

THE FUTURE OF CAPITALISM AND THE LEFT IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

INTERVIEW WITH PROF VIVEK CHIBBER

Vivek Chibber, Professor of Sociology at New York University, was on a speaking tour of South Africa. He spoke to Zunaïd Moolla, *New Agenda* Deputy Editor.



Vivek Chibber

ZUNAID MOOLLA: You have been to South Africa several times now. Do you see or hear anything different with this visit?

VIVEK CHIBBER: No. I have been coming to South Africa on and off for about five years and what I hear every time is the same which is an expression of regret, sorrow and disillusionment with the process of liberation and a constant thinking and rethinking of what might have gone wrong. Why did such a powerful liberation movement end up becoming either captured or neutralized or domesticated as easily as it was. I have to say it is disheartening to see it. At the same time what I have seen is enormous commitment, social



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commitment, political commitment, on the part of the left that still exists to try to keep the struggle going in spite of a general sense of demoralisation and confusion that has set in.

ZM: South Africa is one of the new kids on the block as far as democratic states go. Recently a decolonization movement has emerged on campuses that seek to tackle every vestige of our colonial past including language, labour relations, statues and artwork. Is South Africa following the same trajectory as other countries in the global south and, if so, what do you make of this movement?

VC: Those are two separate questions. On the larger question of whether South Africa is following the same trajectory, I would say that in the recent past, yes, in that South Africa has embraced neoliberalism like many other countries in the global south. It is on the African continent an achievement that it has managed to sustain a stable democracy for now, coming up on 25 years. That is no mean achievement and South Africans have to be congratulated on that. The vigilance in keeping those institutions alive has to be commended.

The narrower question of the student movement, it seems to me that it is probably incorrect to say that it has attacked every vestige, every institution of the colonial past. It seems to me that the one vestige that it is not questioning at all is capitalism and the system of class domination and class reproduction in capitalism. It has a lot of rhetoric of radicalism and questioning the past and it strikes me as being rather narrow in its aims. In many ways the stark racialism that it has embraced, it seems to me to be quite ill equipped to deal with the systematic and structural dilemmas that confront South Africa. It is of course true that the legacy of racial segregation and the legacy of racial oppression is still very much a central issue. In that respect what the “fallists” and the decolonising movement has



taken up is of central importance but to separate that from matters of radical redistribution, to separate that from confronting the real centres of power which are not constituted by race, these are constituted by wealth and economic power. Race is simply the one way in which they are organising themselves. To separate these two means that the movement, even of its own terms, will not be able to get very far and that is worrying to me because I like the passion, I like the dedication and energy that these students show but they are students whose vision is very much a product of neoliberalism, not an alternative to it.

ZM: So would you see at some point a decoupling of race and capitalism?

VC: You cannot decouple them in the South African context. It is impossible to confront South African capitalism without taking up issues of race and similarly it is impossible to confront racism in South Africa without attacking the maldistribution

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of resources between the classes. So I would not under these circumstances call for a decoupling. The worry I have is that the students have decoupled it and refused to take up matters of capitalism in a systematic way that limits their ability to fight issues of race.

ZM: A famous quote by Kwame Nkrumah was “seek ye first the

political kingdom and all else shall follow”. While political independence was the immediate demand in colonial struggles for which there was enormous mass support, there were those who said that only when economic emancipation is achieved will the colonised enjoy freedom in the full sense of the word. In South Africa now, identity politics has been placed on the agenda of liberation. This has brought the categories of class into collision with race, culture, gender, indigenes vs. settler rights. Is there some advice you can offer on how we can reconcile these competing approaches?

VC: The trajectory that South African politics is taking is actually not to be blamed on the groups espousing identity politics. What it betokens is a massive catastrophic failure of the left, a failure of the left to capture the political ground, to frame the debates, to show that the struggle against gender and racial oppression is as much a part of class struggle and the left agenda as is workers’ issues. ➤

It is an indication of the abdication of the left, of its role as a hegemonic force, that it has allowed middle class and elite groups to frame issues of identity. The left has never been an opponent of struggles against racial and gender oppression, in fact it has led those struggles for most of the 20th century. But it understood them as being part and parcel of the struggle against capitalism. What the current form of identity politics embodies is not a recognition of the importance of gender and race, that recognition was always there. What the current crop of identity politics embodies is a narrowing of the horizon of gender and racial struggles so that they really embody the agenda of elite and middle class groups. Allowing them to do that, enabling them to capture the political ground is one of the worst defeats, indeed I would call it an abdication on the part of the left. In this of course the CP has to share the bulk of the blame but the South African intelligentsia, which was a very powerful Marxist intelligentsia into the 80s, also has to accept the blame. Housed in universities and in think tanks, it has allowed itself to be out manoeuvred and to be overshadowed.

ZM: Would you see other forces shaping that?

VC: It is of course a symptom of the political defeat suffered by the left but in the face of political defeat to also accept ideological and intellectual subordination is a moral failing on the side of the left. There was plenty of space for debates and discussions to go on in spite of the political defeats that came with 1994 and the transmission to power. What surprises me is how quickly Marxist intellectuals, socialist intellectuals allowed themselves to be eclipsed and overshadowed by race discourse. I would say the largest failing and the largest responsibility in this has to fall on black intellectuals.



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One can see why white intellectuals would have been cowed into submission. There is no reason whatsoever that a small but still significant black intelligentsia in this country should have allowed racialism to define politics the way it is now.

ZM: Would you say that the intellectuals have been seduced by capitalism to some extent?

VC: Certainly a large number of them have, no doubt about it. Those closer to power, it seems to me. It is pretty likely that the almost overnight eclipse of Marxist economists in South Africa probably has to do with their proximity to power but it does seem to me that there is a certain amount of just demoralisation and confusion amongst the intellectuals as well and that cannot be explained simply as a consequence of being seduced.

ZM: Formerly colonised countries have a dismal record of economic and human development. Where do we begin to look at why this hasn't happened differently?

VC: I think the answer is clear that what Nkrumah said about the road

to paradise going through political power was too narrowly conceived in the liberation movements so that simply capturing state power was something they were content with and they did not accurately and sufficiently foresee that in modern capitalist societies, real power does not reside in the state. It resides in the economy and capturing state power without also having the leverage in the economy means that your state will become subservient to the most powerful groups in the economy which is national and international capital. I think that is where the root of the failure of decolonisation and independence lies. Sadly, even through the 50 odd years of independence, the left hasn't been able to regroup itself in Equatorial Africa or even in South Asia to the point where it can recommence the struggle. The racialism that is prevalent in South Africa now is a gigantic obstacle. Until the left realises that what is happening in South Africa is a process of a kind of multiracialisation of the ruling class and the struggle has to be against the economic character of that class and not simply its racial character. Until it comes to that realisation, it won't be able to lead successful struggles for social justice, it will keep on getting co-opted into what is in fact a nationalist discourse presented as race consciousness.

ZM: So what do you see as possible solutions?

VC: That would not be my place to do. As somebody who visits the country and has a broad perspective on these issues, I can point in the general direction but spelling out solutions is something that the South African people and South African workers themselves have to come up with.

ZM: If the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism is not on the cards, what do

you see for the countries of the global south?

VC: There is much that can be achieved short of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. There is still space for the taming and subordination of some of the forces of capitalism to issues of redistribution, of equity, of gender justice and racial justice. We should not fall for the mistake of thinking that if we feel that socialism is off the table then the only option is neoliberalism or some form of unregulated capitalism. There are many varieties of capitalism that are possible. To move the meter towards the direction of social justice requires enormous class and social struggles. What I am trying to suggest is that whether or not socialism is on the agenda in South Africa, it still has the social forces, the political and organisational wherewithal, to shift the political and policy process towards a much more humane and just social order even within capitalism.

ZM: Where would you place planning in this context? Is it an option that can still be considered?

VC: Very much so, in fact I think the only way out of the neoliberal order is to a regulated and state guided



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capitalism. I do think that the kind of state guided capitalism is something we call developmentalism. I do think that the developmentalism that we saw in the 50s to 70s is not on the agenda because that was a developmentalism that came out of an alliance between state and capital. National capital today, whether in South Africa or just about every part of the global south, is not interested anymore in having an interventionist state overseeing development. So if there is going to be a shift back towards some sort of state guided capitalism, it is going to have to come through pressure from below. It is going to have to come through working class struggles and not only do I think it is possible but I think that any policy shift that leaves investment decisions only to the prerogative of private hands is not going to work. The history of neoliberalism in the past 20-25 years has been massive under-investment and shortfall investment and the result of that has been massive underemployment and unemployment. As a first condition of achieving any kind of decent society which means increasing people's access to jobs and basic amenities, we have to massively increase the rate of overall investment in fixed capital, in housing, in infrastructure. Private capital shows no indication of doing so, so it is going to have to come through massive public investments but that is only going to come about through a struggle from below. I think the best option for the foreseeable future short of socialism is a kind of working class led interventionist capitalism.

ZM: In cases like that, if that were to emerge and capital were to go on strike as we have seen in other parts of the world, what would you say the way forward is from there?

VC: Selective nationalisation and socialisation. If capital issues a threat then you issue your own threat. If



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capital threatens to leave, you close off the doors. If it still tries to leave you nationalise. With a popular mandate behind you, there is no reason you can't do that. It is the only way out, that is what was done in the 30s and 40s, that is what could be done now. Sometimes when I bring this up, people raise their eyebrows and click their tongues but that really reflects a loss of nerve. If you do not do that, if you simply take and leave to capital the prerogative of shifting and moving out without questioning that prerogative, I do not see how you can even begin to imagine a more progressive economic agenda. The state is the representative of the people and as the representative of the people it has to lay claim to national wealth and when that national wealth is being used to threaten the welfare of the people then that wealth will have to be taken back and given to them.

ZM: Because we know that some of the weapons that they use in their armour is to devalue the currency ➤

VC: The devaluation comes from capital flight, from an attack on the currency. We have to remember that the state still has enormous levers at its disposal to counteract such threats. It is absolutely true, as economists will point out, that for a single country to try to wage this war against capital on its own is very hard. But we all have to start somewhere. The doom and gloom that we envelop ourselves in points to the internationalisation of capital and globalisation. It is a doom and gloom that creates and sustains our defeats. The only way that we can think our way out of it, fight our way out of it is through a more ambitious economic agenda that realises that without confronting capital we will never get anywhere.

ZM: On the world stage we see a rise in religious extremism, racism, Islamophobia, a nationalist fervour which some of us might even call fascism, in several countries. Myanmar, India, the United States, France, Netherlands, Eastern Europe to name but a few, and in South Africa the emergence of nativism and indigenisation as a response to its racist and colonial past. And yet this is the age of globalisation. How do we explain this?

VC: There are different sources which in particular setting are behind the rise of these sorts of fundamentalisms and nativism. There is no one source, in the sense that, in some cases it's come about through a very concerted and organised revitalisation of religious movements. India is one example of this. The resuscitation and the rise of the BJP and the larger Sangh Parivaris was very well funded and it has enormous backing. But then places like Western Europe, the far-right parties coming up in the United States, the source is more coming from below. It is an expression of working class discontent and insecurity. In different places, one would say it is

different things. I would suggest that there is one structuring element that's common to all this, aside from neoliberalism which is very, very important: it is the historic decline and defeat of the left. Again it's important and people don't realise this for a hundred years, the left has been the only civilising force in capitalism. It has been the force that has generated a sense of commonality, common pursuits, common interests, of humanity's shared visions and goals, of the importance of respect and decency, of non-instrumental and non-economic goals also being important in life. With the decline of the left, capitalism's ability to pit everyone against one another, to increase their sense of insecurity, to reduce people to an animalistic state where all they care about is kith, kin and their material subsistence, this is what we are seeing. It is the first time we've seen it in a hundred years and I've been saying this for quite some time and I'll say it again. The only civilising force capitalism has ever known has been the socialist movement. And until that movement gets going again, the forces of religious extremism, of economic anarchy, of these far right groupings, the anxiety, despair, disillusionment, the anomie that we are seeing. It will continue because capitalism knows one and only one thing and that is profit.



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ZM: How would you see us counteract these movements, the very right-wing movements that we see springing up?

VC: The right-wing movement and the religious movements gain from the atomisation and the war of all against all that capitalism has unleashed. The only way around them is through very hard plodding, neighbourhood by neighbourhood organising, in which people discover once again that only by coming together fighting around their basic interest, only by discovering their common and mutual needs and their basic humanity and, through that, finding ways of trusting one another, of respecting one another. In other words, only through the means that the left has always used historically will we be able to do it again. We have been in a difficult situation where we've discovered that unless there is a political organisation willing to bring people together, they can't come together. We've also discovered that unless people are organised it is difficult to sustain a political organisation. So it becomes a catch 22, you don't know where to start. But finally after many, many years, I think the glimmer, the first glimmers of hope are visible and this has to do with the way in Western Europe, neoliberal parties, whether the social democratic kind or the conservative kind, are now in a state of utter collapse. It has to do with the wholesale rejection on the part of the electorate of the economic model of the past thirty years. I think now the cultural preconditions for the rebirth of an organised left are coming about. In order to take advantage of that we are going to have to come out of this torpor that we have settled into, one side of which is our total despair at global capital, the other side of which is our embrace of the divisions and mutual infighting that this kind of middle class identity

politics has brought about. If we can overcome those things and realise as the left did once that the struggle against gender and racial oppression is part of and needs to be part of the struggles against capitalism. Unless we can do that, we won't be able to take advantage of this opportunity.

ZM: The economic hegemony of the west is on the wane but there is nothing to indicate that capitalism will decline within it. Will our world be any different if the star of the west fades?

VC: Hard to say but I do think that the ability of the west to politically dominate the global south is on its way out. You see the United States losing control of its own backyard in Latin America. You see it becoming a second rate power in the Middle East. You see it losing the battle to dominate Eastern Europe to Russia. All this is happening. Certainly I think that the world is moving toward a more multi-centred political set of alignments. Economically, right now what we are seeing happening is the convergence of ruling classes in the global south and the global north into a common committee of global capitalist interests. That it seems to me is a new phenomenon and again the irony is that, while capital is becoming internationally cosmopolitan, internationally religious social forces that are supposed to be criticising it are becoming less cosmopolitan, more nativistic, more religious and thereby completely abdicating or losing any power of being able to resist it. That's where I think we are right now and I think that is new.

ZM: So these movements that we talked about earlier, the right-wing movements, do we see them losing steam after time because finally they won't be able to deliver the goods?



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VC: Well, I do think those are two distinct issues. I do not think they can deliver the goods because they do not have an economic plan any different from the economic plan of the mainstream. But if they are the only force out there speaking to working class people and to the poor. If they are the only people trying to address people's needs while the left continues to be housed in universities and NGOs and talking amongst itself, there is no reason to believe they will lose traction because people want to have a political vehicle which addresses their needs. I would not be complacent about the eclipse of the right. I would however say that right now what Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn have shown is that a basic old style left agenda which brings people together around their economic interests has shown to be, is showing to be, spectacularly popular and it overnight has stripped much of the far-right of their momentum and of their traction. We have to build on that.

ZM: Okay, that was in fact going to be my next question. Can you name some places where you are particularly hopeful?

VC: Well, I think right now the English speaking part of the Atlantic world, England and the United States, is moving in a positive direction for the first time since the 1970s and this is

good because that is still the epicentre of global capital. If there is progressive change in England and the United States then it will enable and open up a space for progressivism all around the world. First of all, structurally because both these countries will shift their economic policy agenda which had reverberations across the world. But also morally and politically in that it will increase the confidence that ordinary people have.

ZM: Finally, Donald Trump has probably done more good for the left than many of us could have imagined the left doing for itself. Would you agree?

VC: No, not entirely because what Trump also does is that he enables the neoliberal left to position itself once again as an alternative, as the more sane alternative, and people like Hilary Clinton using gender ideology and feminism as a way of trying to undermine Trump. No, I understand your question which is that Trump is so barbaric and such a naked expression of class and racial hatred and misogyny that it allows the left to come together. But it still leaves open the question as to what the left is and what its agenda will be and for that we still have to dig ourselves out of this extremely narrow form of identity politics. I want to be very clear, the problem isn't of the left taking up race and gender as issues, the problem is how they are conceptualised. What has happened over the past forty years is that elite groupings have been very successful in turning these issues into something that is opposed to class struggle rather than being part of class struggle. Until the left regains the confidence to bring all oppressed groups together under the banner of the poor and working people, a thousand Trumps can win elections and we won't be able to dig ourselves out. **NA**