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# **Mutant Modernities, Socialist Futures**

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**Nagarjuna University Lecture**

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## MUTANT MODERNITIES, SOCIALIST FUTURES

Modernity and socialism can be daunting subjects. Both have had a long history and both have impacted on humanity in ways few other ideas, systems or forms of life have. In a famous incident, perhaps not entirely apocryphal, Chou En Lai, when asked about the impact of the French Revolution on the western civilization by Richard Nixon, is supposed to have answered, “It is too soon to tell.”<sup>1</sup> It seems to me that Chou’s riposte would hold well, and with a far greater force, if the same question were to be asked a few hundred years from now about the impact of modernity or of socialism on the entire human civilization.

One asks for trouble on other counts too when proposing to deal with these topics. They have both been explored and debated endlessly and both remain enormously controversial. In the domain of ideas and theories, they generate intense, sometimes fierce, intellectual passion. In the domain of real life, they give rise to monumental conflicts and struggles even as their influences continue to seep imperceptibly into ever deeper layers of societies and forms of life through pathways that are hard to track. One must have a good reason for raking up, as many might say, a subject where ashes of time find it difficult in any case to settle on an exasperatingly burning fire. Those too, who would like to continue stoking the fire of historical and emancipatory transformations promised by these words, would need a good reason for re-entering the subject. Whether I have one or not should best be left to be judged at the end of the hour, but one must hope to add something useful and meaningful to the debate.

It is not the case, however, that these two words – modernity and socialism – always invite similar reactions or attitudes. That, in fact, would have been surprising. After all, they belong to two different categories of concepts and they have been differently implicated in history during last several centuries. Socialism is supposed to be a *system* just as capitalism is a system. Or, more accurately, socialism is a *transitional* system that is supposed to take us beyond the capitalist system. Modernity, on the other hand, remains elusive to all exertions of capturing it as a well defined concept, category or entity. Such is the case even after enormous expenditures of formidable intellectual energy by philosophers, theorists and historians, including the legendary ones<sup>2</sup>, across the last three or four centuries.

Among many commonalities and differences in attitudes evoked by these two concepts, one difference is especially noteworthy. More than a decade ago, my friend, Javeed Alam, came out with a book that he interestingly titled – *India: Living with Modernity*.<sup>3</sup> Given the history of modernity during the past two centuries, and especially the theorizations about it during the latter half of the twentieth century, it seems to me that everyone wants to *live with* modernity, but no one is willing to *sign the papers*. A kind of shamefacedness, if not outright concealment, is very commonplace, as is the case, in most societies, with the *live-in* relationship in its more regular meaning.<sup>4</sup> Societies that have lived with modernity for centuries take the pleasures and the

comforts for granted, but there is a growing sense of weariness in the relationship. Other societies, charmed by modernity in more recent times, have entered into a relationship with it, but they keep announcing their being wedded to cultures, traditions and ways of life that would not sit well, in most cases, with the new relationship. Most curious is the case of intellectuals of the postmodern type who come from both kinds of societies. Like the fin-de-siècle artist who would paint ugly portraits of his live-in partner while keeping alive the romance of imagined seductions from the times gone by, these intellectuals draw such caricatures of modernity that pre-modern times begin to look attractive and desirable. Caricaturing appears to be an integral part of the intellectual strategy to facilitate the argument that modernity's hands are soaked with blood of all the victims of capitalism and colonialism.<sup>5</sup>

Socialism, on the other hand, evokes a very different attitude. No one would attempt to hide his or her relationship with it, irrespective of whether it is that of a friend or a foe or it is one from which the fire of earlier passion has gone out. Being up-front about it is helped, perhaps, by the fact that, although being a *system*, socialism presently exists merely as an idea, a proposal, or a chapter from past history. The idea may be attractive to some and scary for others; the proposal may or may not have its details worked out in a way that keeps it true to the principles while making it feasible in the given conditions; its actual history may evoke nostalgia in some while others may remember it as a nightmare. The point of the matter is that no one actually lives under socialism anymore.<sup>6</sup> Unlike modernity it does not permeate life. For most people it no longer compels a feeling of pride or shame or even ambivalence about the relationship they had with it. For most people it is passé in a way that they can be nonchalant about it.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the relationship between modernity and socialism is much misunderstood, often misrepresented and hugely controversial. A revealing example of this is provided by the ways in which the collapse of the twentieth century socialism in the erstwhile Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe has been looked at through the lens of modernity. Explanations range from calling socialism a “failed revolt against modernity” to viewing it as a spectacular example of “failed modernity”.<sup>7</sup> Difficulties arise not only in the efforts to characterize the relationship. They arise, in the first place, from the widely different views held about the entities at the poles of the relationship. Therefore, I first need to clarify how I view modernity on the one hand and socialism on the other.

Before I embark on that, I need to make another clarification. Doubts may exist about the practical-political need to connect modernity with socialism. After all, anti-capitalist revolutions, which would usher history into the socialist era, are matters of strategy and practice, of assessing the severity of systemic crises and weighing the balance of class forces, of knowing how to orchestrate popular movements to political ends. What is to be gained from the supposedly philosophical discourse of modernity and its relationship with the idea of socialism? Let me make a claim – to be substantiated, hopefully, in the course of this presentation – that modernity is an unavoidable practical issue for anyone interested in socialism. It will weigh heavily in future designs of revolutionary strategies as well as in the visions and models of future socialism.

Collapse of the twentieth century socialism, for example, was not unrelated to the fact that its make-up was significantly *un-modern*. But, let me not get ahead of myself.

### **Mutant Modernities**

Using the term *mutant* in the context of modernity, even if metaphorically, calls for qualifications. Mutations are random changes in genes that can produce new *traits* in an *organism*. Genetic changes can arise spontaneously and randomly during the normal genetic processes of replication, or they can be induced by external factors present in the environment (viruses, chemicals, radiation etc). A *mutant* is a member of a species that is physically different from the *typical* members of the species, the difference resulting from the new traits arising out of mutation. In the natural world of organisms, then, a *mutant* can be treated as a deviation from the *typical*. In the metaphorical usage of this term in the context of modernity, one may ask, which of the modern societies are to be considered as the *typical*?

This can be a controversial issue. There can be views which would equate the *typical* with the *original*. Modernity, whichever way it is defined, did emerge in the Northwestern Europe before anywhere else. One may think of the West European model as the original model. The trouble is that this model is not one. Countries of the Western Europe, despite recent moves towards integration of one kind or another, show significant variations around the general theme of modernity. If the examples are expanded to include other industrially developed societies, such as in North America or in Japan, then the variations are much more pronounced.

But the story does not end there. Societies of most countries on this planet have become modern, and each one of them is modern in its own specific way. Their histories cannot be traced to an original or a classical model; their typology cannot easily be systematized. Despite famous theories of *convergence*, which expected all societies of the world to become progressively like those in the west,<sup>8</sup> the spread of modernity, even after the onset of so-called globalization, has not been able to homogenize the world. This has been taken by some as a grand failure of the project of modernity, while others have come to believe that one can talk about modernity only in the plural. The latter position would hold that there are as many modernities as there are modern societies; one can say that the contemporary world contains *multiple modernities*.<sup>9</sup>

I argue in favour of a position that falls somewhere in between, although it may appear to be indistinguishable from the latter position. In the case being made here, there are no *typical* members of the species. All *embodied* and *actually existing* modernities will be taken as *mutant* modernities. What, then, is to be gained from using this metaphor? Why could one not just go with the usage of the term “Multiple Modernities”?

At the descriptive level, it would perhaps make no difference. The purpose behind using the term “Mutant Modernities”, however, is to emphasize the process through which the generative features of modernity – whichever way they are identified – give rise to different embodiments

of modernity. The emphasis here is on the processes, structures and environs through which the genetic code, so to speak, gives rise to the specific traits of the embodied organism.

This is far from being a case of definitional hairsplitting. It is important substantively as well as methodologically, and it has important political implications. For example, at the substantive level one might ask, what is it that mutates when modernity takes various embodied forms? Methodologically, can one decipher the genetic code from analyzing a mutant or from comparing different ones? Can one construct, at least theoretically, the shape of the perfect organism that should emerge from the code and compare a mutant form against the ideal one? At the practical and political level, one may ask, does this give us a way to choose what would be a better system, society or way of life?

Classical theories of modernity did attempt to decipher such a genetic code. In these analyses, the role of *base molecules*, so to speak, was played by two concepts that were taken to be entwined in this code – *autonomy* and *rationalization*. Autonomy referred to the emergence of humanity from the shadows of religion, tradition, custom and communities. Rather than thinking as religion would have them think, humans began to think for themselves; rather than living as tradition would prescribe, they began to live in newer ways; rather than remaining subsumed in the community, they began to emerge as individuals. Immanuel Kant described it as humanity's *gaining of maturity*.<sup>10</sup>

Rationalization, on the other hand, referred to reorganizing the society and the way of life according to the principles of *reason*. Philosophers differed about the nature, the source and the seat of reason, but there was enough agreement about what it was and how it could be contrasted with dogma, faith and superstition. More importantly, the understanding of reason kept evolving through the history of modern philosophy. Cartesian paradigm of *subject centered reason*, with the solitary thinker as the source of trustworthy knowledge, continued as the dominant paradigm all the way to Kant for whom knowledge, in spite of its connections to the external world, remained grounded in the consciousness of the *individual self*. Hegel questioned this subjectivist orientation and argued that *structures of consciousness* are socially and historically constructed. *Reason*, of a given era or at any given time, is the historical and social achievement of humanity and it is going to continually improve through the dynamics of history driven dialectically by the defects of contemporary reason as compared to the perfect one – the latter, according to Hegel, being encoded in the Absolute Idea waiting for humanity at the end of history. Discounting Hegel's philosophical idealism and his political conservatism flowing out of a method in which history always justifies the *present*, his contribution was to put real flesh on the emaciated *subject centered reason* of Descartes and Kant which could hardly keep standing.<sup>11</sup>

In the story of *reason*, if Kant brought in the *individual* endowed with the critical faculties and freed from custom and community and Hegel brought in *society* and *history* as the makers of the social individual, then Marx completed the picture by bringing in *Nature* and the *entirety of the material world*. He insisted that “mind is not the ground of nature but nature that of mind; he

stressed that human consciousness is essentially embodied and practical and argued that forms of consciousness are an encoded representation of forms of social reproduction.”<sup>12</sup> The individual is social and, in part, socially constructed; society is coming together of the socialized individuals (*social relations of production*) to deal with Nature and with the material world to ensure reproduction of material and social condition of life at a progressively higher level (*development of productive forces*); the material world, the society and the individual are ceaselessly interactive and operative in making and remaking each other; and in this process the *totality*, through its own internal dynamics, keeps constituting and reconstituting itself. The philosophical discourse of reason would continue after Marx and long after the classical era is concluded, and it would continue to glean fresh insights into the nature of reason from a variety of sources,<sup>13</sup> but, after Marx, there is hardly anything big to be added to the big picture.

In all this, a point of methodological importance needs to be kept in view. When one is trying to decipher the genetic code of modernity through philosophical toil, one is engaged in something akin to post-mortem; one is reading history backwards. This is very different from making history or influencing it in any big way. The fruits of such philosophical toil may feed into live history – *history in the making* – but its influence will at best be minor and indirect. Modernity has unfolded in history the way it has and taken its multiple embodied forms that we actually see not because of Descartes, Kant, Hegel or Marx. It has unfolded as a result of the generative mechanisms arising out of modernity’s own genetic code. Those legendary philosophers did not will into existence what has been described as autonomy and rationalization. They merely saw these at work in the life processes of embodied modernities.

The practical implications, therefore, of “roads not taken” while they were philosophically available should not be blown out of proportion. It would not have, for example, made much difference to history if the philosophical tradition of Spinoza and Marx that spurns the Cartesian section and does not drive a wedge between *Body* and *Mind* were to prevail intellectually over that of Descartes and Kant that does so. Or, to put it another way, there were substantive reasons in history for the latter to prevail over the former.<sup>14</sup> Modernity, although a concept or entity very different from capitalism, was nevertheless conjoint with it at birth and its unfolding so far has happened in a world that has been capitalism’s playground. The worship of individualism, private property, market, bourgeois democracy and in general of bourgeois liberal ideology has arisen in the course of actual history and not from taking the wrong philosophical turn. Similar comments would apply if one were to imagine that replacing the subject-centered understanding of reason by the inter-subjective one, or taking up “a hermeneutic dialogue with other cultures and epochs about the common concerns of human life; or, perhaps, a genealogical unmasking of any pretense to universal validity”<sup>15</sup> would in any significant way change the future course of history.

It is instructive to note, in this context, that Marx, after making his seminal contribution to philosophy and after realizing the relative disempowering of philosophy brought about by empirical and scientific investigations of the social systems and of Nature – a development not



unconnected with flowering of modernity and development of capitalism – moved away from philosophy to the study of the capitalist system. This study was inspired by his theoretical and philosophical framework, but it was not a philosophical discourse. It was a concrete investigation of a concrete system. One may ask, why did he choose to study a system, rather than, say, a culture, a country, or history of technology? The answer lies in the special role played by system in the social totality.

System has not always been sufficiently differentiated and separately identifiable within the social totality. Such a differentiation is a characteristic feature of modernity. If it is often seen as a characteristic feature of capitalism, that is because capitalism is often equated with modernity. Even among those critics of capitalism who would like to replace it with socialism, such a conflation of capitalism and modernity leads to a viewpoint that the social differentiation characteristic of modern societies must be undone and, under socialism society must once again become an integrated and organic whole. The relatively integrated character of the social totality in the pre-modern times comes in clear view when compared to the increasingly differentiated make-up of a modern society. This differentiation is a much studied subject. From Hobbes, Smith and Marx through Durkheim and Weber to Adorno, Parsons and Habermas have all studied it in its different aspects and from their different perspectives.

One illustrative way to describe the complex process of differentiation has been to compare the organic character of Community (*Gemeinschaft*) with the rational and contractual character of Association (*Gesellschaft*). The transition from *society as community* to *society as coordinated network of associations and institutions* has been seen variously as a loss, as a progress, and as something in between about which one can only have an ambivalent attitude. Alex Callinicos refers to Ferdinand Tonnies as a typical example of the first kind, “Tonnies regarded the transition from one kind of society to another as essentially a process of loss: individuals in pre-modern *Gemeinschaft* were bound into the social whole by a series of primarily affective connections; social relationships in modern *Gesellschaft* are cold and egoistic, based on individuals’ rational calculations of their interests.”<sup>16</sup>

Comte, Spencer and Durkheim, on the other hand, considered this differentiation to be at the root of a progressive *social evolution* leading to better social arrangements, although there were important differences among them. In Comte’s schema establishment of consensus was key to prevent the danger of social disintegration posed by differentiation, whereas Spencer held the system of free market as the best way to have a society ensuring individual freedom. Durkheim, on the other hand, was far from being an unthinking importer of *evolutionary theory* into the social realm. In his thinking, *division of labour* and the resultant social differentiation give rise to a new kind of organic solidarity in the society. In fact, division of labour simultaneously creates conditions for increased independence of the individual and of increased social solidarity.<sup>17</sup>

Marx had a very complex and often ambivalent attitude, evidence of which is scattered in different places in his writings. His trenchant criticism of capitalism for its barbaric conduct

while destroying pre-modern forms of life coexists with his disdain for Asiatic inertia and rural idiocy. At a much later time, a comparable ambivalence is witnessed in Jurgen Habermas who proposes to view society simultaneously as a *system* and as a *lifeworld* and locates the pathologies of a modernity that dwells on subjectivist reason and flourishes under capitalism in the processes of *system's colonization of the lifeworld*.<sup>18</sup>

The complex and long-winded intellectual history of the study of social differentiation under modernity cannot be summarized satisfactorily in the time and space available here. Taking a practical approach reasonably informed by this history, one can say that the modernist social differentiation, in its broad outlines, is roughly based on making a distinction between economy, polity and society – society being used here not in the sense of social totality but representing only the part left over after economy and polity are separated from it. This differentiation of the society into three separate, though interconnected, spheres is actualized through emergence of corresponding sub-systems and institutions. These take clearly identifiable definite shapes mainly in the economy and polity parts, although the residual social part is not altogether devoid of its own kinds of institutions. Taking this practical approach further, the *system* part of the social totality – what has been called *the system* without defining it thus far – can be taken as comprising of the economy and the polity. This may not be fully accurate or consistent as both economy and polity are inextricably entangled in the social totality. In a more careful analysis one may have to distinguish the rational-formal-legal-institutional parts of the economy and polity from the parts that are soluble in the social fluid and take the former as playing the constitutive role in the differentiation of the system from the rest of the society. But, for the argument I am going to make here the present level of care will suffice.

In the Marxist political economy, understanding of *system* is correlated with the understanding of the term, *mode of production*. A system arises out of a mode of production and corresponds to that mode of production. Capitalist system, for example, is based on the capitalist mode of production. However, just as in the case of modernity, there is a serious dose of abstraction involved here. A capitalist mode of production is an abstract category distilled from manifold embodied forms of capitalism that may appear very different from each other. Capitalism, or any other mode of production for that matter, never gets a clean slate to write its rules on. Even in cases where it may be implanted from outside, it must grow in the womb of the host society. The make-up and the history of the pre-existing society co-determines, along with the genetic code of capitalism, the shape of the embodied capitalism as it grows in that society. In a way, all capitalisms too are mutant capitalisms.

Marxist method has often been vulgarized by Marxists themselves. When Marx chose to move away from the philosophical discourse of consciousness that is socialized and naturalized at the same time, and embarked on an empirical-scientific study of the capitalist system, he did not do so in order to derive the society from the mode of production, or to derive the organism from the genetic code. There was a dual reason behind this choice – one methodological and the other practical-programmatic.



The methodological reason lies in the fact that if one wishes to study social formations and gain insights into the forces animating the flow of history, the best place to start is the system part of the social totality. System is the more active part; the non-system part mostly plays the role of environment for the system. Marxist method is especially successful in the study of the system part. Within the system, the role of the *economic-material* is taken to be the basic one, on which rises the political superstructure that can be shown to be in dialectical relationship with the economic-material base. One can, perhaps, also identify a part of the ideological superstructure that falls within the system and corresponds to the given economic-material base. But this should not be confused with the non-system part which contains most of the cultural and civilizational domain of a social totality. It is a misuse or vulgarization of the Marxist method when one puts the system and the non-system parts in as tight a dialectical embrace with each other as one does for the material and non-material components within the system. The system part does interact with the non-system part. After all they are part of the same social totality. But this dynamics is much weaker and of its characteristic time-scale is much longer as compared to the dynamics within the system. The constituents of the system live in a far tighter dialectical embrace with each other. This is the main reason behind civilizations retaining their distinct identities over historical periods much longer than the lifetimes of systems they envelope and harbour. Systems change faster than civilizations do.

The practical-programmatic reason for undertaking the study of the system is related to the methodological one. First of all, it is far easier to intervene in a system than in a culture or a civilization. More importantly, intervening in the system is a far more effective way to intervene in history and change its direction. History is made by throwing a spanner in the works of a system that has exhausted its historically progressive role and can be replaced by a better system. This will create ripples, at times strong ones, in the non-system part too. The cultural-civilizational domain will not remain unaffected. A progressive and emancipatory transformation of the social totality would have been triggered from within.

How does one decide in which direction history is to be nudged or pushed? How does one envision and design the new system? This brings me to the main argument I wish to make.

### **Totality, Differentiation, Freedom**

Let me take a step back to the philosophical discourse of social totality and retrace the steps along a slightly different route towards the practical understanding of society and its differentiation. If we summarize the big picture after its completion by Marx, we can say that there are three enormously complex structures or entities woven into each other: *Nature*, *Society* and *Individual*. All philosophies and social theories emanate from different conceptualizations of the relationship among them. For the purpose at hand, I will focus on three salient features of the complex arrangements and dynamics that arise out of this relationship.

The first feature is connected with the nature and function of *totality* one is dealing with. One needs to understand what kind of totality each of these three structures is. Nature, taken in the sense of the entire Universe, is a completely *closed totality*. There is nothing external to it; it does not receive any input from outside. If one were to talk about history of Nature, such a history would be an absolutely endogenous process; all the forces driving that history would be completely internal to it.<sup>19</sup>

Society, on the other hand, is often taken as a totality, but, strictly speaking, it is not a closed totality. The reason lies in the fact that it sits in the lap of Nature from which it draws sustenance, and obeys natural laws in the domains where it must. Social totality, then, is a *partially open totality*. Furthermore, its opening to Nature is through two routes. One is the direct one that I have just mentioned. The other is through the other structure, namely the *Individual*. It is a near tautology that human individuals are socially as well as naturally constructed. Socially constructed parts of the individuals are completely internal to the society, but the same cannot be said about the naturally constructed part. Individual that animates the interior of the social totality also stands at the door that opens beyond.

*Individual* too is a partially open totality. As should be obvious from what has gone before, it has two openings to the *outside*. One is directly to Nature which is mostly through its physical body, though not exhausted by it. The other opening is to Society, which in turn opens to Nature. Constructed both by Nature and by Society, Individual is a constituent of both. This interlacing of layers of partially open systems makes for exceptional complexity. Individual, in any case, can be taken as the paradigmatic example of partially open systems. It has enormous internal complexity, differentiation and structure, and it has relatively weak opening to the outside. Whatever it takes from outside, it can imbibe only by digesting it; and whatever it takes from outside at any given instant is small compared to the totality of its constitution. And, yet, it cannot survive if it does not receive the inputs from outside. That is what it lives on.

It is quite reasonable, then, to consider society as an approximate totality. It too has enormous internal complexity, differentiation and structure. Most of its dynamics is internal. The type of a society is identified by its internal structures and processes. Like the individual, society too 'digests' whatever inputs it takes from outside and turns those into its internal composition. It would be gravely erroneous, however, to consider it as a completely closed totality. It would be like taking an individual as the typical example who does not eat or breathe. This is a point of critical importance for constructing a theory of history.

Marx, again, comes out as the best example. His theory of history – *historical materialism* – is constructed on the premise that society is a *partially open totality*.<sup>20</sup> This theory is largely concerned with the *social relations of production* which are fully internal to the society. That is why it considers history primarily as the history of class struggles. However, the other key concept – *productive forces* – is as crucial to history as air, water and food are to the human body. They connect the society to what falls outside it. One can look at productive forces as

human and social capacity and yet it is not wholly internal to humans and their society. Clearest examples emerge in the case of our capacity to deal with Nature when we use its laws for our purposes. The capacity is ours and in that sense internal to the human society. And yet, it is not completely of our own making. It also depends on the laws of Nature that are objective and independent of human designs and desires. One end of the productive forces, in this sense, falls inside the society but the other end falls outside.

Marx's care and subtlety is not always emulated by Marxists. In the most common interpretation of historical materialism, it is taken "to account for history's structure and direction by identifying a causal process internal to human history, an endogenous process, that supplies history with a determinate trajectory or, strictly speaking, that would do so in the absence of countervailing exogenous causes."<sup>21</sup> It would be a misrepresentation of Marxist theory of history if Nature's inputs into the society were to be treated as those exogenous causes whose sole function is to derail history from its determinate trajectory – one that is supposed to be determined exclusively by endogenous causes.

Let me now come to the second feature of the big picture that I would like to focus on. This is the process of *differentiation* that I have already talked about in the context of modernity. Here I would like to indicate its connection with the concept of *totality*. The process of differentiation, usually, has two requirements. One, it needs complexity. Simple structures, on their own, are not very likely to become complex and differentiated. Second, it needs something to feed on; it needs energy-supply, so to speak, from outside. *Partially open complex totalities* are the best sites for processes of differentiation to flourish.

Earlier I talked about social differentiation being a characteristic feature of modernity. I also mentioned the fact that modernity is frequently conflated with capitalism despite the two belonging to two different categories. I will now argue that the social differentiation characteristic of modernity was accelerated by its being conjoined at birth with capitalism. As a system, capitalism has been incomparably more efficient than any of the pre-modern systems in developing productive forces. Rapid development of productive forces opens the door of the social totality wider to the outside and brings in nourishment and energy at a much faster rate. Acceleration in social differentiation under modernity can, thus, be correlated with capitalist development gathering pace. This is an example of the *system* playing an active role in the transformation of the *social totality*. The process results in differentiating the system away from the non-system part. It also induces rapid internal differentiation of the system. The internal differentiation of the non-system part, however, proceeds at a much slower pace.

Given the big picture of Nature, Society and Individual in interaction with each other, the differentiation of the social totality should ideally delineate three separate spheres. One is the sphere of the *natural-objective world* operating according to laws that can be used by the humans but cannot be altered by them. The second is the sphere of the *social world* where, to paraphrase Marx, humans enter into relationship with each other with the objective of dealing with the

natural-objective world and reproducing the material conditions of life. Here, all laws, structures and institutions are human creations. As discussed above, the social world is further differentiated into the *system* part and the *non-system* part. In addition to the natural-objective and the social spheres, there is another sphere which is often caricatured as the sphere of *individualism* and left on the table of the liberal bourgeois ideologue who happily receives the caricature as the true description of it. Ignoring the caricature, I will call the real thing the sphere of *active freedom*. Explaining this would require to take up the third feature of the big picture that I promised to focus on.

The third feature relates to the question of *freedom*. It is one of the most discussed concepts in philosophy and in social and political theories, but it is also one of the questions which are often side-stepped for fear of looking politically naïve and intellectually juvenile. Freedom is often described, even by philosophers, by counting its types. For example, Roy Bhaskar explains it as follows in the Glossary section of a heavily philosophical book, “Freedom: Degrees of freedom consist of agentive freedom, formal legal freedom, negative freedom from, positive freedom to, emancipation from specific constraints, autonomy, rational autonomy, universal human autonomy, wellbeing, flourishing, progressively dependent on the positive generalization of the concept of freedom to include needs and possibilities for development as rights.”<sup>22</sup> Amartya Sen, on the other hand, counts five distinct types of freedom, namely, *political freedoms*, *economic facilities*, *social opportunities*, *transparency guarantees*, and *protective security*, and underlines importance of an instrumental approach by saying, “Freedoms are not only the primary ends of development, they are also among its principal means.”<sup>23</sup>

I will discuss it more in the spirit of Marx who said that the “realm of freedom” falls beyond the “realm of necessity”, but the former has its foundation in the latter. Marx also pointed out that the realm of necessity itself contains certain kinds of freedoms that expand with the development of productive forces and improvements in the material life conditions. But these freedoms must be differentiated from those that make up the realm of freedom. It is worth quoting at length from the relevant passage in *Volume III of Capital*,

“The realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production. Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but, at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase. Freedom in this field can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true

realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with the realm of necessity as its basis.’<sup>24</sup>

A key insight contained in this paragraph is the differentiation between two kinds of freedom. The first kind is what I will call *adaptive freedom*. The social sphere is its principle domain and the system part of the social totality is its guarantor. This kind of freedom expands and deepens as society moves to systems that are better at developing productive forces, instituting equitable division of labour, creating material prosperity and distributing it equitably. But, this kind of freedom is gained primarily by doing what is demanded by the system. One enjoys freedom by fitting well into the system and the system expands this freedom by making it easier and rewarding for the individuals to fit into it. There has been a long tradition to define freedom in this way. One is free when one knows one’s place in the order of things and is happily reconciled to it. Romantic, conservative, communitarian, organic-holist and various strands of social-constructivist philosophies and theories often define freedom in this manner. On surface the bourgeois liberal definitions of freedom appear very different, but in essence they too belong to the same category. They too are freedoms within the realm of necessity.

There is, however, the other kind of freedoms that inhabit the realm of freedom and constitute it. This kind is qualitatively different from those in the realm of necessity. Marx defines it as “development of human energy that is an end in itself.” This is the type I call *active freedom*, which is similar to Roy Bhaskar’s term “agentive freedom” from the quoted above.

In the discussion so far, *Individual* has been taken as a dually constructed structure – by *Nature* and by *Society*. But, the real individual, in flesh and blood, so to speak, is not fully covered by the image of a constructed structure. The quality of *agency* is left out of this picture. It is not possible, at least in the present stage of knowledge, to theorize agency in such a way that it can be derived, at a fundamental level, as a property of a structure – material or otherwise. No one knows how to construct an object endowed with the property of agency out of constituents that do not have this property to start with. Whenever we talk of a *collective agency*, it is necessarily based on individual agency. This is despite the fact that a collective agency is seldom a simple sum of individual agencies. All social theories, therefore, must begin with some primitive notion of individual agency as a pre-given input. This skeletal agency, then, gets padded with flesh and infused with blood by the social processes.

Agency is harnessed in social structures and processes. But it is never fully subsumed in the *social*. If that were to be the case, only *adaptive freedoms* would be possible. There is always a surplus agency left over in the individual, even as the iterative process of constitution of the society by the individual and construction of the individual by the society progresses endlessly. *Active freedom* is the freedom of this *surplus agency*, and it cannot be realized within the system or within the social order. A desirable differentiation of the social totality must lead to carving out of a sphere where *active freedom* can be realized.

The history of modernity so far, in spite of the constraints imposed on it by the capitalist system, gives clear indications that such a differentiation of the social totality is possible and realizable. Pre-modern societies and communities are *totalitarian* in nature.<sup>25</sup> They resist differentiation of the social totality into separate spheres and keep all aspects of life under the unified control of the *sacred* and the *customary*. Desirability of differentiation is a point that is often missed by many Marxists too. Their visions of a good society often resembles a *strongly interacting system* in which each part is in tight dialectical embrace with all the other parts and with the whole; where everything is always determined by everything else. This is not the way to design a better society and this is not what Marx proposed. If it comes to actually living in it, such a society would not be attractive even to those who propose to build it.

### **Socialist Futures**

I can now pull all the pieces together and summarize the broad argument I intend to make. Modernity is characterized by a process of social differentiation in which distinct spheres of life get carved out. Such a differentiation is a welcome thing because it expands the scope of human freedom and facilitates its realization. This process also leads to differentiation of the system part of the social totality from the non-system parts. System plays the most important and active role in shaping a social order. Any system should be judged on two counts: whether or not it tries to maximize the *adaptive freedoms* that are to be realized within the natural and the social spheres, and whether or not it helps in carving out and in enlarging the sphere of *active freedoms*.

Modern era began with the advent of capitalism, which is now the reigning system on the planet. It has played a historically progressive role in the transition from pre-modern societies to the modern ones. However, this system has now become a barrier to further advancement of modernity and to further expansion and deepening of human freedom. The need for a better system is increasingly obvious.

However, the new system must be such that both types of freedoms are further expanded and deepened. The new system must be able to accelerate the progress of modernity. If socialism were to be envisioned and designed in such a way that it would take under the *system's* fold ever larger parts of the society and ever larger domains of life, then it would end up arresting the historically progressive process of differentiation of the social totality. Instead of enhancing both types of freedoms, it would end up diminishing them. Replacing capitalism with some kind of 'pre-modern socialism' may be temporarily successful, but in the long run it will neither be sustainable nor desirable.

Of course, one does not get to choose where to make revolution, nor can one design the post-revolutionary system to its last detail. One knows that socialism too will not get a clean slate. It will grow in the given conditions of the society where revolution would have opened the doors for it. The same was the case with capitalism, and we have already seen how this led to mutant capitalisms and mutant modernities. No matter how presciently one writes the genetic code of



socialism and how carefully one tries to grow it, every embodied form of socialism will be some mutant version of it. The general conclusions we have arrived at are important nevertheless. Even a mutant socialism will have to be socialism. And, in order to be socialism it must accomplish two objectives. *It must do away with capitalist exploitation and it must enhance and ensure both adaptive and active freedoms.*

The first objective can be achieved by replacing the capitalist principle – *socialized production, private appropriation* – by the socialist principle – *collective producers will be the collective appropriators*. This is a challenging task in itself. As the Draft Manifesto of the New Socialist Initiative puts it,

“End of capitalist exploitation is the central component of a socialist programme, but this objective has to be achieved in a way that elevates societies to ever-higher levels of productivity, prosperity, democracy and freedom. Capitalism is an unethical and exploitative system that inflicts miseries on a large part of the society, but its mechanisms and processes also result in taking the social productive forces to higher levels. A system that ends capitalist exploitation but fails to surpass capitalism in developing productive forces would, in the end, fail to defeat capitalism.”<sup>26</sup>

The second objective – ensuring and enhancing both kinds of freedoms – is equally challenging if not more. Development of productive forces under the socialist principle can be achieved in various ways. The socialist economy and the socialist polity that would together constitute the socialist system can, in principle, take different forms. An understanding that is widespread among Marxists and in the Left movement holds that the first objective – end of capitalist exploitation – is the only objective. The socialist system can, therefore, be designed in any of the possible ways, and preferably in the way that accomplishes this objective most efficiently. The second objective is either not recognized at all or it is taken as something that would hinder the first objective.

Such an understanding is gravely erroneous. The second objective is as integral to the socialist project as the first one. If freedoms are not expanded and deepened under socialism and, instead, they are sacrificed on the altar of development of productive forces, the very purpose of socialism will then be defeated. Development of productive forces does contribute to the deepening of some of the adaptive freedoms. But most of them get left out or even damaged if the economy and polity are shaped only by the first objective. Furthermore, the sphere of active freedoms does not get enlarged by a system that focuses exclusively on the first objective. Importance of this sphere is even less acknowledged in the standard understanding of socialism. Conceived as one that operates in the sphere of individual agency, it is invariably confused with the bourgeois liberal concept of freedom and thrown out of the window tout court.

The conclusions we have arrived at warrant a re-examination of the history of past socialisms and a fresh envisioning of the future ones. I have already pointed out that a system cannot be designed like a machine. It grows in a soil and takes a form partly shaped by that soil. This holds

equally for the case of twentieth century socialisms. Let me quote once again from the Draft Manifesto of NSI which articulates a balanced approach on this issue,

“Socialism of the twentieth century was a product of the conditions of that century. Even the vision and the theoretical-ideological understanding underlying it had an imprint of those conditions. It was a socialism that was built in pre-capitalist or backward capitalist societies existing under varieties of feudalisms and colonialisms. It was also built under emergency conditions of wars, encirclements, acute hardships and other disasters. Its ultimate fate notwithstanding, it was highly successful in getting those societies out of deep crises and in putting them on a course of tremendous progress. As a result those societies became more prosperous, egalitarian, just and modern than they had ever been in their entire histories. In a nutshell, it was a backward socialism and it was a socialism of emergency conditions. Given the circumstances in which it was born and raised, it was nevertheless successful.”<sup>27</sup>

Past socialisms, however, cannot be presented as models for future socialisms. The conditions which shaped the twentieth century socialisms have long expired. The vision that inspired the designs of those socialisms needs reworking in the light of the lessons of the past century. It is in this context that the insights gained from revisiting the issues of modernity and freedom will prove immensely important for envisioning socialist futures.

**July 24, 2012**

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<sup>1</sup> The veracity of the incident and the quote is much disputed. For example, Richard McGregor has argued in his article “Zhou’s Cryptic Caution Lost in Translation” in the *Financial Times* of June 10, 2011, that the Chinese Premier was referring instead to the 1968 protests in France. In any case, the quote has gained a life of its own as it contains a deep truth about epochal events and ideas.

<sup>2</sup> In the context of modernity, I would count names like Kant, Hegel, Marx or Weber from the classical era of social theory among the legendary ones. Other names like Heidegger, Adorno, Foucault or Habermas, from the next era, may also qualify. Calling someone legendary, however, has no implications for my agreement or disagreement with that person.

<sup>3</sup> Alam, Javeed, *India: Living with Modernity*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> My use of relationship metaphors should not be construed to mean that I accord higher sanctity to legal or solemnized marriages as compared to live-in relationships.

<sup>5</sup> Javeed Alam does put his finger on such confluences of modernity with capitalism and colonialism. See, for example, chapter 1 (pp. 3-26) of Alam, *ibid*. But, he himself falls prey to the temptation of caricaturing modernity when he writes,

All the disastrous attributes of Modernity like its exclusiveness, abstract rationality, cognitive blindness about its own claims to universality, aggressive postures towards other cultures, dichotomies imposed on reality, thoughtless homogenization, instrumentalization of human cognitive and transformative powers, disregard towards contextual constraints, and so on, are now being systematically overcome at the level of thought, even if practical difficulties due to the unchallenged

presence of capitalism remain insurmountable. Modernity as an outlook has a creeping sense of shame as it defends itself. (*Ibid.* p. 27)

The source of these excessive generalizations about modernity lies in the concept of what he calls *entrenched modernity*, which he considers as the dominant or the solely existing form of modernity and which he treats as a completely pliant handmaiden of capitalism, fully complicit in the ideological justifications of colonialism and racism and utterly contemptuous towards non-western cultures. Such a theorization ascribes unlimited powers to capitalism in shaping modernity to exactly suit its purpose and bestows universality on every particularity of a given embodied form of modernity.

<sup>6</sup> This statement can be contested in many ways. The names of Cuba and North Korea may come up as counter-examples, so can be the case with China for many. In a different way, the situation for the people of the so-called post-socialist societies, in Russia and elsewhere, is not as simple as announcing indifferently, “socialism does not live here anymore.” They are still living in the immediate aftermath of what was labeled by some as the “actually existing socialism”. However, in the general contours of the global political situation, and also from the perspective of the particular proposal of socialism articulated here, the statement remains largely incontestable.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Arnason, Johann P., “Communism and Modernity”, in *Multiple Modernities*, Daedalus, Winter 2000, Volume 129, Number 1, pp. 61-90, Cambridge, USA; see also the Preface to this issue of Daedalus by the Editor, Stephen R. Graubard, *ibid.*, p. vii.

<sup>8</sup> Even Marx and Weber, who in their different ways had very ambivalent and complex attitudes towards modernity, saw it nevertheless as a more or less universal and homogenizing process. In case of Marx this emphasis originated in his considerations of capitalism which he took as the engine carrying modernity to the far corners of the world. In case of Weber who saw modernity more in social-civilizational terms, the universalistic and homogenizing tendencies arose from what he considered the inexorable process of rationalization of the world.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, *Multiple Modernities*, Daedalus, *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Kant, I., “An Answer to the Question: “What is Enlightenment?” in *Kant’s Political Writings*, Hans Reiss (ed. and trans.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1970, pp. 54-60. Kant was talking about Enlightenment and not explicitly about Modernity, but the difference can be taken as nominal.

<sup>11</sup> The literature on Kant and Hegel fills entire libraries. For short accounts relevant for the present purpose, see for example, Habermas, Jurgen, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, translated by Frederick G. Lawrence, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1987, Chap II, “Hegel’s Concept of Modernity”, pp. 23-44, and Pippin, Robert B., *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, Second Edition, Blackwell Publishers, Malden, 1999, Chap 3, “Idealism and Modernity”, pp. 45-77.

<sup>12</sup> McCarthy, Thomas, “Translator’s Introduction” to Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Volume One, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1984, pp. xi-x.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas McCarthy, for example, continues in the paragraph quoted above,  
 “Darwin paved the way for connecting intelligence with self-preservation, that is, for a basically functionalist conception of reason such as we find in American Pragmatism. Nietzsche and Freud disclosed the unconscious at the heart of consciousness, the role of the preconceptual and nonconceptual within the conceptual realm. Historicism exhibited in detail the historical and cultural variability of categories of thought and principles of action. The end result was, in Habermas’s phrase, a “desublimation of spirit” and, as a consequence, a “disempowering of philosophy.” (*ibid.*, p. x)

<sup>14</sup> See, Alam, Javeed, *ibid.*, pp. 15-17.

<sup>15</sup> McCarthy, Thomas, *ibid.*, pp. x-xi.

<sup>16</sup> Callinicos, Alex, *Social Theory: A Historical Introduction*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. 128.

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<sup>17</sup> See Callinicos, *ibid.* pp. 123-33, for an informative discussion of these thinkers.

<sup>18</sup> See Habermas, Jürgen, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume Two: The Critique of Functionalist Reason*, translated by Thomas McCarthy, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1987, Chap VII, Section 2, “Marx and the Thesis of Internal Colonization”, pp. 332-73.

<sup>19</sup> One can talk about objective history of Nature only in a special way that would be very different from the way one talks about human history. For example, there is no agency that may play any role in ‘making’ the history of Nature.

<sup>20</sup> Although he did not use this term, as far as I know.

<sup>21</sup> Levine, Andrew, *A Future for Marxism?*, Pluto Press, London, 2003, p. 147. I must clarify that I am not holding Levine as an example of careless Marxists. I am merely quoting from his description of historical materialism as it is commonly interpreted.

<sup>22</sup> Bhaskar, Roy, *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*, Verso, London, 2003, p. 398

<sup>23</sup> Sen, Amartya, *Development as Freedom*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2000, p. 10

<sup>24</sup> Marx, Karl, *Capital Volume III, Book 3: The Process of Capitalist Production as a Whole*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1959 (8<sup>th</sup> Reprint, 1986), p. 820

<sup>25</sup> I have argued elsewhere that the term *totalitarian* fits the pre-modern communities better than it fits any other social or political system. They take all aspects of life under their control. See, Sinha, Ravi, *Global Capital, Compliant Nation-States and Totalitarian Communities: Three Formidable Barriers to the Advance of Democracy*, in *Mainstream*, Vol. L No 8, February 11, 2012, New Delhi.

<sup>26</sup> New Socialist Initiative, *Draft Manifesto*, Delhi, 2011, pp. 34-5

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 32-3

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