

## **Hidden in Plain Sight**

### *Problems of Democracy under Capitalism and Socialism*

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If one has to say something brief and short about a large and complex subject, which is also a much discussed topic, one always runs the risk of stating the obvious. But one may also chance upon the unexpected and the counter-intuitive. Problems of democracy under capitalism and under socialism have by now a ring of tiring familiarity around them, but they also contain surprises that are hidden in plain sight. While fixing my coordinates by recounting the obvious, my hope is to point towards aspects that may be counter-intuitive to the political common sense prevalent in much of the left and the social movements.

Let me begin with the status of democracy under capitalism. Popular mind considers them complementary to each other. Ancients – whether in Greece or in India – were familiar with the concept of democracy and, at least in some famous examples, they are also supposed to have practiced it. But the large-scale acceptance and practice of democracy overlaps with the history of capitalism. In addition, the history of socialism of the twentieth century has been such that this association got further entrenched in the popular mind. I will come to the socialism question a little later. For now, let me stay with the relationship between democracy and capitalism.

If I were to say, then, that at the core of this relationship lies a tension that is fundamentally irresolvable, it would appear counter-intuitive to the popular common sense. On the other hand, it would appear obvious to a leftist. On both counts there are reasons to dig a little deeper. Truth is often counter-intuitive for the wrong reasons, but at times it is also obvious for the wrong reasons.

If democracy is irreconcilable with capitalism at some fundamental level, how is it that they have coexisted in the real world for such a long time? The short answer is – always at the cost of democracy. They have lived together but not on equal terms. Capitalism always had the trump, although one should not overlook the fact that, over time, it has also shaped up to the growing rigors of democracy. During much of the early history of capitalism citizenship rights were confined to the property owners. Slaves and women, for example, were not considered full humans worthy of citizenship and democratic rights. The situation has now changed, but not entirely. Democracy is allowed into many parts of capitalism’s mansion and this access has enlarged over time, but it is barred from the gilded central halls and it would never be allowed into the sanctum.

One of the non-negotiables is private property. Not that many would like to negotiate over it. Everyone loves private property, especially one’s own. This virtue or vice, whichever way you look at it, is not confined to the capitalists. Everyone, it seems, would like to keep both – private property and democracy. And, private property is part of the genetic code of capitalism. Where, then, is the case for democracy being irreconcilable with capitalism?

Let us do a bit of unpacking of the concepts. Take the case of democracy. Its conceptual map can be drawn along two axes – one of *power* and the other of *freedom*. If democracy means people will govern themselves, some mechanism would have to be put in place for the formation and execution of the *popular will*. Ideally, every citizen must participate actively and equally in this process. There must also be social accountability of the exercise of power even when power emanates from popular will. Institutions, mechanisms and practices of democracy are supposed to approximate this ideal.

The second axis is that of freedom or liberty, although we on the left often feel shy of using the latter word. It is taken as a code word for capitalism, private property and individualism. In any case, having aligned the axis of power along the democratic principle, we are still faced with a critical question. How much of life do we wish to bring under democracy? If you are surprised by this question, especially coming from a leftist, let me rephrase it. In how many aspects of your life would you be willing and happy to live in accordance with the *popular will*?

It is not an easy question to answer. And, answers keep changing through history and across social conditions. Perhaps, we can more fruitfully ask – what is the desirable direction for this answer to change? This, I believe, can be answered more firmly. The direction should be such that increasingly larger domains of life get released progressively from the grip of the *system* – from the grip of *any system*, including the most democratic ones.

I am aware that, to some ears, all this may sound like Maggie Thatcher or Milton Friedman. But that would be an utterly false impression. Their concept of liberty was not aimed at releasing life from the clutches of the system. Their sole pre-occupation was to keep private property and economic power of the capitalist class away from the reach of any kind of popular will or public scrutiny. Economy – the system of ownership of productive assets as well as the rules of production, exchange, wages and money – falls, for them, in the private domain – what earlier used to be called *the civil society*. This was before the term became much narrowly defined and appropriated by the NGO sector and sections of the social movements. For the likes of Thatcher and Friedman, only in the arena of state and governance should one be concerned with the formation and execution of the popular will. As long as liberty takes avatar only in the form of private property and the economic sphere is separated from and protected by the political sphere, God will be happy in his place and everything will be fine with the world.

This is precisely the problem. Capital creates private sphere around itself and declares it to be the sacrosanct arena of liberty in which no one should interfere. But it interferes itself in the private life of everyone else. I am not alluding only to the fact that it shapes the consumption patterns, behavioural habits and aesthetic tastes of yours and mine. The material life – indeed life as a whole – depends on whether capitalism is doing well or not. Well-being of humanity depends on the economic growth of nations and the world, and this growth is defined by the rate of profit accruing to capital. This is how capitalism gets the trump over democracy and over everything else. This is why Marxists and many other kinds of leftists say that there is no hope for universal liberty and freedom under capitalism. The fundamental incompatibility

between capitalism and democracy resides in the fact that capitalism does not allow formation of that kind popular will which might knock at the gates of capital. It obliterates the axis of freedom from the map of democracy.

All this is too obvious. After all, we are leftists raised on such knowledge from our days in the cradle. Why then, one may ask, struggle for democracy has practically walked out of the economic arena? In fact democratic struggles are conceptualized in clear distinction from economic struggles. And the latter are considered utterly outdated – a preoccupation only of those leftists who refuse to be awakened from their dogmatic slumber.

Of course, there have been some good reasons for this to happen. It is far from the case that all victories along the axis of power have been won. Gender, race, caste, sexuality and other such bases of disempowerment and subjugation have rightly become major arena of struggles and have given rise to waves upon waves of social movements. Also, one cannot really say that these movements have not made any efforts to knock at the doors of capital. We had speakers yesterday making this point forcefully in the session on patriarchy and capitalism.

In addition, there have been negative reasons too – corrective as well as reactive. Leftists have been in the habit of reducing everything to the class. Class struggle, in turn, is identified more or less exclusively with economic struggles. These economic excesses had to be corrected. This was also the time when twentieth century socialism was fast turning into a source of widespread disillusionment. As it hurtled towards its demise, the idea of socialism began to get a very bad press – its economic model even more so.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the focus shifted away from the economic sphere. Democratic struggles along the axis of power became all the rage. For the past fifty years this is where all the action has been. Beyond the social movements that I have mentioned, demands arose elsewhere too to re-conceptualize and re-configure democracy. Proposals were made to replace the weak and thin democracy with a strong and thick democracy – the liberal and representative one was to be replaced by the radical and participatory, the centralized and institutional one by the decentralized and direct. Beyond being a historic goal in itself, this was supposed to set everything else right too. Pendulum had swung to an opposite kind of reductionism.

One of the main points I would like to argue is that this faith in strong democracy needs to be reexamined. For one thing, strong democracy by itself does not work very well. It needs an already entrenched democratic tradition and an institutional framework to work properly. Here in India, a *Khap Panchayat* can always wake you up rather rudely from the dream you might be having about a vigorously participative and communitarian democracy. Even in Venezuela, I suspect, the fate of strong local democracy depends rather strongly on what kind of government gets constituted at the national level through a rather run-of-the-mill representative democracy.

Some thirty years ago, Benjamin Barber wrote a book by the title *Strong Democracy*. Its subtitle was *Participatory Politics for a New Age*, and it became a near classic. After writing the whole book about the limitations of thin and liberal democracy, he presented in the final

chapter an institutional framework for strong democracy. This framework reads more like a manual of how to avoid the pitfalls of strong democracy. He is forthright about his own proposal when he says, “This is not to say that strong democracy aspires to civic participation and self-government on all issues at all times in every phase of government, both national and local. Rather, it projects some participation some of the time on selected issues on both national and local levels of power.” There you have it from the horse’s mouth.

There has been this rather radical claim that under strong democracy politics would trump economics. Under capitalism it is impossible to turn this claim into reality. And, it will take a great deal more than participatory, communitarian and direct democracy to unseat capital from the power-centre of the social world.

Admittedly, strong democracy can do some good things, if care is taken that it does not take an ugly form. It can subject capital to greater popular pressure and force it to yield more space for the rights and well-being of people. But it cannot bring about a revolution by itself, nor can it claim like Napoleon – I am the Revolution.

Let me now jump to the question of democracy under socialism. As someone mentioned on the first day of this Seminar, the popular perception has been that democracy is incompatible with socialism. The history of twentieth century socialism further bolstered that perception. I do not have time to go into why things happened the way they happened, and where can one put the blame for the demise of what was known as actually existing socialism. We have examined it elsewhere and you can, if you wish, take a look at the Manifesto of the New Socialist Initiative.

Things are not helped by the fact that Marxists as well as many other kinds of leftists exaggerate the collusion between democracy and capitalism. They tend to think that democracy so far has been nothing but a handmaiden of capitalism. It has been made to order for serving the interests of capital. This is why no element of *bourgeois democracy* – not a single one of its institutions and practices – will be allowed to survive when socialism comes around. This is a mistaken view that ignores centuries of peoples’ struggles for democracy. History of democracy overlaps significantly with the history of capitalism, but this does not make them synonymous. This kind of exaggeration and blanket judgment adds to the false impression that Marxists are opposed to democracy itself.

I must express my satisfaction, however, that the traditional left parties have begun to accept a few things openly. For example, a party can lead a revolution – indeed it must – but it cannot monopolize the state power after revolution. Party is constituted by the party members; state must be constituted by the whole people. This will remain true under socialism. We cannot go back from where humanity has reached, even if this journey has been made largely under capitalism.

There are others who think that, unlike bourgeois democracy, socialist democracy will be the real democracy because people will constitute the state on a daily basis. This democracy will be participatory rather than representative, direct rather than indirect, decentralized rather than centralized. It will be a thick and strong democracy that would bring all social life and

most of private life under its fold. That is how it will give rise to an active political society and transform the passive citizen into an active political being. Such is the leftist commonsense about democracy.

Although each component of this view may have something in its favor, all put together it can go horribly wrong. We may have been raised on the lessons about the Paris Commune and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, but we must also have the competence and the courage to evaluate even those things on which we were raised.

Time does not permit me to go into the details, but let me mention one general feature. We might love organic things, but we should never think that the socialist system will be like a single cell organism. All complex systems go through differentiation. Society differentiates into different spheres; economy differentiates into sectors; polity differentiates into institutions. It is through such differentiation that systems become flexible, adaptable, resilient and robust. One of the deeper problems of twentieth century socialism was its rigidity that did not allow differentiation. Socialism can prove superior to capitalism only if it is more complex and differentiated – more flexible, adaptive and resilient.

Socialist democracy, therefore, will not be a democracy in which people will assemble daily in the stadium to constitute the state and decide on the policies. There will have to be an elaborate system of democracy. One does not have a blueprint, but one can make out the broad outlines.

For example, socialist democracy will be based on a socialist constitution that will disallow private appropriation of socially produced surplus. That is the key element. It can be realized through thousand different paths and varying combinations of different ownership structures. It can allow market, it can allow production of commodities, and with appropriate safeguards it can allow what was earlier known as the bourgeois right – “from each according to her capacity, to each according to her work”. But it will not allow labour power to become a commodity. As the system and the society progress to different stages in their lives, these arrangements will keep on changing, although the basic principle will remain the same.

How will the socialist democracy be implemented in the political arena – what I earlier called the axis power? It will depend on the history and the conditions of a given society. It is a rich and complex topic to speculate on and we do not have time. But, at least I can say this much. Let us not determine the shape of democracy at the systemic level only on the basis of the experience and the inclinations of specific movements. Movements are agents of change and they impact on everything, but they are not everything. To rehearse a famous quote, they make history but not in the conditions of their choosing. The shape of coming democracy will depend on the reality we start from as well as on what we can manage to do with that reality. We do not have a free play when imagining socialist democracy. It is constrained by where our society has reached under capitalism.

Let me conclude by saying a few things about socialism in general. In this, I may be sounding a discordant note – given the dominant attitudes and inclinations that I think I have noticed in this assembly.

Let us envision twenty-first century socialism as an alternative *system* and not as an alternative *way of life*. Socialism – no matter how much we love it – would still be a system and not a life form. Right now we want it desperately, but when we will get it, we will have to think about how to make it shrink. Every system, even the best ones, must shrink to progressively release life from its grip.

One big problem with capitalism is that it cannot shrink. It cannot even stabilize at some level. It must keep on expanding. It is a ruthless example of what a famous theorist called – colonization of the life-world by the system. Socialism, on the other hand, must have an inbuilt mechanism for shrinking as a system. Of course, we should not get restless if this shrinkage is not noticed the next day or the next decade after its arrival. But, in the long run it must shrink.

This progressive shrinkage would have a decisive impact on the way of life. In turn, the changing way of life will accelerate the system shrinkage. Furthermore, the newly evolving way of life under socialism would transform our relations with Nature.

Yesterday, in the session on *Capitalism, Ecology and Sustainable Development* we heard powerful arguments about the need to re-configure this relationship. Pablo Solon elevated the argument to the level of incorporating New Age Gaian spirituality into the conceptual make-up of future socialism. I mean no disrespect, and I hope you do not get me wrong. In fact, I subscribe to the final goal of humanity to be living a good life that is in dynamic equilibrium with a perpetually changing Nature. But I have two issues.

Revolutions are not so much pulled by a future that is normatively attractive as they are pushed from behind by the hard and unacceptable conditions of material life. We can only do so much by telling people what *living well* is; mostly they will be driven by the existing conditions of life. As Sudha Vasan pointed out, ecological disruptions may become part of the existing conditions in a way that they would give rise to new movements and add further push towards revolution. But that does not require deriving higher level normative criteria from a Gaian holism.

I am not a climate change skeptic. But I am skeptical about the rather definitive long-term predictions made about the climate. I cannot give very good reasons for my – what you may call – tactical skepticism. I was trained as a physicist and physicists have great difficulty in dealing with complexity. In fact they must reduce the *complex* into a bunch of *simples* if they dare at all to try to understand the former. So, climate change is not my cup of tea. But I do not feel handicapped in my political endeavor because of this. Social facts are enough to try and convict capitalism, and ecological facts will be experienced by the people primarily as social facts.

The second issue I have is: should we put a new-born under the weight of an entire earth? If socialism were to come today to India where more than half of the population consumes below the global subsistence standards, can we tell that socialism to shape itself according to the planetary imperatives? I do not feel ashamed in asking this question – primarily because I am confident socialism will grow up to behave thoughtfully with Nature. It will do so by

creating conditions for evolving a new way of life that would reduce the size of humanity's footprints on the planet.

I do not think there is any harm in exploring alternate ways of living, in promoting a different relationship with Nature and learning from the wisdom of the indigenous and the ancients. But if we make all of this a precondition for socialism, we are setting the bar too high and we are running ahead of ourselves.

We are setting the bar too high because capitalism as a system – and not as a way of life – is preparing the stage for socialism. That is what we should focus on utilizing.

And we are running ahead of ourselves in the sense that a different way of life, a different relationship with Nature and a different level of human solidarity will follow from socialism. We do not have to design socialism with so many conditions. We have to design it in a minimalist way – to the extent it can be designed at all. Let other things follow from there.

Let us not prescribe a new way of life the way we used to prescribe proletarian culture in the days of erstwhile socialism. Let the new way of life emerge from the laws and practices of the new system.

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