

Historicism and Revolution

The term “historicism”, as is well-known, has been used in two very different, and indeed almost diametrically opposite, senses. There is the sense in which Karl Popper (1957) used it, to refer to the view, which he attributed to Hegel and Marx, “that history has a pattern and a meaning that, if grasped, can be used in the present to predict and fashion the future”¹. Popper saw historicism as a progenitor of totalitarian politics, and its proponents as “enemies of the open society”, whose attempt to push society into a mould which they believe to be historically inevitable could not but lead to dictatorship.

There is however a second sense in which the term “historicism” has been used. And this refers to the view, held by a number of “Western Marxists” such as Gramsci (1973), Lukacs (1971) and Korsch (1970), that theoretical development is itself conditioned by the historically changing context. There is only one history, from which there is no stepping out, which shapes both material conditions as well as ideas deriving from them and in turn acting upon them. Historicism in this sense should not be confused with a crude historical materialism; it is very much in conformity with a materialism that recognizes the primacy of praxis.

These two notions of historicism are in a sense opposed to one another. The second makes ideas historically relative, while the first, by insisting on a pattern in history, makes the idea which comprehends this pattern a non-relative one. If one believed in the second conception then even the conception of a pattern in history would be a historically relative conception, something which is thrown up at a particular juncture and has no validity transcending that juncture.

I shall not however dwell further on these divergent meanings attributed to the term. In my view, “historicism” in either sense is different from a “science of history”; “historicism” in neither sense is essential to the argument about the necessity or the imminence of a revolution against the bourgeois order; and it is only a non-“historicist” perspective that can possibly underlie theoretically the kind of revolution that is on the agenda in the under-developed societies. I shall devote the present paper to developing these propositions.

II

Let me discuss briefly the first notion of historicism before moving on to the second. Popper's critique of what he called historicism has been much critiqued, in the sense that his absolute insistence that there *can* be no pattern but only a set of separate, independent developments, on a reading of which one can advocate not a revolution but piecemeal social engineering, has called forth powerful rejoinders. E.H.Carr's *What is History?* (1964) is one such rejoinder. More recently, Professor Irfan Habib (2003) has argued, with a great deal of persuasiveness, that discerning a pattern in history, treating history not as one incident after another, but as something which becomes explicable, is methodologically a perfectly sound procedure.

There are at least three levels at which one can join issue with Popper. First, Popper's notion of a scientific proposition, with which his critique of "historicism" (in his sense) is closely tied up, is too narrow, and does not correspond to actual theoretical practice in science. "Refutability", the criterion which he insists upon in a scientific proposition, is itself a complex concept. It is not like a weighing machine on the basis of which one can immediately assess the scientific content of particular theories. Rather, the precise meaning of "refutability" in the context of any theory, which is a set of inter-linked propositions, has got to be worked out, so that passing judgements on whether a theory is "refutable" or not, is itself highly problematical. Indeed on Popper's criterion, not only Marxism which attempts to develop a science of history, but psychoanalysis, astronomy and several other disciplines would simply not qualify as science. Consequently, Popper's rejection of "historicism" which implies a rejection of any science of history, should not be given much credence.

Secondly, there is a fundamental difference between Hegel and Marx which the Popperian perspective, because of its own inherent limitations, illegitimately obliterates. Seeing an abstract pattern in history as Hegel did is not the same as opening up history in its totality for scientific analysis which was Marx's project. The Popperian perspective, by obliterating this basic difference, also obliterates a whole range of other differences bound up with it. For instance it obliterates the distinction between not-directly-observed structural concepts and metaphysical concepts, by calling both sets of concepts "metaphysical". Marx's concept of labour values is a concept of the former kind. It is not directly observed, but, according to Marx, it is a structural concept, which underlies the prices of production, which in turn constitute the "centre of gravity" for the directly observable market prices. Now, whether Marx was right or wrong in saying what he did about "labour values" can be debated, as indeed it has been, but "labour values" as a concept is fundamentally different from "absolute spirit" as a concept: it is a tangible,

quantifiable, precise, and, even though not directly observed, is theoretically observable (e.g. under simple commodity production). To call both of them indiscriminately as “metaphysical” is both indefensible and indicative of an extraordinary narrowness of conception.

Thirdly, and most pertinently from my point of view here, the case for a revolution does not necessarily rest upon an acceptance of “historicism” as Popper imagined. Let us for a moment assume that there is indeed no pattern whatsoever in history. Nonetheless if it can be shown that the quest for freedom by the people at large cannot be satisfied as long as the property relations that characterize “modern society” are not transcended, then a sufficient case for revolution would have been made². In other words, the belief that history moves in a certain fashion leading to a *denouement* in the shape of throwing up a proletariat, which, rather like Prometheus, has the historical task of delivering mankind from the cycle of class conflicts, enabling it to make a transition from its own “pre-history” (which is the entire recorded history till now) to its authentic “history” (where it consciously makes its own history in the sense that its intentions and outcome increasingly coincide) is not necessarily the only theoretical case for a revolution. The case for a revolution in “modern” times³ arises from the fact that capitalism as a mode of production is not only based on exploitation, but is also a *spontaneous*, non-malleable, “non-reformable” system.

For a long time after the second world war, however, this particular view had receded into the background. With Keynesian demand management it appeared that capitalism had overcome its tendency towards over-production crises; with “welfare state” measures it appeared that capitalism had become more humane; with near-full employment in the metropolitan capitalist countries, it appeared that capitalism’s need to have a large reserve army of labour, on the basis of which Marx had argued that capitalist development produced growing wealth at one pole and growing poverty at another, had been overcome; with decolonization it appeared that capitalism could live without imperialist control over the “outlying regions”; and with the rapid growth of some countries belonging to the “outlying regions” it appeared that capitalism’s tendency for producing development and underdevelopment as dialectically-related phenomena, as the “new” theories of imperialism had postulated, had also been rendered irrelevant. In short, virtually every weapon in the armoury of the theories which postulated capitalism as a “non-reformable” system, appeared to have become blunted by the developments in post-war capitalism. True, as long as the Vietnam War continued, the stigma of predatoriness attached to capitalism could not be fully overcome. But that war appeared to many as a problem left over from an earlier epoch, a

decolonization delayed by inherited fears that still haunted the system, rather than a portent of things to come.

All these “achievements” now appear to be a chimera¹. The welfare state has been progressively enfeebled in the metropolis; “globalization” has meant the “rolling back” of all attempts by third world countries to pursue a relatively autonomous trajectory of development, and, a re-assimilation of their economies into metropolitan hegemony, with devastating implications for employment and poverty; the East Asian crisis, dealing a massive blow to the prospects of the most rapidly growing part of the third world, has belied all expectations of a diffusion of development from the metropolis to the “outlying regions”; the world-wide economic slow-down which has lingered for decades, has destroyed the myth of a near-full employment, demand-managed, dynamic capitalism; and the espousal of the doctrine of “preventive wars”, initially by the U.S. and the U.K., and now even by France, upon which the actions in the Middle East are based, now constitutes a threat to mankind that is comparable only to what Hitler had posed.

But it is not just these empirical developments, momentous though they are, which are relevant in the present context. What is relevant is that these developments, constituting precisely a failure of “piecemeal social engineering”, *arise because of the immanent tendencies of the system*. The immanent tendencies of the capitalist system, arising from its economic working, do not, save in exceptional circumstances, reveal themselves in their pristine purity; they always appear refracted through concrete struggles, including political struggles: they may be delayed, temporarily halted, and, in exceptional circumstances even partially reversed. In short what is actually observed is the result of concrete struggles, themselves stimulated by the immanent tendencies of the capitalist system, acting upon these tendencies. But these tendencies can never be permanently stopped as long as the system lasts.

Viewed in this light, the second world war, which itself owed its origin to the immanent tendencies of the capitalist system, also brought about a significant shift in the balance of world social forces. The expansion of the socialist system, the Chinese Revolution, the process of decolonization, the assumption of power by social democratic governments in several European countries on the basis of working class revulsion against the “old days”, all these were reflective of the shift. And in that ethos, capitalism, even within the metropolitan economies, could not function in the old way. The acceptance of Keynesian demand management policies and the adoption of certain welfare state measures owed much to this fact.

In short, what had appeared as a basic and permanent shift in the character of capitalism was merely a temporary phase brought about by the

war and the enhanced socialist threat. But starting, as it were, from a new point of origin (which represented a displacement from its earlier position), capitalism once again witnessed the working out of its inner tendencies, which led progressively to a gradual re-appearance (though in a different form which was in keeping with the changed context) of many of its older characteristics, which belied the promise of “piecemeal social engineering”.

Let me elaborate. Centralization of capital, a basic feature of capitalism, gives rise eventually to monopolies out of free competition. But monopoly capitalism, as Lenin had argued, is also associated with the rise to dominance of finance capital. Greater control over the production of social output in the hands the monopolists is also accompanied by an increase in the role of finance. Post-war finance capital however, unlike that of the pre-war years, was necessarily supra-national to start with (since large concentrations of such capital had been created *inter alia* from the US budget deficits flooding Europe and from the OPEC surpluses deposited with the metropolitan banks, both of which arose from a transcendence of national boundaries). The fact of the emergence of globalized finance capital therefore was a playing out of the immanent tendencies of capitalism on a world scale and in a new context. The entire post-war scenario of “changed” and “humane” capitalism however was predicated upon the active intervention within each metropolitan economy by its own nation-State. And globalization of finance capital necessarily meant that any intervention by the nation-States, other than in the interests of globalized finance, became impossible.

Finance capital is always opposed to State intervention in demand management anyway, as was made clear during the Great Depression of the 1930s when all plans for getting the capitalist world out of the Depression through State intervention floundered on the opposition of finance capital and its spokesmen⁵. But when finance capital gets globalized, its opposition acquires a spontaneous effectiveness, since finance capital can always move to other destinations if a particular State acts intrasigent, thereby pushing its economy into a financial crisis which any bourgeois State would find it impossible to resolve.

In short, the immanent tendencies of capitalism carried the system beyond the stage where it had appeared “humane” and “reformed”. Since the nation-State is the only agency available in capitalism for effecting any reforms in a “humane” direction, and since the globalization of finance, an outcome of the immanent tendencies of capitalism, has negated everywhere the “reforming” capacity (in a humane direction) of the nation States, the only way to build a humane society, it follows, is by transcending capitalism itself.

III

Let me now come to the second notion of "historicism". Gramsci (1973, 406) expressed it as a theoretical affirmation that "every 'truth' believed to be eternal and absolute has had practical origins, and has represented a 'provisional' value ('historicity' of every conception of the world and of life....)", which according to him was the position of the "philosophy of praxis" (by which he meant Marxism).

He also said: "That the philosophy of praxis thinks of itself in a historicist manner, that is as a transitory phase of philosophical thought, is not only implicit in its entire system, but is made quite explicit in the well-known thesis that historical development will at a certain point be characterized by the passage from the reign of necessity to the reign of freedom. All hitherto existing philosophies (philosophical systems) have been manifestations of the intimate contradictions by which society is lacerated. But each philosophical system taken by itself has not been the conscious expression of these contradictions..."; by contrast, philosophy of praxis "is consciousness full of contradictions, in which the philosopher himself, understood both individually and as an entire social group, not only grasps the contradictions, but posits himself as an element of the contradiction and elevates this element to a principle of knowledge and therefore of action." It followed that if "contradictions will disappear, it is also demonstrated implicitly that the philosophy of praxis too will disappear, or be superseded" (1973, 404-5). For this reason Gramsci refers to the philosophy of praxis as "absolute historicism".

"Western Marxism" sees Marx in close relationship with Hegel. It envisions, in the tradition of Classical Marxism, a Proletarian Revolution centred in the advanced capitalist countries, in particular a European Revolution. Of course when the outstanding figures of "Western Marxism" wrote, the hopes of a proletarian revolution in Europe had not yet receded, despite the series of setbacks which the revolutionary project had suffered in Western Europe in the years after the end of the First World War: Lukacs' *History and Class Consciousness* was published in 1923, and so was Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy*; Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* were written during the years 1929-35 in a fascist prison, where his incarceration was a symbol as much of the defeat of the revolution as of its inevitable forward march when the dark fascist days would be over, as they were bound to be. "Western Marxism" in other words reflected the mood of the times. The revolution in Europe might have been defeated temporarily, but it was very much on the agenda.

More to the point, however, is the fact that the theoretical rationale of the "historicism" of "Western Marxism" lay in the conception of a European

Proletarian Revolution. But then this throws up a problem: if the practical truth of Marxism is linked to the revolutionary praxis of the proletariat, then what relevance does Marxism have in societies where the proletariat is a minuscule social force? The only relevance it could possibly have is through the progress that these societies can make *as a result of the proletarian revolution in the metropolis*, but this is not of any direct relevance as far as praxis in these particular societies is concerned. In other words, if “historicism” makes Marxism a product *temporally* of a certain epoch, then why should it not, by the same token, be considered to be a product, *spatially*, of a certain context, certain specific societies where the proletariat is sufficiently significant to convert itself, in Lukacs’ language, into a “subject-object”? The universal truth of Marxism then must inhere in something different from its mere self-conscious location within a world of contradictions, as a world-view of the proletariat; it must inhere rather in its capacity to analyze structures as an aid to praxis of large masses of the oppressed people, in short in its *scientific* content which, in common with all science, goes beyond relativism without claiming “absolute truth”. (Its life is short in so far as it would eventually get absorbed into a more comprehensive theory).

This alternative perspective on Marxism as a science of history has of course been developed in our time most systematically by Althusser who referred to “historicism” as a “variant” of empiricism⁶. But it goes back to Lenin, who talked of the development of theoretical knowledge and of the historical conditions for the emergence of the proletariat as a potent revolutionary force, as *separate* and *parallel* phenomena. True, this development of theoretical knowledge gets immensely accelerated under capitalism, so that there is some objective basis for the two phenomena, the development of a science of history and the emergence of the proletariat as a decisive historical agent, to coincide. But the phenomena nonetheless are separate.

In Lenin’s words (1977, 114), “in Russia, the theoretical doctrine of Social Democracy arose altogether independently of the spontaneous growth of the working class movement: it arose as a *natural and inevitable outcome of the development of thought among the revolutionary socialist intelligentsia*” (emphasis added-P.P.) Or as Althusser expressed it, “theoretical practice” like other *genres* of practice requires its own tools, namely concepts and theories bequeathed from an earlier period, and hence operates in relative autonomy from the development of the sphere of social production. Taking his cue from Engels’ remark that the “economic” was determinant only “in the last instance”, Althusser wrote: “From the first to the last, the loneliness of the last instance never comes.”

To talk of “theoretical practice”, to talk of the “relative autonomy” of the development of ideas, to talk of the distinction between the “object of thought” and the “real object” (a distinction whose obliteration, Althusser (1970) argued, constitutes the basis of both empiricism and idealism), does not of course mean a promotion of scholasticism, of the notion that ideas develop in a universe of tranquillity unsullied by struggles of any sort. Ideas are shaped through struggles, not only struggles in the realm of ideas themselves, but also, in an indirect and refracted manner (e.g. through the opening up of intellectual avenues that the rising tide of a social revolution brings about), by the social struggles as well. But the latter do not determine in any direct fashion the trajectory of development of ideas. And the life of any particular set of ideas does not derive from the length of the particular period whose struggles coincide with their development.

The separateness of the two trajectories, of social development and of the development of ideas (though of course the development of ideas, while using earlier ideas as its means of production, necessarily engages with the unfolding trajectory of social development), was central to Lenin’s thought. He was emphatic that socialist ideology arises in the realm of knowledge and has to be carried to the proletariat: “The theory of socialism however grew out of the philosophic, historical, and economic theories elaborated by the educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals” (1977, 114). Since the theory of socialism stands on its own, since the class analysis upon which it is based has a general (though concrete) applicability not circumscribed by the particular class-configurations of a particular society or set of societies, in short, since it constitutes a method of *scientific* analysis of *any* society, it has a universal applicability, irrespective how close the societies in question are to a socialist revolution.

A historicist approach, in this second sense in which I have been using the term, is thus not only not necessary for the argument for a revolution, but it might even restrict the sweep of the revolution, by focussing too closely on proletarian struggles in the metropolis.

IV

A number of implications follow from a non-historicist approach to revolution. First, it underscores the vital importance of an outside agency, a Party, for bringing the idea of socialism and of revolution to the working class, and to other classes which, theory would suggest, might be allies of the working class at that juncture. Many have reacted strongly to this view, and have located the dictatorial features of the erstwhile socialist regimes in this tendency of putting the Party above the class(es). In this debate however it is usually forgotten that even if the revolutionary project is eschewed and

“piecemeal social engineering” is promoted in its place, then that too would be as much an extraneous imposition on society. If a revolution constitutes an imposition on society, then “piecemeal social engineering” cannot be exonerated from this charge. Indeed *any* attempt at changing society must *ipso facto* constitute an imposition. The point at issue therefore is not the fact of imposition *per se*, but whether such imposition, by being an imposition, might subvert the journey to the new society that is being attempted. But such subversion, if it occurs, would indicate retrospectively, a theoretical failure on the part of the outside agency, and not a problem with imposition as such. It would indicate in other words a limitation of theoretical understanding rather than the fact this understanding came “from outside”.

Secondly, it is not as if there is a *choice* between “piecemeal social engineering” and a social revolution. The necessity for revolution arises precisely because the scope for “piecemeal social engineering” has got exhausted. The occurrence of revolutions is not a result of some Marxist conspiracy (for had it been so there would have been many more revolutions than have actually occurred); it arises when contradictions in society have reached a point where their resolution becomes necessary but cannot happen in any other way. A caveat however is in order here. When “piecemeal social engineering” appears to have been successful in some context, it is often the case that this success has been achieved at the expense some other society, in which case the non-occurrence of a revolution in this particular context does not indicate an obviation of the necessity for revolution in every context. The fact that Western Europe has not had a successful socialist revolution is not an indication of some intrinsic strength of social engineering in the European context; it is a consequence of the capacity of Western European countries to manipulate, through their imperialist control over “outlying regions”, their internal contradictions in a manner that obviates the need for a revolution.

Linked to this is a second issue. Many historians express their distrust of “grand narratives” and focus instead on some particular aspects of the domain of their interest, without relating it to broader issues. Of course how a historian chooses to conduct his craft is her or his business, and nothing need be said about it. But when “Grand narratives” are critiqued not on their scientific merits but merely on the grounds that they are “grand”, when a virtue is sought to be seen in *petit* narratives as such, then clearly there is a methodological flaw in the critique. The matter again is not one of *choosing* between one kind of narrative and another, but one of scientific merit, whether a “Grand narrative” is scientifically valid or not, for if it is, then a myriad replications of *petit* investigations which do not add up to any “grand narrative” would leave the discipline scientifically impoverished.

applicability is the notion of a “democratic revolution”. The task of transforming societies, armed with an understanding of social contradictions and their inter-play, cannot remain confined to Europe alone. But once non-European societies are analyzed, where capitalism remains underdeveloped despite their being under the imperialist yoke of metropolitan capitalism which has its local allies among the landed and comprador interests, what comes on the agenda is not a socialist revolution but a “democratic revolution”. This concept, which made an appearance in Engels’ *The Peasant War in Germany*, was enshrined in the programme of the Bolshevik Party prior to the October Revolution (the task of the revolution was supposed to be the establishment of a “revolutionary democratic dictatorship of workers and peasants”) and was to be, in various different shades, the revolutionary objective in the programmes of the Communist Parties in the third world. The “Peoples’ Democratic Revolution” (to distinguish it from the usual “democratic revolution” led by the bourgeoisie), or the “New Democratic Revolution” (as the term was used in China) was a remarkable theoretical innovation, which made possible the assimilation of the third world situation within the Marxist framework.

It was also a complex concept. It refers to a situation where forces committed to the objective of building a socialist society carry out a revolution whose immediate task is to create the conditions for the most broad-based development of capitalism (by sweeping away colonial and feudal bondage), *without in any way compromising with, or jeopardizing the achievement of, the goal of socialism*. We know in retrospect that the progress towards socialism via a peoples’ democratic revolution in underdeveloped third world societies, which have successfully essayed such a revolution, has not been an easy one. But the point of relevance in the present context is this: since the working class in such societies is small, the concept of a “people’s democratic revolution” necessarily places a greater emphasis on the role of the “revolutionary socialist intelligentsia” and hence upon the correctness of “theoretical practice”. The epistemological precondition for such correctness is a science of history, the view that history can be a terrain of scientific investigation to yield conclusions that can buttress the correctness of political praxis.

V

Let me recapitulate the argument that I have been advancing in this paper. There is a basic distinction between historicism on the one hand and the science of history on the other. The historicist tradition within Marxism does not see it as constituting a science of history, and is generally hostile to the idea of a science of history. On the other hand, “historicism” as

understood by Popper, while supposedly referring to a science of history, subsumes under it diverse currents, all of which it indiscriminately, and hence illegitimately, debunks. The revolutionary perspective in the “modern society” does not need “historicism” in either of the two senses. It is based on a science of history which the revolutionary intelligentsia carries to the people, and which forms the basis of praxis. It is this aspect of a science of history which makes Marxism relevant for diverse societies, including especially underdeveloped ones where the proletariat has a minuscule presence. Of course any talk of a science of history gives rise to fears of a totalitarian order justified in the name of absolute truths, such as those which science is supposed to yield. But the degeneration of the revolution into totalitarianism calls not for an abandonment of the scientific perspective, but rather a refinement of it. In the context we are discussing, all repression, all use of gratuitous and excessive violence by a socialist State, constitutes above all a theoretical failure, signifying the insufficient development of the scientific perspective.

The question may well be asked: why should we bother about these issues which were debated so long ago by people long dead and gone? The answer is simple: important issues do not go away unless they are resolved. In intellectual activity fashion cannot be the decisive factor in the choice of issues to discuss. In particular, questions of exploitation and hegemony under capitalism are still with us. If anything they have become extremely acute of late, and thrust themselves into our consciousness after the war waged by the United States on Iraq. Unless these issues are discussed properly, resistance to such hegemony cannot be put up in an effective and organized manner. And any discussion of such issues of hegemony would once again bring into focus the entire question of revolution versus piecemeal social engineering, the entire question of a vanguard organization, the role of a revolutionary intelligentsia etc., which were debated long ago and which I have tried to touch upon in this paper. But if these issues are shut out of the terrain of discourse, then anti-imperialist praxis will continue to take the destructive and unproductive forms, such as terrorism, which we are seeing before us today.

Prabhat Patnaik is at the Centre for Economic Studies and Planning, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Notes

- 1 I take this expression from Victor Kiernan (1983)
- 2 This point has been discussed at greater length in Patnaik (2000).
- 3 I use the word “modern” here as synonymous with capitalism, taking my cue from Marx’s identification of the capitalist mode of production with the “modern society” in his Preface to the First Edition of *Das Kapital*. See Marx (1977), p.92.
- 4 For a more elaborate discussion of many of the points raised in this paragraph see Patnaik (2003).
- 5 This opposition was expressed in the form of an opposition to fiscal deficits and an assertion of belief in the principles of “sound finance”. The Keynesian Revolution which started with an attack by Keynes’ pupil R.F.Kahn on the British Treasury’s views upholding “sound finance”, was to fight this hostility of finance capital to State intervention in demand management. Its thrust, as Keynes (1949) put it, was “socialization of investment” and a “euthanasia of the rentier”. (Since finance capital is the main representative of rentier interests, Keynes’ target of attack is quite clear).
- 6 See Althusser (1971), p.12, for this particular remark.

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