

CO-OPTING THE GRASSROOTS

The Professionalization of Political Culture

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.....the rethinking that is required must be more profound than just imagining that the problem can be resolved by substituting a plurality of new social movements for the old workers' movements. The compensatory stifling of ideals we saw in the institutions of the labor movement has also appeared in the new social movements. Every progressive social movement must, sooner or later, confront the inescapable fact that capitalism cripples our capacities, stunts our dreams, and incorporates our politics.

In the March 2004 issue of this journal, John Clark discussed the problem of political culture, suggesting that, more than anything else, the revival of the American Left is contingent upon the regeneration of a vibrant political imagination that builds upon the experiences of the past while celebrating solidarities and building socialist visions in the present. He also emphasized the “...need for an ethos that expresses hope and creativity in concrete form. There is great danger in the tendency of the Left to become a culture of opposition, endless ‘struggle,’ and reactivity.” □

There can be little doubt that the miseries faced by the working people of the world today can only be transcended by confronting the system that (re)produces them, and this confrontation will only take place if working people *believe* they can beat the system. But the capitalist system is resilient and sophisticated, and it co-opts our struggles, often without us even realizing it. As so many socialists have acknowledged, our imagination is stunted by capitalism. Capitalist hegemony necessarily limits our conception of a post-capitalist society, given that values and beliefs ingrained within us are the products of capitalism. Transcending these values and beliefs is a massive challenge when capitalism inhibits our ability to conceive of anything different. Arguably the biggest failure of “actually existing socialism” was its emphasis on an economic ethos above and beyond the development of the socialist consciousness. Revolutionary thinkers throughout the 20th century, including Mao Zedong and Che Guevara, were unable to transcend capitalist hegemony—even as they insisted on the importance of inculcating such a consciousness.

Clearly modernity has brought with it innumerable opportunities to create and move beyond the here and now, as much as it inherently tends towards self-destruction. This is why the possibility of transcending capitalist modernity will always exist, although it is important to understand the enormity of the challenge, because, as Wallis points out, “the very factors that make the rule of capital so destructive also operate to shield it against any effective effort to go beyond it.” In any case, it may well be the overwhelming destructiveness of the system that impels us to consider how to beat it.

There is no evidence to suggest that the multitude of new social movements will be able to transcend the capitalist imaginary just because they celebrate diversity. In fact, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the new social movements face a serious crisis of legitimacy as manifested in international gatherings that have not moved meaningfully beyond what they oppose to what they propose. In particular, the overwhelming professionalization of progressive political culture must be signaled as a cause of serious concern for the “anti-globalization” movement.

Given that the international movement claims to be fighting capitalism, it must also confront the question of means, because creating a political culture that allows us to struggle against capitalism requires us to reject the practices and values that define it. For example, we celebrate the Zapatistas for challenging the boundaries between the state and indigenous culture, and our movement's dynamism is inherent in our belief that the Zapatistas represent an alternative value system to capitalism. But when we employ the means of the corporate mainstream under the guise of "supporting" the Zapatistas, we are not only reinforcing corporate and state power but are also contributing to the structural violence being waged against the indigenous culture we purport to defend.

Whether one is to articulate this dilemma in terms of Marx's notion of false consciousness or a more sophisticated Gramscian discussion of hegemony, there is little question that the struggle against capitalism must involve a very deliberate and definitive rejection of the very practices and symbols that define capitalism. There is no reason to believe that capitalist hegemony is all-encompassing and cannot be challenged. But it is crucial that our challenge begins in our daily practices, however seemingly inconsequential these may be.

While the problem of professionalization of political culture in all social formation should be the subject of serious debate, it is the aim of this essay to analyze the problem of professionalization of left political culture in the periphery, with specific reference to Pakistan. For it is in the periphery that the most significant counter-hegemonic formations are emerging, arguably because peripheral societies have only partially been overwhelmed by the consumerist culture that is one of the defining features of late capitalism. In contrast, there would appear to be little to challenge commodity fetishism as a major fact of life in the core countries, although it would be unjust to understate the mobilization in recent times by broad-based ecological movements of which the Left is a part. In any case, the "anti-globalizationists" in the core countries celebrate mass movements in the periphery as the lynchpin of the global movement□

In societies such as Pakistan's, the problem of political culture was complex even prior to the onslaught of neoliberalism and its attendant practices. In most societies characterized by the mainstream ethnocentric discourse as "backward," "traditional" and "static," personalized patron-client relationships dominate political culture. While this has always been the case, the colonial experiment institutionalized a personalized political culture in such a way as to vest inordinate power within the centralized state structure. This is just one of many reasons why the disparaging of this culture by the hegemonic modernization discourses is a contradiction in terms. In any case, political culture in most colonial societies was constrained within the boundaries defined by the state. This was as true in colonial Africa under the guise of "indirect rule" as in India□

Following the partition of the sub-continent, Pakistan's political culture continued in this vein, particularly because of the predominance of the civil-military state oligarchy, the lack of autonomy of political parties, and the patronage of the state by imperialism. The partition itself had an enormous impact on the social, economic, political and cultural constitution of the new state, including on the conception of what the state represented among the subordinate classes. In particular, the fact that Pakistan was created to be a haven for the sub-continent's Muslims ensured that Islam has always remained the central hegemonic pillar of oligarchic rule. No ruler throughout Pakistan's history has ruled without invoking Islam.

The evolution of the Left was dramatically shaped by state repression, at least in part because communism was depicted as the antithesis of Islam. The Communist Party of Pakistan was banned within a decade of the country's creation in 1954. As in other parts of the periphery, the Left was also molded by the

inordinate influence wielded by the Soviets and Chinese. As a result, the Left engaged mostly in “frontal” politics, working in mass organizations, such as student and trade unions, and also in radical nationalist political parties that espoused anti-establishment programs. And to a very significant extent, the Left was successful in introducing the idiom of class into the political mainstream. Radicalization of students, youth, the smallholding and landless peasantry and urban industrial workers took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s parallel to similar processes in many other parts of the world. It was the Left’s influence that allowed the populist Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) to come to power after the 1970 general election.

By the same token, many strands on the Left recognize that its inability to penetrate the political and social mainstream as a distinct and overt alternative at that juncture seriously impacted its political future. In retrospect, the Left never evolved its own independent political culture on account of numerous constraints, including the influence of imperialism and the Pakistani state’s collusion with it as well as the specific circumstances of Pakistan’s creation and the state’s ability to suppress the Left under the guise of protecting the “national interest.”

While objective conditions were oppressive, the Left also had many failings in meaningfully challenging the prevailing values and practices that represented the status quo. For example, where the Left did engage in the electoral sphere, it often relied on primordial identities to garner support. Because of victimization by the state—although not exclusively so—left organizations tended towards excessive centralization in the name of Leninist principles. There was also an over-reliance on individual leaders who inherited positions of power and privilege on the basis of primordial identities. At partition for example, the comintern had decreed that Muslims in the Communist Party of India should be responsible for setting up the party in Pakistan. Many of those who took on this task—arguably with all the right intentions—were migrants into the Pakistan areas and therefore were hopelessly ill-equipped to fully appreciate the cultural, social, and political realities of Pakistan. In cases where segments of the Left did try and challenge the mainstream, they were too direct, alienating themselves socially and politically by allowing themselves to become obvious targets on account of being “anti-Islam.”□

However, it would be unfair to attribute the Left’s failings only to its inability to create an independent progressive political culture. In particular, the collusion of state and imperialism, particularly during the Afghan War of the 1980s, severely undermined the Left as a popular political force. Following the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the majority of left workers became inactive, and the Left virtually disappeared. This would suggest that the left parties in Pakistan were not organized as well as they needed to be given prevailing objective conditions. There can be little doubt that the vacuum created by the Left’s retreat has contributed greatly to the subsequent evolution of political culture.

Meanwhile, following the injection of Islamist idiom into the Pakistani polity during the Afghan War of the 1980s, the state-sponsored religious Right further increased its influence. As suggested earlier, Islam has always played a critical role in the machinations of the state, and this recourse to the country’s major legitimizing tool became more dramatic after the secession of the eastern wing and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. More specifically, the politicization of religion reached new heights during the 1980s, a process that was accompanied by the marginalization of progressive forces and ideas.

The NGO Option

There is no consensus on the so-called new social movements or, more specifically, on their politics, both in terms of how these movements are understood within left intellectual circles as well as their

enormously variegated impact on and engagement with subordinate classes around the world. To some extent new social movements are synonymous with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which receive institutional funding and are staffed by professionals rather than political activists. This is not true across the board, however, since many social movements insist on distinguishing between themselves and NGOs in terms of politics, organization and method. Arguably, the differences between NGOs and movements are less acute in the core countries as the proliferation of NGOs has been consistent with the organic evolution of progressive political trends. The same cannot be said about many peripheral countries where the decline of progressive politics has been associated with a distinct upsurge in the NGO sector.

In Pakistan, NGOs started to emerge in the 1980s as bilateral funds from European governments began flowing into the country. Some of the most prominent NGOs were started up by labor activists who had enjoyed long associations with the Left. Many of these activists genuinely believed that NGOs could provide a new impetus to progressive politics. While the NGOs were not explicitly political entities, it was believed that they could serve larger political ends. The development of a distinct political culture was an obvious objective of many activists who adopted the NGO course.

For example, NGOs emphasized the active involvement of women in their activities. This was at least partially in response to the Left's inability to meaningfully challenge the social constraints placed on women. The difficulty of breaking with the established practices of confining women's public space was compounded because very few women themselves were able to gain exposure to *any* kind of politics, let alone that of the Left. The fact that many activists were simply not able to break with the prevailing division of labor even within their own homes should not be understated. Thus, the space opened up by NGOs to women to be more active in public life was necessarily a positive development, and many women did become involved in public life through NGOs.

Similarly, NGOs had some success in bringing ecology to the forefront of radical discourse, something almost totally neglected by the cold war Left on account of its overemphasis on techno-economistic socialism. It was also believed that NGOs could promote democratic decision-making within the organization while also creating space for "communities" to be involved in organization-building of their own.

However, such goals were explicitly espoused by only a handful of NGOs. In the first instance, the majority of donor-funded organizations that began emerging in the 1980s were concerned with social welfare activities and focused on providing services the state had neglected. As a result, the NGOs were knowingly or unknowingly reinforcing the neoliberal paradigm, because they did not challenge the state to fulfil its responsibilities but accepted that the state would not. NGOs then tried to substitute by providing direct services, a task they could accomplish poorly, at best. In any case, even those organizations run and staffed by experienced political activists were not necessarily able to establish any meaningful autonomy from their donors, particularly when budgets were large and organizational survival started to take on more importance than any specific political agenda.

Burying Radical Action in Paperwork

The evolution of the SUNGI Development Foundation, an organization initially driven by considerably radical ideas that was set up in 1989 by the son of a prominent ex-chief of the Air Force, illustrates the point. SUNGI founder, Omar Asghar Khan, had been involved with the trade union movement previously and had been fired from a teaching position at Punjab University in the early 1980s

because of his opposition to the military regime of General Zia ul Haq. SUNGI worked in the mountainous northern region of Hazara and in its first few years developed a reputation for dynamism and innovative political work. For example, it helped foment a movement in the remote area of Dir where local communities had been deprived of forest royalties by a nexus of local influentials (including clerics) and the state. The resort to colonial laws to encroach on local resources was countered by a sophisticated and radical response on SUNGI's part. However, within a few years of its founding, SUNGI had become immersed in the politics of donor funding and the imperatives of sustaining a staff of over 150. Since the mid-1990s, its work has suffered, and it no longer resembles the more radical organization that it was at its inception. □

In an environment where organic political entities such as trade unions, students groups and other similar formations were in decline, NGOs spread like wildfire, spurred on by large injections of donor money. As socially and politically conscious groups and individuals in relatively remote areas became aware of the NGO phenomenon, they acquired the language skills and demeanor to qualify for donor funding—so much so that the politics of patronage intensified as groups and individuals started to compete for available monies.

The funding frenzy has evolved dramatically over time. The larger NGOs in Pakistan have created budgets to fund smaller community-based organizations (CBOs) under the former's umbrella. Large NGO umbrellas have emerged that have become the de facto "leaders" of the NGO community, primarily on account of the power they enjoy because of their large budgets. Meanwhile, the vast majority of NGOs and CBOs have adopted routines that are entirely stagnant. Typically, workshops and trainings are the centerpiece of their activities, and report writing has become a mandatory skill they must acquire to placate donor requirements.

Good Governance

Organizations such as the South Asia Partnership (SAP) and Pakistan Institute for Labour Education and Research (PILER) have developed huge patronage networks. SAP, for example, supports hundreds of smaller CBOs across the interior of Punjab and Sindh. In more recent times, SAP and PILER have distributed funds for activities related to the Musharraf government's devolution of power program that was initiated shortly after the October 1999 coup. The "good governance" lingo that is so critical a feature of the neoliberal counterrevolution was adopted by all and sundry—including big NGOs—and it was argued that a military government could successfully devolve power to the local level, thereby dismantling the age-old system of bureaucratic government that has persisted well beyond the presence of its creators, the British.

This devolution exercise eerily mirrored similar "decentralization" initiatives undertaken by Musharraf's predecessor, General Ayub Khan, during the 1960s and General Zia ul Haq during the 1980s. As in the previous two periods of military rule, pliant local governments have been created to provide support to an illegitimate military dictatorship that does not enjoy any meaningful political mandate from established constituencies. Not surprisingly, the donor community pumped huge amounts of money into the devolution exercise in accord with prevailing regional geopolitics. Organizations such as SAP and PILER have been the major beneficiaries of this pumping in of donor money.

The professionalization or standardization of social activism has taken place across the country, even in areas that one might otherwise categorize as very remote and therefore relatively untouched by capitalist modernity. Some larger social trends can be discerned in this regard. First, NGOs and CBOs have become

one of the primary employment avenues for the relatively educated lower middle classes whose other employment options would include clerical and junior management jobs in the private or state sectors. In traditional Marxist nomenclature, this relatively socially mobile class would fit to some extent the image of the petty bourgeois. Needless to say, this class is primarily concerned with its social mobility and definitely *not* with larger collective social and political ends that NGOs otherwise espouse.

Meanwhile, many political activists from the cold war Left have adjusted themselves into the NGO circle. The majority look at their work with NGOs as a secure livelihood, while a small number are firmly committed to the ideological principles behind the NGO phenomenon, such as rolling back the state. As suggested above, given the rapid retreat of the Left after 1991, the flocking of left activists into NGOs exacerbated an already acute crisis: among the new generation of youth, there has been no meaningful attempt to build a new cadre of activists. Among younger people who may otherwise have an inclination towards the Left, it is perceived that NGOs offer the best combination of a secure livelihood and social activism. Needless to say, similar phenomena are obvious in other parts of the periphery and even in the industrialized countries. More detailed comparative studies could uncover just how widespread the process of co-option truly is.

Second, the liberal intelligentsia, which is synonymous with the upper middle class, or elite, is the primary beneficiary of the NGO upsurge. This English-educated elite—the major beneficiary of the post-colonial dispensation at large—is the ideological vanguard of the NGO phenomenon. In particular, it now champions the broad ideas of secularism and freedom of movement. It would, however, be wholly inaccurate to describe this class as committed to all of the tenets of bourgeois democracy.

The liberal intelligentsia has underlined its fundamental class allegiances over the past few years by providing almost unequivocal support to the military dictatorship of General Pervez Musharraf, now firmly established as a stooge of Western imperialism. As pointed out above, the NGO community stood firmly behind the “devolution of power” initiative of the Musharraf government. Third, NGOs have become the unwitting foes of the religious Right, thereby acquiring even more importance to the international donor community. The Right has dismissed NGOs as citadels of decadence and cultural imperialism and has even engaged in direct physical attacks on NGOs and their staff. As such, the state has adopted a rather ambivalent attitude towards the NGO sector, which has varied depending on the relative influence of the Right and the donor community.

All in all, the impact of professionalization on left political culture has been acute, even if not uniform. Perhaps most importantly, professionalization has further limited the political imagination. Because the primary strategy of NGOs is to negotiate with the state and other powerful groups, the progressive discourse has been deprived of any confrontational tendency that openly acknowledges the intense class war that continues to be perpetrated by the state, imperialism and indigenous propertied classes against working people. In the instances where more overt class conflict has emerged in Pakistan in recent years, it is not uncommon for “civil society” to brand explicitly leftist groups as extremists who are exposing “vulnerable communities” to the tyranny of the state. While what exists of the Left also acknowledges the tyranny of the state, its analysis and politics prevents it from what the professionals call “critical engagement.”

Revolutionary Conditions

That having been said, it is worth considering that the primary inspiration for revolutionary movements throughout the 20th century was Russian Bolshevism, replete with its ideal of the professional revolutionary as vanguard. It is beyond the scope of this contribution to discuss the merits of this idea or its successes and failures in the Soviet Union or elsewhere. It is possible to assert, however, that the professional being discussed here is not at all revolutionary and in fact overtly rejects revolutionary ideas. Moreover, the professional discussed here is inadvertently or otherwise reinforcing the structures of global capitalism, primarily by propagating the values and practices of neoliberal reaction.

Clark rightfully calls for the creation of “communities of liberation” that offer real-life proof that working people can transcend the inertia of consumer culture. Unfortunately, in Pakistan professional activism has established a monopoly on the content of “communities,” “liberation” and any other notion of emancipation that may persist from the period where organic politics flourished. “Best practice” and “participation” are some of the catchphrases that have relegated more substantive and potentially revolutionary ideas to virtual oblivion.

As suggested above, the influx of donor money has reinforced this non-confrontational and clientelist political culture replete with a language that is indispensable to its place in the popular imagination. In moments of lucidity, many relatively less affluent staff members of NGOs will acknowledge that the primary function of NGOs is to provide employment and that their claims of promoting social and/or political change are laughable.

Professionalization has also consolidated elite alienation from society at large. As suggested above, professional activism tends to reflect the concerns of the urbanized elite and donor patrons. From the late 1970s onwards, the elite have become more and more estranged from the pulse of the larger society. As organic people’s formations such as student unions, intellectual groups and the like have degenerated, the elite have lost contact with the hopes and aspirations of the working mass of people—so much so that there is now a clear disjuncture between the elite and working people, which manifest most obviously in the lack of the intelligentsia’s understanding of the lives of working people. This alienation has been both the cause and effect of the state-sponsored rise of the religious Right. It has also deprived working-class struggles of those members of the elite that have affectionately or derisively—depending on which side of the political fence one sits—been called class traitors. This is because the elite no longer has any contact with working people, even at the level of a shared popular culture. This necessarily means that there can be no shared political vision and no collective struggle for social change.□

The professionalization of political culture is likely to intensify in the near future. In spite of the growing threat, it is arguably in the periphery that a meaningful challenge to this threat will take root as the majority of people remain constrained by capitalism’s structural imperatives to even get a look-in. The oppositional sub-cultures in peripheral societies are being co-opted on the one hand by consumerism and on the other hand by professional activism. Nonetheless, there are myriad examples of movements and emerging trends—even in a politically repressed society such as Pakistan’s—that suggests that an alternative to neoliberalism lingers just beneath the surface.

In the first instance, it is necessary to identify the structural crises that face Pakistan’s dominant classes and the state. In collusion with multinational capital, local propertied groups—including the military—have intensified their swoop for natural resources in recent years. On the whole, Pakistan’s financiers have demanded a major liberalization of trade and financial markets. All of these factors have

combined to produce a windfall for the protagonists of the neoliberal project while dramatically increasing the exploitation of working people.

This has given rise to a variety—albeit not a great number—of resistance movements that have attempted to protect their lands, livelihoods and other basic freedoms. The radicalism of these movements has typically precluded the involvement of NGOs, and the more professionalized groups are careful not to overstep the boundaries that are laid out for them by donors. Such movements have been limited to making basic economic demands, which are mostly defensive, such as protesting eviction and loss of livelihood. Nonetheless, they have provided a radical spark to the political discourse and have been a lightning rod for the widespread disenchantment that mainstream parties are unwilling and unable to articulate.

These movements—like many in the past—use cultural symbols and practices that have till now not been co-opted. Nonetheless, due to a lack of support, these movements tend to either peter out or do not move beyond their initial reactivity to the attacks on their resources. Given the clear disjunction between such movements and the professionalized discourse of NGOs—and the fact that no party across the existing political spectrum wants to be implicated in these kinds of radical struggles—the opportunity for the Left to build a mass constituency is perhaps more pronounced today than it ever has been. This is not to say that a “traditional” left party is or is not the appropriate organizational form of a new political alternative, but that the objective conditions to build a counter-hegemonic bloc exist.

That being said, the regeneration of the political activist remains the primary prerequisite of such a political alternative. But here, too, creative initiatives will induce a new cadre that can take on the challenge. After all, NGOs can only hire so many people.

The modernity of post-colonial societies such as Pakistan is inherently different from that in the industrialized core countries, because it has retained many features and trends of community and personalization that the atomized societies of the First World have long since shorn. If the Left is able to acknowledge its past failings, understand existing objective conditions, and be willing to learn more of the genius of the Pakistani people, there is no reason why counterhegemony cannot be developed, even amidst the Pepsi billboards that are becoming an evermore present feature of the country’s landscape.