

POPULAR DEMOCRATIC STRUGGLES

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Two of the most important influences in my life — disappointingly (as a feminist) they were both male — were Jesus Christ and Karl Marx. The effects on me, at different times in my life, were similar while at the same time taking me in different directions. Both worked on my sense of justice and abhorrence of discrimination and oppression, but while the message of Christ was to develop a higher morality, to “feed the hungry and care for the dispossessed”, Marx asked the question “why are people hungry when others have more than their needs; why are so many dispossessed while others have the possessions of kings?” For me, ultimately, marxism was much more satisfactory as it provides the conceptual tools to analyse the sources of oppression and discrimination, to understand why the oppressed consent to their expropriation, and in this understanding to seek ways of changing such a system.

The capitalist state plays a critical role in shaping social and political life in order to enhance the continued expansion of capitalist production and social relations. The manner and scale on which the state performs this role under capitalism is historically specific and distinct from any previous social formation. While the economic level is the determining factor, the social relations which characterise such societies cannot be sustained and reproduced at the productive level alone. These must be articulated through all levels of the social formation — economic, political and ideological, and increasingly in the apparently unproductive spheres, through cultural apparatuses. This ensures a more effective means of social order than that of the enforced social discipline of a more coercive state, for here this discipline appears to be the result of the spontaneous consent of each citizen to a common social and political order.

It is important, of course, not to slip into “conspiracy” thinking; in order for the conditions of the capitalist mode of production to be reproduced whole terrains of social, moral and cultural activity have to be developed and reshaped to its needs through the political and ideological superstructures. This ethical function of the state is in terms of a relationship to the potential presented by the development of the productive forces.

Western democracies are well adapted to this complex exercise of hegemony through political representation, freedom of expression of public opinion, formal representation of subaltern social groups, and equality of citizens before the law. In democracies where the working class has won formal representation, popular consent as the basis of the state is, however, reversible as the capitalist state cannot remain securely founded on that legitimisation while at the same time taking severe measures to contain any threat to its foundation. The state must therefore continually shape the consent to which it, in turn, refers itself. This is particularly important at the ideological level where ideological elements which do not have an intrinsic class character acquire a class character by being organised into specific discourses by a fundamental class.





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Contradictions remain nonetheless, and in a moment of open class conflict, gaps open up to signal a crisis in the hegemony of the ruling class. This, an interpretation of the crisis is ideologically constructed in the interests of the dominant classes to win popular consent to its foundation in reality, through such mechanisms as the media, education and the judiciary. By consenting to this view of the crisis, however, people also consent to the measures of control and containment necessary in this version of reality.

As an example, the recent swing to the right in western democracies, notably Britain, the USA and Australia, specific to this historical conjuncture, can be understood, not as a reflection of a hegemonic crisis but rather as a response to it. In these new political and ideological configurations it is no longer a question of the popular-democratic struggle of the left confronting political forces committed to conserving traditional ideologies in the face of threats to its economic power. Rather, the right has thoroughly renovated and reformed itself and now constitutes a new active political force emphasising more traditional petty-bourgeois ideology, the virtues of the free market, competition, elitism, and individual initiative, while denigrating state intervention and bureaucracy. It has also successfully

attempted to mobilise the diverse forces of backlash against trade union militancy, the women's movement, minority ethnic and racial groups, and permissiveness, in favour of more conservative and essentially regressive ideological themes such as authority, law and order, the family, nationalism and possessive individualism. Its economic policy which seeks to curtail the economic intervention of the state by restructuring industry through the operation of market forces, relies on its new comprehensive populist ideological and political offensive, thus undermining working class resistance to its policy of rationalisation which is reversing the structural achievements of the labour and democratic movements. This combination of right laissez-faire economic strategy with reactionary and authoritarian populism seeks to resolve the crisis by mobilising a new expanded social base embracing sections of the middle classes, the petty-bourgeoisie, the working class, together with key elements of big capital.

A fundamental danger with the advent of the right is that with this defence of free enterprise and individualism, democracy itself is being redefined in order to neutralise its potential antagonism within the capitalist order. The hegemonic thrust of the intervention of the radical right is marked by its global character which has effectively condensed a wide range of social and political issues and themes under the banner of social market philosophy. The radicalism of this form of intervention

has, therefore, set new terms for the political struggle where the reconstruction of a popular force on the left is intrinsically linked with the struggle to expand and transform the forms of popular struggle.

Many of the social contradictions thrown up by the development of monopoly capitalism have produced new political subjects, e.g. feminists, ecologists, anti-nuke activists, etc. which groups, while being clearly anti-capitalist, do not have a necessary class belonging, and have therefore not been taken up by the left as an important terrain for the political struggle. A new, active concept of socialism is on the agenda which requires a conception of new forms of political representation of a more broadly mass and democratic nature.

It is in the struggle for democracy, as in the young Marx, based on the existing system of forces that the struggle for socialism must be waged. The struggle for democracy, however, cannot be limited to the narrow sphere of legal rights or parliamentary representation because formal democratic institutions do not in themselves guarantee real freedom or popular control; rather popular-democratic struggle involves the establishment and maintenance of social conditions in which such freedom and control can be realised, through the radical reorganisation of all manner of social relations. True democracy can only be effectively pursued with the support of a broad-based mass movement.

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