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# **New (and not-so-new) realities of our time - On the "International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest"**

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**See on ESSDF: [The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest - 1500 to the Present](#).**

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I am glad to be able to speak here, at the Left Forum, about the *International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest*. What is not so new, of course, is the attempt by socialists to be internationalists. That is indeed one of our oldest and proudest traditions. In 1871, the General Council of the International Working Men's Association received a letter from Calcutta, which wanted to open a branch of the International there. The identity of the author of the letter is not known. But the response proposed by Marx included a suggestion that Indians be included, indicating that the correspondent from Calcutta was probably a European.

As late as the 1920s and 1930s, militant socialists from India or other colonial and semi-colonial countries could only keep sporadic contact with their fellow fighters in the developed countries, or with the Soviet Union. An international effort meant chiefly the work of people and organizations in Europe and North America, with perhaps Japan added. Asia and Latin America, to say nothing of most of Africa, were very marginally represented. Capitalism itself has changed that. And at the same time it has made closest international collaboration ever more imperative.

The newest reality we face right now is of course, that there is a massive crisis of capitalism. This was supposed to be finished. With 1991, history had come to an end. I remember all too well (as who does not, who was old enough to be a leftist in 1991 and still remains one) the queues of repentant leftists who were busy acknowledging that it had all been an illusion. Those who refused to give up their Marxist politics were derisively labeled "dinosaur". Capitalism had supposedly triumphed, something proved by the collapse of the bureaucratic regimes calling themselves socialist. For a number of years, only small groups, barring in a few countries, were willing to stand up and call themselves revolutionary socialists or Marxists. Small numbers were willing to argue that capitalism would again face crises. That is of course what a part of the new reality is about. The initial attempts at saying that the system faced no trouble, only the rotten elements were being weeded out, had to be given up by September 2008. Not only that, but for the first time in two decades, bourgeois political leaders across the world were talking about policies that meant ending the neoliberal consensus. When the Republicans call Obama socialist for talking about some degree of state control, and the accusation does not cut much ice with US public opinion, we need to realize that

there have indeed been great changes. If the US President can talk about state control, we are much better placed today, to talk about control over the economy by working people, and get a hearing, than we were for a very long time.

What is not so new is the continuing reality of imperialism. In the happy utopias of free trade theorists, there is no war, only people peaceably trading. There, the hidden hand of the market ensures that the aggregate of millions of different, self-interested decisions appears, magically, as in everyone's best interests. States are hardly visible either: they just protect property and enforce contracts. What an irony then that the most enthusiastic free marketeers are also the most warlike. The free market, pushed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, was about as peaceful, as Joseph Stiglitz, no socialist, said, as the Opium Wars, which too imposed the "free market" on China. The so-called Washington Consensus meant that debtor countries trying to borrow from the Bank were forced to comply with the structural adjustment policies set by the IMF. The resulting cuts in government spending, the dismantling of tariff restrictions on imports and a shift in agricultural policy away from food production towards exportable cash crops, the earnings from which could be used to service the debts, have resulted in a global tide of starvation, misery and environmental damage. Countries already desperately poor are forced to service debt they will never be able to repay and hand their economies over to the international banks. It has been estimated that the South had paid to the North, by 1997, via debt servicing, 6 Marshall plans. By 2006 this had gone up to 20 Marshall Plans. The ultimate irony is that aid and cancellation of debt is ever more tied to 'good governance' preconditions when the main cause of bad government was and is the same structural adjustment policies associated with debt.

There have been arguments to the effect that imperialism in its classical sense is of little or no use in understanding the current realities of the world. While it is true that modern imperialism is not presently in a stage of warlike rivalry between national states, this does not mean that inter-imperialist competition could not in the future lead to such rivalry. Though in recent periods competition between capitalist powers has been institutionalized within bodies such as the G8, the crisis of 2008 saw big business run to national governments for protection. Globalization has meant the growing importance of trade between local branches of the one hundred transnational corporations that dominate global trade. This means that protectionist pressures (and therefore imperial rivalries) are lessened because raising trade barriers would also damage branches of transnational companies located within the protectionist state's own borders. Conflicts of interest between transnationals are also negotiated within bodies such as the G8/G20, the IMF or the World Trade Organisation (WTO). There are 63,000 transnational corporations worldwide, with 690,000 foreign affiliates. Three quarters of them are based in North America, Western Europe and Japan. Ninety-nine of the 100 largest transnational corporations are from the industrialized countries. 51 out of the world's 100 largest economies are transnationals. This shows clearly the domination of the same small group of countries, with the TNCs closely linked to the governments of those countries. In the last analysis the power of transnationals in organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank comes not from market dominance but from the ability of their states to protect their interests, if necessary, by military force. We have seen, in connection with the Iraq War, how powerful imperialist states have an agenda that meets the requirements of many of those transnationals. Indeed, ultimately market dominance and state power are closely linked, thereby providing a major contradiction of capitalist globalization.

So we now have a global crisis of capitalism, with even the political representatives of the ruling classes are compelled to call for state action. And we are doing so, when a new generation has grown up, that is not burdened by memories of past defeats and that cannot be halted or defused by pointing the finger at a now non-existent Soviet Union as the only alternative. We are in a period when the degeneration or collapse of many of the old left parties are no longer the sole reality. In

Nepal, a Maoist party combined armed struggles, mass struggles and elections with great flexibility. Certainly, they have problems, the biggest being that Nepal is a small country, very poor, and no party can hope to transform it rapidly, while precisely such an expectation will be building up among the masses. In country after country in South and Central America, a left swing is visible. Not all these are equally radical, but this swing reflects a profound stirring at the base.

But a part of the new reality is also the tragedy that in many countries, the younger generation comes to these militant struggles without adequate revolutionary continuity. It is only the sectarian, for whom if his or her organization does not lead the revolution then the revolution should be postponed, that the collapse and degeneration of left wing parties can be a cause of glee, an opportunity to say I told you so. In his novel *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*, Victor Serge tells us what a disaster the break with our historic continuity can be. The Old Bolshevik Ryzhik, a Trotskyist who has accidentally survived the three purge trials, is reflecting on the Bolshevik Party. "each hieroglyphic was human: a name, a human face with changing expressions, a voice, a portion of living history.... If he had credited himself with the slightest poetic faculty, Ryzhik would have allowed himself to become intoxicated by the spectacle of that powerful collective brain, that brain which brought together thousands of brains to perform its work during a quarter of a century, now destroyed in a few years by the backlash of its very victory, now perhaps reflected only in his own mind as in a thousand-faceted mirror". The revolutionary party, not as a bureaucratic machine, as Cold Warriors, above all in the USA, have constantly warned us, but rather, as the collective brain of the vanguard of the working class.

In its humble way, the encyclopedia that is the starting point of our gathering here today, will be seeking to contribute to overcoming that disaster. For decades, we have had aggressive right wing attacks on the ideas of revolution, even of enlightenment and progress. We have had Schapiro, Pipes, Figs, (for example) tell us that the Russian Revolution was nothing but a coup, a plan for a dictatorship. We have had Furet, Simon Schama and others tell us that terror and mindless violence was built into the very origins of the French Revolution. We have had historians like Ramachandra Guha or Rudrangshu Mukherjee in my country debunking the communists in the cause of neoliberalism. The *International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest* is, or can be, a very important tool for radical activists. It restores, in a form accessible for those who cannot go through piles of books, the memory of revolutions and struggles. For example, David Mandel and Paul le Blanc respond to the campaigns against the Russian Revolution. Soma Marik explores the historiography of the French Revolution and the popular aspirations behind the Terror. And the encyclopedia has an ecumenical position. The perspectives from which the essays are written are many, not one. Not monolithism, but an engagement between anarchism, environmentalism, feminism, radical nationalism, and of course a very plural Marxism is what marks these volumes. And it is, above all, truly international. All too often we find that a Eurocentric bias is built heavily into histories written in the North. This is not the case here. Struggles in Africa, Asia, Latin America are extensively covered.

I am particularly happy to be speaking at the Left Forum about this, for the forum, too, is an attempt to bring together the diverse voices of the left. To strengthen political consciousness, notably class consciousness, these are important initiatives. Certainly, mass radical movements are the essential ingredients. But movements do not automatically generate class consciousness to the full extent, nor do workers get the full picture of the totality of world capitalist oppression and exploitation simply through workplace experience. Certainly, a book, any book, including the *encyclopedia*, cannot take the place of the living collective brain. But this too is the product of a living collective, reflecting on our new realities while writing about the past, and it can have good value for working class militants and social movement activists.

From the late 1930s to the 1970s, for about forty years, there was a rich left wing political culture in

much of India, certainly in West Bengal, where I live and work. Bengal/West Bengal had seen general strikes of hundreds of thousands of jute workers. Bengal had a massive radical student upsurge, not once but four times within this period – demanding the release of political prisoners in the late 1930s, sparking off the post-war upsurge of 1945-47, fighting, in East Bengal/East Pakistan for the Bengali language, and fighting for food and for democratic education in West Bengal, between the 1950s and the late 1960s. India's most massive women's movement was developed there, in the 1940s, where the Mahila Atma Raksha Samity mobilized over 40,000 members by 1944, combating a government and capitalist made famine that left half a million dead in Bengal in 1943. In 1946, at the crest of the post-war upsurge, P.C. Joshi, the then General Secretary of the Communist Party of India, told a group of prominent intellectuals of Calcutta that for the next generation, the best intellectuals of Bengal would be Communist, as indeed they were. The splits in the communist movement, the smashing of the original Naxalbari movement, the class battles of the 1970s and 1980s that saw major defeats by the working class, the orthodoxy that silenced women's autonomy within the communist movement, and the rise of aggressive communalism, all combined to weaken and partially to break the continuity. But new struggles are breaking out there too. Struggles against Special Economic Zones have taken place, in West Bengal, in Gujarat, in Uttar Pradesh. Struggles have developed against communalism, going beyond merely contesting it in the parliamentary terrain. Young people are contesting the destruction of civil liberties in the name of fighting terrorism. As the participants in such struggles try to make sense of the world, rather than just their corner of it, they will be looking at history. This *Encyclopedia* will be making its own contribution to all such attempts at recomposition of ideologies and political and organizational outlooks.

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**P.S.**

\* From <http://kunal-radicalblogger.blogspot.com/>