence and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structure, functions and evolutionary processes. All persons, communities, peoples and nations can call upon public authorities to enforce the rights of nature... Nature has the right to be restored..., apart from the obligation of the State and natural persons or legal entities to compensate individuals and communities that depend on affected natural systems.

### **Two Areas of Continuity**

I have said earlier that these positions are not completely “new”, and certainly there are many strands of earlier leftist thought that contain some elements or versions of these ideas. Certainly the concern with women's rights and the recognition of other forms of oppression and discrimination, as well as other aspects, can be discerned in the writings of Marx and Engels as well as other socialist thinkers. Nevertheless, these seven features of the emerging left do represent some departures from the traditional left paradigm in the ways outlined. But there are some crucial features of strong continuity: most significantly, the attitude to the significance and role of the nation state and the attitude to imperialism. It is intriguing that despite the many economic, social and cultural changes wrought by globalisation,

these concerns have remained, especially in the developing world.

At one level, of course, the focus on the nation state is obvious: the demand for rights of individual or communities or nature must be defined in relation to the locus whereby such rights will be ensured, and the nation state remains the basic location for such demands and negotiation. And the demands generated by the proliferation of current economic forces requires state intervention in all sorts of ways: in reining in finance, in generating economies of scale, in determining the extent of use of the products of nature, in the redistribution of assets, and so on. How leftists engage with the state, even when they recognise it as what Miliband described as “the executive arm of the bourgeoisie” is an arena of constant negotiation. There is a fine line that left engagement with the state must tread, between compromise that thwarts progressive intent, and insistence on “purity” that can render left forces irrelevant. But in addition, the transformation of the state is still certainly seen as necessary, but this is currently perceived to be possible through a much wider range of strategies than were available to the “traditional” left of the 20th century, including participation in the existing democratic processes and demands for larger democratic empowerment of the people in ways outlined earlier.

Also, it is fairly obvious that material forces have transcended the somewhat limited boundary of the nation state. The “cosmopolitan” character of capitalist production and accumulation has never been more evident. And this has attendant implications for effective popular collaboration and mobilisation for change. How that will translate into emerging left praxis is still an open question.

This leads to the second continuity: the concern of the emerging left in the unfolding world with imperialism, in the broad sense of the use of the nation state in the struggle of large capital to control economic territory of different kinds (land and other resources, labour, markets, knowledge and technology, etc). This marks something of a difference with some left tendencies in the

developed world, which increasingly tend to view imperialism as an outdated concept which has been rendered irrelevant by globalisation, and even seem to forget or ignore the material content of much of international relations today. But the struggle over economic territory of different kinds is at least as significant as before, and indeed the relative decline of the only current superpower has further accentuated it. So the left in the emerging world is not only concerned with these tendencies but also has to confront its quotidian practice, which includes not just standard weapons like war and military aggression but also newer instruments such as control over privatised intellectual property rights and “economic partnership agreements” that fundamentally protect large capital of particular nations. For these and other reasons, the left – along with others in the developing world – tends to be much more cynical about the intent and nature of “humanitarian intervention” to forcibly export democracy, and other attempts to enforce “the international rule of law” in very selective cases.

### In the North

When I first thought of the subject matter for this lecture, it seemed as if the alternative progressive visions for the future organisation of economies and societies were both more likely and more prevalent in the Global South. Indeed, just as there are those who argue that the fulcrum of global power is shifting (albeit slowly and unevenly) to countries in the South, so it can be argued that the more exciting and imaginative forms of socialist praxis are increasingly to be found in countries that are currently in the global “periphery”. But recent happenings in

Europe and the us suggest a more complex reality in the North as well, as the established beliefs get challenged and there are more thoughtful formulations of feasible alternatives. As the “Occupy”, Indignados, and other political movements suggest, as more and more people recognise how current economic structures operate in ways that are fundamentally inimical to their interests, the stronger and sharper becomes the search for economic alternatives.

The fundamental premises of the socialist project remain as valid: the unequal, exploitative and oppressive nature of capitalism; the capacity of human beings to change society and thereby alter their own future in a progressive direction; and the necessity of collective organisation to do so. The fecundity of the socialist alternatives cropping up in different parts of the world suggests that – whatever we may think to the contrary in what are generally depressing times – the project is still very dynamic and exciting.

[It was a great honour and privilege for me to be invited to deliver this lecture. Ralph Miliband was not just an outstanding social scientist and innovative Marxist thinker, but also a beacon to progressive people across the world. For many of us, including in India, his own work and the work he promoted in the *New Left Review* and the *Socialist Register* expressed the spirit of enquiry and questioning, as well as the fundamental commitment to a socialist future, which made Marxism as a mode of thinking so attractive. This gave us more confidence to interpret the world around us, even when we disagreed with some particular interpretation. Ralph Miliband showed us that ideas could and should be handled not just “with care and with passion” but also without dogma or fear, including the fear of exposing one’s own shibboleths. The subject of this lecture is a tribute to this inspiring combination of personal commitment, intellectual integrity and fearlessness.]

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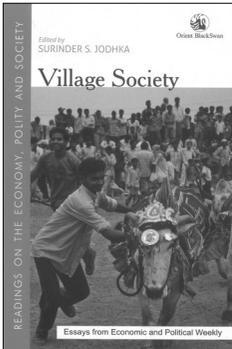
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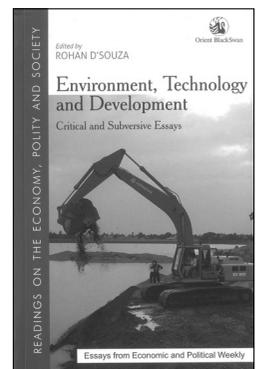
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