

Bourgeois Democratic State and “Democratic” Space - Strategies to Manoeuvre and Master

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Intro

The tension between ‘determinism’ and ‘voluntarism’ is perhaps one of the central tensions of Marxism. On the one hand, (Marxist) historical materialism strives not only to make sense of the seemingly huge anarchy of past events and decipher a specific, and universal, pattern of development lying just beneath the surface and locate the locomotive of development and change in the accumulating stress between the compulsively evolving technology of production and reproduction of means of subsistence, and also production itself, and the relationship of control pertaining to the production system, but also lay down a schema of the future course of development extrapolated from the past patterns. These changes are acknowledged as driven by ‘material’ forces and thereby independent of human desire or choice. Not only that, at a given stage (of development), the subsequent changes are (historically) pre-determined. So nomadic hunters / food gatherers evolve into settled food producers and then graduate to machine-based production. The change in the system of production brings in its wake a whole lot of concomitant changes in the sphere of social/political organisation. And the trajectory of change is not simply linear; it is interspersed with sharp breaks and leaps, which correspond to the sudden bursts of stress having reached a certain critical range.

On the other, we’re also aware of Marx’s clarion call: “So far the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point is, however, to change it”. “Workers of the World, Unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains!” is also another famous exhortation we’re all familiar with.

The emancipatory movements, which, by their very natures, have to take off from a voluntarist premise, even if formally denied (and the limits set by the ambient realities acknowledged), suffer from another paradox. It’s the contradiction between the (anarchist) ideal, or end, of doing away with all asymmetric power relations and the hierarchically structured organisation, as the essential means, to dismantle the apex and pivotal structure of power symmetry and organised repression - the State. The ‘smashing’ of the (bourgeois) State, the ultimate organ/instrument of (class) coercion presupposes and calls for the building up of some comparable counter organ/instrument for accomplishing the task. The task demands that this organ (of revolution), at least to a certain extent, casts and recasts itself after the image of the organ it has set out to destroy. Not only that, the paucity of resources at command demanding ruthlessly efficient utilisation of those, also calls for a high degree of organisational discipline based on hierarchy. There’s an evident and dangerous trap here. Once the organ (of revolution) structures itself on tight hierarchical lines, the hierarchy tends to further solidify and perpetuate itself and consequently the ‘new’ organ also becomes an organ of highly asymmetrical power relations. In the process, the ideal, the goal, the end gets vitiated/corrupted by the means, and consequently shifts, again even if formally denied. The whole concept of ‘smashing’, however, stands or falls with a particular reading of the State, or the ‘bourgeois democratic’ State, in particular. (The dictatorial/authoritarian State has an explicitly coercive character leaving much less scope for any prevarication.)

The State: Marxist Understanding Evolving

The Marxist understanding of the 'bourgeois democratic' State, for generations has been guided by the famous Leninist dictum that the 'bourgeois democracy' is nothing but the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. (The precise text is: "that even the most democratic bourgeois republic is nothing but the instrument by which the bourgeoisie oppress the working class, by which a handful of capitalists keeps the working masses". Lenin's *Theses on bourgeois democracy and proletarian dictatorship*, March 4, 1919.) A sort of rather crude 'instrumentalist' view. (Lenin himself had to rather uncomfortably contend with this narrow view in his 'Leftwing Communism an Infantile Disorder', his only major work dealing with the specific and concrete tactics to be adopted by the Communists in West Europe, with far stronger democratic traditions and mass labour movements usually remaining on the right side of the Law.)

The experiences of the bourgeois democracies, the developed ones in particular, over the last half-century or so - roughly since World War II, have forced a rethink on the nature of 'democracies' and the range of opportunities they offer and also the challenges they pose.

An Italian Marxist in fascist jail, Antonio Gramsci, arguably provided the first major breakthrough. It is he, who emphasised and highlighted that the (capitalist) exploitative order is maintained just not through coercion, but a combination of coercion and consent.

Unlike the previous orders, capitalism brings forth a substantial separation of the 'economic' and 'political' as the process of surplus extraction from the labouring categories is now embodied in the economic process as something 'natural' by untying the direct producers from the means of production. Consequently the State does not have to engage in day-to-day exercise of coercion. Maintenance of 'law and order' is no longer perceived as an 'economic' function of the State.

The State gets much more abstracted, and consequently autonomous as well. With growing economic strength and stability, 'democracy' finds larger and larger acceptance. The system becomes more and more complex and elaborate, allows much enlarged freedom for dissent.

It's this institutionalised enlarged freedom that allows spaces/interstices for building institutions of counterculture, to challenge the hegemony of the dominant from which the 'consent' follows.

Alternate and Complementary Strategies to Counter Bourgeois Hegemony

The counter-hegemony project must envisage the proliferation of these (approximately) horizontally built institutions and also horizontal networking of these.

But these institutions do not operate in vacuum; these are not hermetically sealed islands. So it'd be quite unrealistic to expect these, on the basis of some 'pure' principles, to remain unaffected by the environ in the process of interacting with it and getting converted into standard attachments of the 'system'. Even then a constant and conscious endeavour would definitely help to keep them on track and initiate molecular changes in the ambience they interact with.

The feminist movement is perhaps one of the best examples how changes have been brought about in a 'non-revolutionary' manner. The caste struggles in India have caused, *inter alia*, changes in language, in a society considered unalterable. Untouchables', 'lower castes', harijans', 'scheduled castes', are now known as 'dalits'. This is no mean achievement. Peace movement though has scored no such comparable victory, at least as yet. These hubs of counterculture are, almost by definition, by and large dispersed, each usually linked to a single issue, and as a totality dealing with a number of issues and representing multiple perspectives.

While synergy of much of these dispersed and diverse hubs is likely to make a hugely impacting contribution towards the making of a web of counterculture/counterhegemony and thereby, continually and somewhat inconspicuously, undermining of the structures of (asymmetrical) power; at the end of the day, States would, in all probability, still need a final push.

But even the process of emasculation of the States would demand a creative/constructive dialogue between the civil society movements spearheading the endeavours for counterculture and the political society, particularly its radical components representing various oppressed/deprived sections, not excluding even the various organs of the State itself.

The massive protests at Seattle in November-December in 1999 against globalisation and worldwide protests on February 15, 2003 of millions and millions at the nerve-centres of global capitalist-imperialist order against the impending Iraq War did graphically bring out the vitality of the newer movements, the scope for collaborations between the 'new' and the 'old', and also the limitations - the transient character in particular, of the movements not formatted as per the norms of 'democratic centralism' - a hallmark of the 'old'. But they have also pretty forcefully put a question mark on the 'primacy' of 'class', and 'class struggle' over all other forms of struggles. The concept of 'vanguardism' - '(working) class' as the vanguard of the 'revolutionary' social block, Party as the vanguard (and the only authentic representative) of the 'class', and oftentimes the Supreme Leader as the vanguard (and the only authentic representative) of the Party - was never before so compellingly challenged.

Nearer home, the agitation of the evicted slum dwellers of Mumbai led by the NAPM, in 2005, outside of the traditional political structures while maintaining a constructing/creative dialogue with these and the conscious efforts to link up the issue of housing rights with other issues concerning gender, mill lands, globalisation etc. is a great ongoing experiment worthy of a closer look.

There is no readymade model available, nor a single size is likely to fit all. And perhaps there is no alternative to learning by doing, though at each turn we may not have to reinvent the wheel.

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