

Marxism in Africa: Past and Present

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“Many of us have raised before the question of the relevance of Marxism to this or that. Its relevance to Europe; many European intellectuals debated its relevance to their own society. Its relevance to Asia was debated by Asians. Its relevance to Latin America was debated by Latin Americans...I will suggest that African people, like other Third World people, have virtually a vested interest in Scientific Socialism [Marxism], because it offers itself to them as a weapon of theory.”

Walter Rodney, Marx and African Liberation

There was once a time that Marxism dominated global politics and

academia. At the midway point of the 20th century, one third of the world population lived under self-proclaimed Marxist governments. In Africa, many anti-colonial revolutionaries embraced it as their guiding ideology. In contemporary South Africa, and indeed across the continent and globe, we see a resurgence of political thinking and movements calling for decolonisation. In this new context, we think it is useful to gain some understanding of what Marxism is and consider its historical relevance to liberation politics in the Global South.

WHAT IS MARXISM?

Marxism is not a doctrine, although a number of people, both academics and political leaders, have treated it that way. Marx himself developed his opinions and views over time and famously rejected the label “Marxist”. Since the publication of his Communist Manifesto and the three volumes of Capital, however, many interpretations of Marxism emerged, each of which took on distinct aspects of Marxist thought. Some emphasise the young and humanist Marx of the “Paris Manuscripts of 1844.” Others prefer his more mature and scientific analysis of capitalism in *Das Kapital*. While the differences between

Marxists have enriched his body of work, we should resist the temptation to view Marxism as complete and immutable. Rather, it is the distinctive methodology and political world view of his work that we should seek to grasp.

MARX'S METHOD

Marxism presents us with a means to study and understand the nature and development of society. For Marx, all societies are defined principally by their mode of production i.e. how men and women produce the means of their own subsistence in community with one another. This materialism is to be distinguished from idealism, which holds that people's ideas determine the nature of society. For Marxists, people may believe a variety of things and may hold interesting ideas about morality, culture, cosmology and so on. But what allows them to reproduce, prosper and live is their work with nature and the technology they create to mediate that work. Descartes said, “I think therefore I am.” Marx might have said “I produce therefore I am.” And what “I think” is also often times conditioned by what I need to do in order to produce.

What is crucial for Marxists is that each system of production is in flux, in movement, as society evolves into

different relationships with the natural world and with others in community. This movement constitutes the second aspect of his distinctive methodology. For Marxists, then, it is not only necessary to undertake the scientific study of society, but also to illuminate the latent potential for change within that society. For Marx, societal change occurs when an antagonism or contradiction between two classes, between people with unequal relationships to the fruits production, becomes untenable. As Marx wrote, “the history of all hitherto societies is the history of class struggle (Marx and Engels, 1959).”

For long periods in human history, people produced items for use. In Marx’s time, however, people in Europe, and increasingly across the globe, organized production for profit and exchange. This new system of production came to be known as capitalism. Marx analyzed capitalism and argued that it consists of two antagonistic classes namely, the bourgeoisie, who own the means of production (land, factories, finance) and the proletariat who have to sell their labour to the bourgeoisie in order to survive. Production under this system thrives off the surplus value or profit thus created. Marx called this the bourgeoisie’s exploitation of the proletariat which becomes the fuel for capitalism’s dynamism and innovation, but is also the seeds of its own destruction.

Capitalism is an inherently unstable and volatile system because of the exploitation of labour and the resultant tension it generates between the class of owners and non-owners. Mainstream economists bemoan periods of economic crises and argue that the causes lie with something outside of capitalism itself e.g. government policy, natural disaster, war etc. For Marxists on the other hand, the essence of capitalism is crisis. And as capitalism stumbles from crisis to crisis it leads to the increasing enrichment of the



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bourgeoisie and the impoverishment of the proletariat, laying the material grounds for a proletarian revolution and societal change. This is how, in Marx’s terms, capitalism creates its own gravediggers.

Marx believed that socialism is the unrealized potential of capitalist development itself. This is what he meant by having a dialectical view of change. Socialism is not imposed on capitalism from outside it; rather, socialism is conditioned by capitalism itself. Marx wrote very sparingly on what a socialist society would look like, but stressed that in it the proletariat would come to own the means of production and lay the foundation for a communist and classless society free from exploitation. Moreover, Marx believed that capitalism was a world-historic mode of production. Its insatiable thirst for expanding markets and more labour to exploit propels it to spread across the globe, settling in Kolkata as it does in New York, “creating a world out of its own image (Marx and Engels, 1959).” As such, for Marx, the socialist revolution would be a worldwide phenomenon. This is what is meant by Marxist internationalism.

ANTI-CAPITALIST POLITICS

“Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world... The point, however, is to change it! (Marx,1976).” It is important to emphasise that Marx did not support a naïve materialism where thought is a mere reflection of matter. Rather, human beings are for Marx conscious and creative agents, shaping the world and history. As Lenin wrote, stressing the dialectical interconnection between thought and material reality in Marxism: “Man’s consciousness not only reflects the objective world, but creates it (Lenin, 1972).”

This call by Marx and Lenin for an engaged and politically active philosophy is what differentiates Marxism from other political ideologies. It is what characterizes Marxists of all persuasions. Since the days of Marx himself, Marxists have championed working class struggle in factories, in parliaments, in social movements and even through open revolutionary war. Marxists have also made it a priority to fight for all progressive struggles including anti-racism, anti-sexism and anti-colonial struggles. This is not to say that Marxists have always agreed on political strategy and priorities. Some Marxists advocate for slow reform of capitalism and the parliamentary road to socialism, others argue that socialism can only come from open revolutionary conflict. Nonetheless, no other political philosophy can claim for itself the proud history that Marxism has in being engaged in the struggles of ordinary people across the globe. As Marx said “[people] make history,” and it is people that must translate the potential of socialism within capitalism into reality.

MARXISM AND AFRICA

It is true that Marxism has its roots in Europe and that Marx based his analysis of capitalism on the advanced countries of Western Europe in the mid to late 19th century. This has led some African academics and political activists to >>



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argue that Marxism bears no relevance to struggles in the non-Western world. This is a mistaken view.

Marx wrote sparingly about the nature of colonialism in Africa. Yet he did see the intimate connection between slavery, colonization and capitalism. For Marx, the European bourgeoisie were prompted to seek cheap labour and valuable commodities in the colonies and then set out to construct a whole ideological system of racial/national/cultural superiority to justify what was an essentially naked economic interest. With the European bourgeoisies thirst for expansion, capitalism stretched its tentacles to Africa. Any analysis of African societies thus has to take account of the change in this material base and develop a corresponding anti-capitalist political platform for change.

To underscore the point about the relevance of Marxism in Africa, we can say that Marxism goes where capitalism goes. It is transportable across time and space, producing different results and different political outcomes depending on the context. To illustrate: Russia was not as industrially advanced as Western European countries but this did not stop Lenin from developing a Marxist understanding of his society. The Russian Revolution would have been impossible to justify save for this. Moreover, after the success of the revolution the Bolsheviks immediately turned to theorizing, with their counterparts from the Third

World, about the relationship between national independence, anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggle within a Marxist framework. These efforts continued in the years that followed. The World Systems and Dependency theories, for example, are 20th century Marxist paradigms that attempt to understand capitalism in the age of neo-imperialism and neocolonialism.

AFRICAN MARXIST THEORY AND PRAXIS

A number of African revolutionaries turned to Marxism to guide them in their anti-colonial struggles. Yet as Amilcar Cabral noted: “We will use the Marxian method. [But] We will not be tied by concepts which arose historically in Western Europe when Marx was studying that society (Cabral, 1966).”

African Marxists like Cabral took Marx’s method and applied it to their own history and society as it evolved in the wake of colonial capitalism. They developed their own Marxist revolutionary theories and political praxis which did not always use the same concepts as Marx’s analysis of advanced Western societies. For example, Cabral only used class when it was empirically suitable for Guinea-Bissau. Revolutionary strategy and tactics also differed as they needed to incorporate anti-racist and anti-colonial imperatives into and outside of the class struggle.

Despite the ideas of revolutionaries such as Cabral, several African leaders rejected embracing Marxism in African society. Julius Nyerere and, for a time Kwame Nkrumah, advanced a distinctive African socialism that attempted to plot a third way between European capitalism and socialism. Others were committed nationalists and racial puritans who saw colonial exploitation to be rooted, not so much in capitalism, but rather in the cultural domination of Africa

by “Europeans.” As such, Marxism’s European origins condemned it as part of colonialism itself! Walter Rodney argued, however, that such mistrust of Marxism was misguided and the power of Marxist analysis in far flung regions such as China and Latin America was inspirational to all colonized people across the globe. Nkrumah, once he had abandoned African socialism for Marxism, was more direct when he wrote: “To suppose that there are tribal, national, or racial socialisms is to abandon objectivity in favour of chauvinism (Nkrumah, 1967).”

THE RETREAT OF MARXISM

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of neoliberalism in the early 1990’s, Marxism has been in retreat. Where Orthodox Marxist-Leninist governments came to power in Africa in the 20th century- Congo-Brazzaville, Mozambique, Angola, Somalia, Dahomeny (Benin), Ethiopia, Madagascar and Burkina Faso- they failed to create a prosperous socialist society. This was due to a combination of factors, from the consolidation of new national elites (so well described in Fanon’s “Pitfalls of National consciousness” in the “Wretched of the Earth”), state corruption, authoritarianism, disruption by Western imperial powers as well as the often times corrupting influence of the Soviet Union. Though the Russian Revolution was initially a great achievement, the gains made by the Bolsheviks were slowly eroded by Stalin and the Soviet bureaucracy which promoted a totalitarian and doctrinaire Marxism. This model was also adopted by a number of revolutionary movements and parties in the Third World.

It is important to note that Marxism has faced serious criticism from within the broader left too. Postcolonial theory and a trenchant identity politics dominates left wing scholarship and activism in modern times. Repeating arguments of old, a number of



modern scholars and activists accuse Marxism of Eurocentrism and/or class reductionism. Marxists have generally responded by rejecting these charges and turning the tables, arguing that the post-modern left is guilty of relativism, identity essentialisms and culturalism, supporting either liberal or nationalist and chauvinist politics. Vivek Chibber's critique of sub-altern studies in "Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital" and Samir Amin's "Eurocentrism" are crucial readings for anyone interested in understanding fissures on the contemporary left.

Although Marxism is nowhere near as popular and influential as in the past, new economic and political crises have led to its resurgence in academia and political organizations. In South Africa, Marxism still has its champions. The South African Communist Party (SACP), certain members of the African National Congress (ANC), COSATU, NUMSA, the EFF and a number of other political organizations and social movements all embrace, to varying degrees, Marxist analysis and its political ideology. In academia there are

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a number of South African and African scholars adapting Marxism to deal with changes in social, economic and political conditions. What appears to guide these adherents is a deeply held conviction that as long as capitalism exists, and continues to stumble from crisis to crisis, Marxists and Marxism will be a necessary component of progressive politics. [NA](#)

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