

Nationalism, Post-colonialism, Communism

RP: Could we begin by asking you to tell us something about your background?

Ahmad: I was born in India towards the end of colonial rule, so I was very much a child of nationalism. I came from a rather traditional rural family, but my father was a left-of-centre nationalist. I cut my teeth on nationalism, Communism – that whole world. The Communist Party of India was a close presence. The son of one of my father's closest friends was a member of the CPI and I used to regard him as something of an older brother. When I was found reading novels at the age of eight or nine, my father brought me into his room and said: 'Why do you read such trash?' He gave me three books, one of which was a biography of Lenin, in Urdu, from Progress Publishers in Moscow. Another was by M.N. Roy, the famous Indian Communist, on Islam. The third was a very fat book, which I have never been able to trace, on the East India Company.

The very fact of the Partition in 1947 was a deeply politicizing experience. I grew up opposing that whole ideology and felt very displaced by it. Later on, when the family moved to Pakistan, I was in college when Ayub Khan installed the first military dictatorship, in 1958. So there were radicalizing events in my life. I remained a Pakistani for a long time, and then went back to India. Or rather, I have been trying to settle back in India. The social, political and cultural worlds in India are very hospitable for someone like me who is Indian by birth, and wants to come back; but the legal situation is very forbidding for anyone who has held Pakistani citizenship. This too is part of the legacy of the Partition of 1947.

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RP: What did you study in college?

Ahmad: I took a degree in English literature.

RP: What was the relationship between your study of English literature and your political interests? Were they separate or connected parts of your life?

Ahmad: They were very separate, but not contradictory. My real interest was in writing in Urdu, but if literature was what you were interested in, you took an English degree. And typically what you did then was go and teach English. There used to be a time when it was quite common for people to read this literature, teach it, but not feel compelled to write about it. Often, they would be activists in the nationalist or the Communist movements. There was never seen to be any sort of contradiction between the two activities. That ambience was still there when I was growing up. It had not dawned on many of us that English literature was purely and simply imperialist. When that idea was developed systematically, one began to think of it in quite different ways.

RP: When would you date that, in your case?

Ahmad: The *systematic* awareness of the role of literature in imperialist ideology came in the 1960s, after the anti-war movements began such interrogations within Europe and the United States.

RP: It wasn't part of the received Communist tradition?

Ahmad: No, not at all. Not the way this question got posed in the West after the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. The 'received Communist tradition' gave much credence to the fact of political conflicts inside Britain and thought of literature itself as a conflicted field. So when I read Conrad and Forster and Eliot as part of my syllabus, I had very different kinds of response. Conrad struck me as both conservative and a great imperialist, but Forster not nearly so much. There are a great many things I disliked about *A Passage to India*, but I didn't think of Forster simply as an imperialist. It was quite clear that he disliked the Empire and that whatever he had to say about India got refracted through his own brand of liberalism. In Eliot's case, I was outraged by the way a handful of words stand in *The Waste Land* for an Orientalized idea of Indian spirituality, but I disliked Eliot much more for being such a Tory and a monarchist.

To give you another example, when Kiernan translated Faiz, the great Urdu poet, I was still in college and I didn't like the translations at all. But I knew that he was a close personal friend of Faiz and numerous other Communists in the subcontinent. In fact, I have been told – this may not be true, but I was told – that when Kiernan first came to India, well before Independence, he occasionally served as an emissary between the CPI and the CPGB. As I said, this may not be true, but within that kind of history one couldn't treat Kiernan's writings on, say, Tennyson or Wordsworth as simply imperialist. In the present climate, that sort of complexity of the 'received Communist tradition' is, of course, charged with being *soft* on colonialism. I'm quite aware of that.

RP: One of the unmistakable impressions left by *In Theory* is your insistence on a sociology of cultural production. In your Introduction, you write: 'It would be hard to think of a Marxism which would not foreground, in any discussion of theory, the issue of the institutional sites from which that theory emanates; the actual class practices and concrete social locations in systems of power and powerlessness, of the agents who produce it; the circuits through which it circulates and the class fractions who endow it with whatever power it gains; hence the objective determination of the theory itself by these material co-ordinates of its production, regardless of the individual agent's personal stance towards these locations and co-ordinates.' What are the material co-ordinates of your own work?

Ahmad: It's always easier to talk about other people! For some ten or fifteen years, I had a very difficult relationship with the Pakistan state, which meant that for long periods of time I lived and taught abroad. By an odd combination of circumstances, I ended up in the United States, rather than Britain. I held an academic job in the United States while trying to go back to Pakistan whenever I could, for as long as I could. So for me the whole period from 1970 to the early 1980s was one of criss-crossing. When I finally quit my job in the US, I found that I had held it for just over twenty years, and almost exactly half of that time had been taken as leave of absence, back in Pakistan. It was also a period of formal involvement in practical work. So, if I were to talk about the range of institutions that had an effect on me, those would be the first two: the US academy and the organized Left. However, I had no professional investment in formal academic writing. I published a great deal, much in Urdu and also in dissident Left journals, but I have no record of any professional publication in the field of English literature during the twenty years I periodically taught it. There is that tension with the institution of English, as it were. It was a very strange location for me. I was in it, but not of it. The only faculty meetings I ever attended were the ones that decided on tenure for people – I considered that a matter of trade-union commitment. Part of the point of *In Theory* was to settle my accounts with my erstwhile professional conscience.

RP: Unlike *The German Ideology*, however, it wasn't abandoned to the gnawing criticism of the mice. It was published and has enjoyed something of a *succès de scandale*. How did the institutional sites from which it was written inform its critique?

Ahmad: The research institute in which I am located at present allows one the political space to do work which would be at variance with the ambience of the metropolitan university. It also provides a certain distance from the metropolitan institutions that I talk about in the book. However, given the increasing integration of the circuits of academic knowledge, it's not quite as simple as that. It's not a question of the metropolis being over there and the periphery over here, with me sitting in India writing about something that happens in the metropolis. There are broad intellectual pressures that are very keenly felt in the Indian institutions. Except for the 'national allegory' piece, virtually the whole of *In Theory* is based on lectures I gave in India. For example, the chapter on Edward Said was a response to *Orientalism* being taught in seminars on methodology in Delhi University. It was the influence of the book in India that I was responding to. If I had written that critique while living in New York or London, some of the emphases would have been quite different. I am more acutely aware of the book's double address than my critics have been.

RP: How much autonomy does a contemporary Indian Communist intellectual enjoy vis-à-vis the party institution?

Ahmad: Let me begin with an example. I am associated with a journal, *Social Scientist*, in which intellectuals of the CPI-M have historically played the key role. This is well known; but that the journal does not speak for the CPI-M is also well known. Indeed, most people who get published in it are not members of the CPI-M. Let me say some things about our history that are not well understood outside India.

Having been very much a part of the anti-colonial movement, the main formations of Indian Communism accepted full responsibility for working within the constitutional structure of Indian democracy, as far back as the early 1950s, with the theses that came to be associated with the name of Ajoy Ghosh. Those theses make interesting reading alongside what Togliatti and others were saying in Italy at the time. The first elected Communist state government dates from 1957, in Kerala. Jyoti Basu, of West Bengal, is the longest serving chief minister in the history of independent India and possibly the most respected political figure in the country since Nehru, who was himself a sort of Fabian socialist. The Communist Left thus enjoys a much wider political influence than is indicated by the fact that only about sixty Communist MPs sit in the national parliament. Anti-Communism has not been much of an ideology in India, beyond the extreme Right.

All this gives Communist intellectuals a very broad role in the culture at large. As something of a fascist threat increases from the Right, and the the historic role of the Congress Party as the main centrist force crumbles, it is recognized that no regeneration of democratic, progressive politics in India is possible without the CPI-M playing a key role. There's much political energy in India these days going into trying to organize what is called a 'Third Force', in opposition to the extreme Right as well as the ruling party. None of it will get off the ground unless the CPI-M either leads it or endorses it. In this situation Communist intellectuals play very complex roles, nationally but mostly locally. These roles rely heavily on immediate initiatives, although on the whole such initiatives correspond to something of a 'common sense' which wouldn't be there without the institutions. This imparts a very wide margin of independence to the work one does, as well as giving it a stake in the collective politics from within which one speaks and is seen as speaking. In terms of a European comparison, it's much more like Italy than Britain.

NATIONALISM

RP: Perhaps we could move on to some questions about nationalism. One of the structuring theses of your book is opposition to the 'three worlds' theory. Part of your case is that it assimilates an undifferentiated Third World exclusively to a colonial and anti-colonial experience for which the only gloss is nationalism. Class struggle on a world

scale is evacuated from the so-called Third World. On the other hand, you say: 'There are hundreds of nationalisms in Asia and Africa today; some are progressive, others are not. Whether or not a nationalism will produce a progressive cultural practice depends, to put it in Gramscian terms, on the political character of the power bloc which takes hold of it and utilizes it, as a material force, in the process of constituting its own hegemony.' Do you really think that there are still progressive nationalisms in Asia and Africa today?

Ahmad: There are so many kinds of nationalism around, it is difficult to know what one means when one uses the word 'nationalism'. We are dealing with a world of sovereign states – national states, multinational states, whatever – whose own legitimacy is very often challenged by groupings, large or small, which consider themselves nations. So that is one kind of thing: separatist nationalisms. Then there are supra-national nationalisms – very real ones, such as the Islamic one – which claim that the existing nation-states, with their divisions into various Muslim communities, for example, are the products of secular modernity and as such are non-Islamic. Thirdly, we have a contest in the field of politics, which is also articulated in areas of culture, about the very essence of the existing nation-state. What is it, the Indian nation-state? What is the Indian state? Is it a multinational state, as secular forces would argue? Or is it the state of a people with a distinct culture, ultimately rooted in a religion, which is indigenous to India and observed by a majority of Indians, in which others may live as minorities, on the sufferance of the Hindu majority? Now I would place the latter position – and it's represented by a very powerful movement in India today – within the range of fascism.

My argument is that in a country like India nationalism is not something which you can concede to the Right. India is a country born of a powerful national movement, of an anti-colonial kind, which defined certain parameters for this nation-state. Secularism, democracy and certain collectivist forms of economy are part of its heritage. The Left needs to occupy that space and extend it. The globalization of capital has destroyed large parts of the collective resources of the people of India. Resistance to it needs to be articulated with the progressive aspects of the heritage of the anti-colonial movement. So you can't concede the territory, but you don't have to become a nationalist in the narrow sense. You have to say that India is the country for Indians, but there is no such thing as a singular Indian identity. Indian nationalism is not about identities. It's about the kind of *society* India is to be. It is about denying the Right the opportunity to define what this nation *is*. After all, Gandhi was shot by a far-right nationalist – precisely the kind of person who is now leading the Hindu nationalist movement – for not being Hindu enough.

The current far-right discourse is not a new one. In fact, I would argue that one thing that impelled Gandhi – this great student of Tolstoy and Ruskin – to become a Hindu reformer was that he saw that if he did not occupy the terrain of Hindu reform, India had the potential to go Hindu-fascist. Fascism has been fought and contained in India by secular nationalism –



nationalism of the Left, among other things. On the other hand, India is also a country born in a partition. So this very nationalism, which I was lauding a moment ago, failed even to protect its own territory – what it claimed to be its composite cultural territory – with enduring consequences, such as the problem of Kashmir. On what basis can you continue to say to people in a democratic society that they are a part of a particular country, if they don't wish to be so?

RP: One can appreciate the strength of the empirical arguments you have made in support of your theoretical generalization about nationalism. But what about its downside? You cite Gramsci, but the other reference that comes to mind is someone who is criticized elsewhere in the very same chapter of your book – namely, Ernesto Laclau. Laclau has argued that nationalism has no class belonging; that this affirmative discourse of the nation is more or less indeterminately malleable, depending upon the conformation of social forces that appropriates it. Now, while the class profile of nationalism can be very variable, doesn't the discourse of the nation subordinate or displace class antagonisms, along with sex, gender and other inequalities, by virtue of what it is, so that 'nation' is the dissolving term? Not a uniting, but a dissolving term, which declares other social antagonisms secondary. And is that not the point at which, as a Communist, you have to say that there *are* limits to the positive relationship one can have not only with nationalism, but with the discourse of the nation?

Ahmad: Let me return to the politics in which I am engaged. From the Communists to the fascists, everyone could be a part of the Congress, but, at the end of the day, Indian nationalism was a nationalism which was led by the bourgeoisie and established a state of the bourgeoisie. The Gandhis and Nehrus of this world created a bourgeois hegemony, of so subtle a kind it was quite extraordinary. However, bourgeois hegemony over this kind of national compact has exhausted its resources. That nationalism cannot be defended in India today, under the leadership of that particular power structure. So while I continue to believe that nationalism *as such* does not have a specific class character, I don't believe it in the sense in which Laclau believes it, since it *can* be identified with a particular class character at any given moment. The difference between Laclau and Gramsci is that Gramsci believed that a progressive national class bloc should be formed by the Communist Party.

The predominant characteristic of nationalist ideology is, of course, to deny and contain intra-national social contradictions and antagonisms. Nevertheless, given the fact that actually existing capitalism functions through nation-states, it is within the structure of the nation-state that these relations have to be addressed. The concrete form of class struggle in India is among classes constituted in India on the national soil of India. That is the horizon – the limiting horizon – within which you contest the bourgeois definition of the nation. This is not a tension that can very easily be resolved. At one level, you are dealing with an ideology which is extraordinarily subtle; at another, you are dealing with a structure of a very concrete and elaborate kind, the nation-state. In India, it is an extraordinarily elaborately developed structure for a backward capitalist country to exhibit.

RP: Does this argument about the continuing possibility of progressive nationalisms also apply to the metropolitan world? Or are you just thinking of discourses on the nation in more recently independent states?

Ahmad: In the metropolitan formations of advanced capitalism, the discourse of the nation is closely tied up with imperial definitions of the interests of the metropolitan working class. The burden of the colonial past which now exists in virtually every major metropolitan formation, in the form of immigrants, structures the discourse of the nation, generating imperial and racist definitions of it. So my sense is that in metropolitan countries nationalisms tend to be almost uniformly regressive. You are also dealing with a very different situation with respect to the functioning of capital. In Europe, for example, you are talking about the terms of a union: how is the European Union going to restrict these clashing national economic interests? Restricting the imperatives of the nation-state and creating a supra-national European nationalism might actually

be a fairly good thing for Europe, but it is a super-European nationalism vis-à-vis the rest of the world. From outside Europe, it looks like an iron curtain.

Then there's the issue of 'non-Europe' stranded within Europe: immigrants from the former colonies who are the object of racist nationalisms in all the main constituent nations of this supra-national Europe. I have often wondered what it is like being Black British, wedged so precariously between the fascist and even Thatcherite Right within Britain and the largely indifferent Brussels bureaucracy.

RP: How do you respond to the claim that the new international organizations which have accompanied the globalization of capital increasingly undertake development policies in ways that deliberately bypass the structures of the ex-colonial states? If this is so, then presumably the nation-state should no longer be allowed to define the horizon of political struggle in those countries. New forms of struggle will have to develop to address the new terrains of transnational capital, which is forging a new language and a new territorialization of power.

Ahmad: There has been a tremendous sensitivity about the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) on the Left. In one reading, they have been seen as an arm of the Second International – sending out aid to small groups of people not claiming to belong to any politics, to work in the precise areas where the Communists work without money. These people go in with a lot of money and they're able to achieve results where the Communist peasant committees could not. We have seen the extent to which the NGO network is deeply connected with the bureaucracy of the nation-state. Not a single NGO can operate without all kinds of relationships with the local bureaucracy from top to bottom – even the ones which do not wish to become implicated in this way. A number of people who were dissatisfied with the historic forms of Communist organization tried to create NGOs from the left of the Communist parties.

RP: That's my point. If the nation was at one strategic moment the domain of ideological struggle, which was to be endowed with a different class content, might it not be argued now that the NGOs are the terrain of a new struggle; that they need to be occupied and ideologically contested? Might one not see this as a change in the terrain of struggle, rather than a war between the ideas of the Second and Third Internationals?

Ahmad: The experience in south Asia is that in some rare cases you may have an NGO which remains independent of the national bureaucracy for a number of years – a notable case was the very large mobilization against a World Bank funded dam which would have flooded enormous amounts of land used by the tribals. So there are instances, but only very rare ones. The vast majority of NGOs become machines for petty-bourgeois corruption beholden to foreign capital and the bureaucracy of the Indian nation-state. Moreover, their idea is ultimately connected with a dissolution of struggle into ever smaller units. If Gramsci used the word 'molecular' for forms of struggle that would be waged over a long period of time by the collective intellectual of the working class, as he conceived the Communist Party, what you've got here are molecular struggles without any organizational form connecting them together. It is in fundamental contradiction with the old Leninist idea that the struggle is for state power. You can't bypass the state.

RP: But wasn't Leninism premised on a certain relationship between nation-states and capital, a notion of national capitals, which is increasingly problematic?

Ahmad: Having abandoned the colonial form, advanced capital cannot operate on the global scene except through the mechanisms of nation-states or regional conglomerations of entities that continue to be nation-states. They are an absolutely essential link in the chain. How is metropolitan capital going to operate in a terrain as large as India? Through what institutional machinery?

RP: I'm not suggesting that nation-states are becoming redundant as political instruments, but that their relation to capital has been transformed, so that to speak of national capitals in the old way is too simple.

Ahmad: I use the term 'national bourgeoisie' to mean the bourgeoisie of indigenous origin: capitalists who carry Indian passports. That's all I mean by the national bourgeoisie. If you look at the chain of economic production and reproduction, then yes, there is a very substantial and increasing integration of world capitals. But what articulates Indian and foreign capital? What makes it possible for them to function in conjunction with each other? The machinery of the nation-state is absolutely crucial. People talk about the retreat of the state, but the reality is a weak state in relation to capital and a strong state in relation to labour.

The idea that the nation-state as a structural unit for the organization of capital is on the decline has been overstated in relation to the advanced capitalist countries, not to speak of eastern Europe or the former Yugoslavia. Japanese capital is ferociously nationalist. I read somewhere that something like 95 per cent of US savings are invested within the national territory. Within the EU, the largest and most powerful of the European states has just achieved its expanded national consolidation. The historical tendency of capital to exceed its national boundaries ought not to be construed as the nation-state becoming a thing of the past. Finance capital exceeds national confines faster than industrial capital, but the most powerful banks in the world are really very national.

POST-COLONIALISM

RP: In a recent essay, 'Post-colonialism: What's in a Name?', in the book *Late Imperial Culture*, you contrast the very precise questions that were posed in the 1970s under the heading of 'the post-colonial state' with the new wave of discussion of post-colonialism as a condition which is ever more historically non-specific. In fact, it's acquiring a kind of anthropological pathos, where post-coloniality is becoming the gloss on what we used to call human existence. I find this reading quite convincing, but I wanted to ask: is there no rational kernel in the attempt to think about the cultural experience of the formerly colonized countries, and also the cultural experience of the formerly colonizing countries, under some such rubric?

Ahmad: It is very difficult, though by no means impossible and perhaps quite desirable, to retrieve a concept from its institutionally dominant definition – a definition which is dominant at the very site of intellectual production where the retrieval of that concept must itself take place. So while it is perfectly possible for an individual scholar to produce good work about the cultural residue of the colonial experience, on either side of the colonial divide, the pressure to assimilate the dominant terminologies and paradigms into their discourse is very great. And the point is that they're ephemeral: they have an unplanned obsolescence whereby they become dominant for five years and disappear in ten. Five years ago, it was 'colonial discourse'. Robert Young's very up-to-the-minute book *White Mythologies*, from 1990, doesn't have any entries in its index for 'post-colonialism' or 'post-coloniality', but it has twelve for 'Third World' and twenty-two for 'colonial discourse'. That's a sign of how quickly things come and go these days.

Certain crucial distinctions need to be made about the colonial period itself. For a start, a very considerable part of the world was not colonized, for which Lenin used the term semi-colonial, in a very specific sense (China, for example). Colonialism itself took several quite different forms, and the cultural consequences of each were significantly different. The experience of language in the Caribbean countries and in south Asia, for example, stands in marked contrast. The moment of independence is of central importance. Latin America became independent very soon after the United States – at a very different moment in the history of capital from the one at which the countries of south Asia became independent.

First of all, then, we need an accurate knowledge of the essential typologies of the colonial period. Once you have established that, the next thing to do is to establish typologies of cultural forms that arise out of that experience at the moment of independence, decolonization, the creation of a post-colonial state. Finally, I think that the term 'post-colonial' has a diminishing relevance as the moment of decolonization recedes into the past, especially in the case of the colonized

countries. In the decolonizing countries, the burden of colonialism is now actually increasing as a result of the number of immigrants these societies imported in the moment of economic expansion. In a period of recession, or stagnation, you have a very different relationship between this post-colonial labour and the indigenous labour force.

RP: There are quite striking parallels between your analysis of the post-colonialist intelligentsia, as a cultural formation, and Raymond Williams's analysis of modernism. Both centre on specific kinds of intellectual mobility and relocation within altered borders. Williams was thinking of the old colonial empires, but the same sort of co-ordinates are being mobilized – in the one case to describe modernism, in the other what becomes projected as post-coloniality. Now, in *Towards 2000*, Williams goes on to make the point that modernism was so successful that it has become the ontological ground of something that is taken to be its opposite: namely, ordinary mass culture. Is it possible to conjecture that in the metropolitan world, at least, the motifs of post-coloniality might enjoy a similar success as a cultural tendency, becoming associated with themes like multiculturalism, which are clearly going to be an important part of the political contentions in countries like Britain and France. You talked about the wheels of fashion, but perhaps the future awaiting the theme of post-coloniality is the opposite. It could become a property of the *bien-pensant* metropolitan culture, with an equivalent moral status to the environment – something that everybody suddenly cares about.

Ahmad: Any such diffusion requires a systematic misrecognition of the process which it is naming. I have argued that post-colonial theory is largely a North American cultural style, arising out of the cosmopolitanism of the elite English literary academy. But the object that it is constantly having to misrecognize and misrepresent is, in fact, a whole variety of integrations of consumption patterns, habits of living, that are getting diffused. I foresee far greater integration of North American capital with East Asian capital, as the American way of competing with the European Community. Both consumption patterns and the very texture of human relationships, the mobility of certain kinds of work between East Asia and the United States, are going to shift very drastically. On the other hand, the levels of surplus capital floating around East Asia are remarkable. Under post-colonial eyes, the combination of this particular circulation of cheap goods and financial concentration is going to be misrecognized and misnamed as multiculturalism.

COMMUNISM

RP: One of the avowed concerns of *In Theory* is to reinstate the 'Second World' among the signs, for good or ill, of our times. Your overall perspective might be characterized as 'anti-anti-Sovietism'. Now, you write of the events of 1989–91: 'In most sections of the Left in Britain and North America – with a few worthy exceptions of course – this entire upheaval has been greeted as the collapse of an evil empire, the outbreak of the spirit of liberty, and the salutary reassertion of social movements based on identity.' With the benefit of such hindsight as we possess, what is the significance of the collapse of historical Communism for the socialist project?

Ahmad: Those lines were written in late 1991. That was not a moment in which people living at great distance from such great events could understand much of what was going on. So in some ways I was writing out of a political instinct – although I don't mean that in a pejorative sense. In fact, I would not substantially alter the view that I took then. I'm rather surprised about the extent to which my sense that it was going to lead to reactionary forms of states throughout that region has been confirmed.

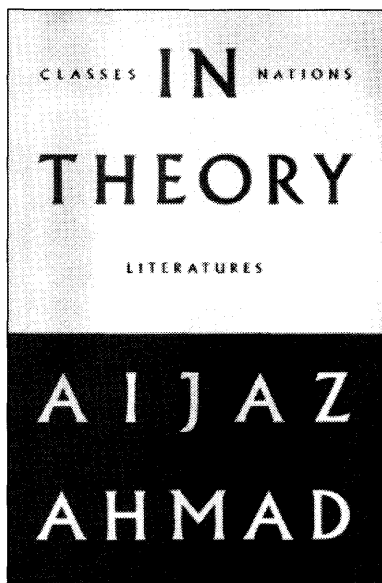
I had several concerns. One was that there would be a tremendous compulsion to bury the memory of all that was ever good about any of those countries, about any of the Communist movements, about Communism as a historical phenomenon, in fact; and that a very large part of the Left which is not grounded in any organization, and very many who are affiliated to the

organized Left, would be complicit with that reaction. So I would basically accept your phrase, 'anti-anti-Sovietism'. I was also worried that the memory of a very large body of critical Marxist work, often in the Trotskyist tradition, would be buried too. So that even what went wrong would be understood in very facile ways, in terms established by American Cold War narratives, and now reinstated in fancy postmodernist vocabulary. That is the wisdom which will now prevail. So we are in danger of two very great losses. I would argue to this day that Marxists were the only ones who gave an explanation of what went wrong, and they started giving it virtually as soon as it started going wrong. There is a very long tradition of that and the memory needs to be retained.

RP: What was positive about formerly existing socialism?

Ahmad: Many things. We might still be living in a colonial world had there not been a Bolshevik Revolution. I can't conceive the shape of the world if you subtract the fact of the Bolshevik Revolution. To the extent that the peasantry has been emancipated in this century, in any Asian country, it was generally because of either a Communist revolution or Communist pressure. One

often forgets what that experience meant for an immensely large number of women in the so-called Muslim world. If you compare the lives of Muslim women in the Asian republics of the Soviet Union – social and cultural rights, professional rights, etc. – with the most advanced of the Muslim bourgeois countries – Turkey or Iran – there's a qualitative difference. Think of the kind of legislation that was enacted in the Soviet Union, on a whole range of social and cultural issues, in the very early years. Its memory became the model for much later legislation. These are simple facts; but in their absence, the sort of secular state established in India after Independence would be inconceivable – in a society in which Communists as such had no power at all. I am just giving you some examples.



RP: How do you view the possibilities for the continuation of the Marxist tradition?

Ahmad: One needs to think about it on several quite different planes, this problem of how revolutionary legacies become a part of cumulative experience in the long term – both the victorious ones and the defeated ones. Gramsci makes the point that only after the Paris Commune was the potential released by the French Revolution fully exhausted. What we are looking back at is a period of tremendous capitalist consolidation – in fact, qualitative change in the nature of the capitalist mode of production and its global expansion, and the shifting of the geographical locale in ways that Marxism had not predicted – permitting a new revolutionary form to emerge.

One tantalizing question, for which I don't have a ready answer, is whether 1989 signifies the exhaustion of the political form set afoot by the Bolshevik Revolution, in the sense that Gramsci gives to his formulation that it was only with the initiatives for revolutionary transformation passing to the industrial proletariat that the potentials released by the French Revolution were exhausted. I don't think this will be clarified until one of two things happens. Either Communism itself will re-emerge, having learnt the lessons of the century; or altogether new revolutionary forms will arise. Contemporary fascination with 'new social movements' is a transitional phenomenon.

There were a great many changes in the world that historical Communism could not assimilate, either because its resources were too limited, or because of capitalist pressure, or whatever. What has happened, especially after decolonization – partly because of decolonization and partly because of other changes in the character of capitalist production – is that you have now got a global logic in which you need more and more concentration of economic resources and their planned utilization. The logic of democratic possibility unleashed by that level of accumulation requires greater and greater democratization of political, social and cultural life. This particular dynamic – centralization of economic power and increasing democratization of social-political-cultural spheres, in ways that the historic forms of parliamentary representation cannot address –

is something that the revolutionary project will have to think through. This is at least one problem which will have to be dealt with in terms that supersede both the central planning discourse of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Rights of Man discourse initiated by the French Revolution.

My sense is that, in moments of great defeat of the sort which we have sustained, only a real shift in the political sphere will begin to make any fundamental change in people's sense of history. This actually takes us back to the first question we were talking about: how much the knowledges which become a part of our knowledge-world are determined by the way in which we live, socially and politically.

RP: What does it mean to be a Communist in India today?

Ahmad: After the events of 1989, the then general secretary of the CPI-M was asked what it was going to mean to them, as a party, in India. He said: 'Nothing. Since the inception of our party we have always been at a considerable distance from the Soviet party. We have always recognized the international character of the Communist movement, but we have also had our own path' – and so on. Now, given that we have witnessed the rise of the extreme Right in India and the disintegration of the centre of the Congress Party, the national position of the organized Left has, in fact, slightly improved. But at the same time, of course, with the collapse of the international Communist movement, the dilemma is acute: what is the Communist answer to marketization and globalization?

There have been excellent critiques of what is wrong with them, but what is to be done? In other words, the victory of capital on the world scale is such that it has not been possible to devise an anti-capitalist policy at the level of a state within the republic of the bourgeoisie. It is not only the collapse of historical Communism in the Soviet Union and allied states that has produced this result, but the global victory of capital that has been its consequence or complement. Being able to envision an alternative at the level of the individual nation-states within which one works, in this very unfavourable situation – that is the challenge.

How does it feel? Well, as usual, paradoxical. On the one hand, one feels very fortunate to be living in a political world in which being a Communist is still a normal thing to be. On the other hand, to be living in a world in which the terms of contestation are so unfavourable that you can't even say, 'Well, at least there is an international Communist movement' – that is a deeply frustrating experience.

Interviewed by Gregory Elliott, Francis Mulhern and Peter Osborne
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