

Interview

Revolutions and revolutionary parties: The Anti-Imperialism of Our Times

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Aijaz Ahmad is one of the Indian sub-continent's leading Marxist intellectuals. He has written extensively on questions of imperialism, culture, and colonialism. Ahmad currently teaches at the Centre of Contemporary Studies, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, in New Delhi and is the author of a half dozen books including - *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures; Lineages of the Present: Ideological and Political Genealogies of Contemporary South Asia*, and *Iraq, Afghanistan and the Imperialism of Our Time*. Tom Keefer interviewed Ahmad in Toronto, Canada in June of 2006 and Aidan Conway edited the transcript.

Tom Keefer - You have stated that the masses cannot make lasting revolution by themselves and that a mass revolutionary party remains vital to the development of radical politics. Could you explain what you mean by this?

Aijaz Ahmad - First, I think we should talk about what one means by revolution. By revolution I mean a fundamental shift of state power from one class or one class alliance to another class or class alliance. It involves the nature of class and capital as well as the nature of the state. So, while obviously no revolutions can be made without the masses, masses by themselves may create massive social upheavals but cannot consolidate revolutions, or at least not lasting ones. Let's consider some examples.

The most comprehensive example is that of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. I call it a revolution because, first, a certain bourgeoisie deeply connected to the monarchy - what has been called the "monarcho-bourgeoisie" - was overthrown. Not only the monarchy but also those top 2000 families actually fled Iran. Power shifted dramatically from one class force to a very different class force. The second important aspect of this revolution was that it was the first urban revolution in the history of revolutions. Thirdly, state power changed in the sense that the apparatus of the state - for example within the military - shifted from the monarchy to the new rising power which ensured its stabilization.

What was the role of the masses? The masses make the revolution but, once a revolutionary process is underway, only an organization capable of leading the masses can ensure that it is victorious. In the case of Iran, there were left wing organizations like the Tudeh that also participated in making the revolution but they were out maneuvered by the Shia clergy and were ultimately unsuccessful.

Now, the Shia clergy has a very specific structure. In fact the term Shia of Ali, which is the correct

name for the Shia, means the party of Ali. Ironically enough, it actually means “party.” The Shia have a hierarchical pyramid structure linking all the mosques in the villages and towns – 60,000 of them in Iran – up through various levels to the top 15 or 20 Ayatollahs who form the leadership of this religious pyramid. It is this organization and structure that made it possible for the clerical establishment to take over the revolution and lead it to its successful *dénouement*.

When masses are on the move and the market collapses and there is a curfew, who’s going to keep order? Who is going to deliver food to families when the corpses start coming in and funerals are used for purposes of political drama? Who’s going to organize those funerals, keep order, and keep building and building? You need organizations. Masses of people make rebellion. Argentina had three of them. Kirschner was able to come out and stabilize them. This is a second example of what I’m getting at.

The third example that I would give is that of Afghanistan, in the late 1970s where a miniscule organization made what can be called a “revolution” because, once again, power shifted from one class to another and the character of the state changed. Now, the notable feature of what occurred in Afghanistan was that it was a revolution made *without* the masses, in the form of a *coup d’état*. Afghanistan paid for it. The revolutionary forces in Afghanistan paid for it. The Soviet intervention ultimately failed because the masses weren’t there and the Americans were able to organize both the bourgeoisie and the masses through various mechanisms. So that is what I mean when I say that masses by themselves don’t make revolutions even though they make the possibilities for them.

This point has some important implications for the way we look at Latin American struggles today. Bolivia has not had a revolution. Bolivia has had an immense mass uprising that has brought a completely different political configuration into government. But the nature of state power remains what it was. The bourgeoisie is fully intact, and possesses as much power as it has always had. It’s therefore not a revolution in the sense outlined above. It was the masses who brought it about and you know how that happened.

Then there is Venezuela, where we see a failed *coup d’état* involving Chavez after which he becomes immensely popular and then later comes to power through elections. There is an attempted *coup d’état* against him, which is defeated, and the result is that his power is secured. To this day, the strongest feature of the Chavez regime is that the Army has remained loyal. Chavez mobilized the masses and the masses keep electing him in referenda and elections. But the power of the bourgeoisie remains. The bourgeoisie is on the defensive but its power remains intact. Chavez is moving through a very intricate strategy of giving them enough concessions to keep them incorporated in the system while at the same time trying to change the nature of institutions like PDVSA, the oil company, and so on; of keeping the masses on the move while creating certain organs of popular power. I would not call this a revolution but a process. Where this process will lead in the future, we do not yet know. But this is not Cuba, as some have maintained. One always has to look at each situation in terms of its conditions and its historic specificity.

If you are not clear about your theoretical position as to how revolutions are made, and if you don’t pay enough attention to the historical process, then you will simply end up making moralistic judgments. For example, “This is a populist who is bound to betray,” as is being said about Morales. By the way, populism has become a terribly bad word. There are left wing populisms and there are right wing populisms and there are movements like Peronism, which had both a leftwing and a rightwing. So our understanding of how populism works in different situations also has to be understood and judged historically, rather than morally.

One criticism of what you’re saying is that organizations that have mobilized the masses and built a counter power to the existing state will end up replicating patterns of

domination or oppression within those revolutions once they are successful.

First of all, I was careful to simply say that a shift in class power constitutes a revolution. It is important to remember that revolutions are made from the right as well as from the left. I don't believe there has been any degeneration in Iran; it was always something of a "clerical fascist" movement and it was always right wing. It was a revolution from the right. What happened historically was that, during the 1950s, both the communist left and the left of center liberal national bourgeois opposition were completely killed off by the Iranian security service (SAVAK) and the CIA so that the balance of forces shifted. The anti-monarchical revolution could no longer be made from the left. The clerics were able to come in and take advantage of this. Unfortunately, masses can be moved from the right as much as from the left.

Now, one must realize that there was a very strong sort of populist tradition in this revolution and it delivered on certain things, including to certain women. Iranian women coming from the lower middle class will tell you how much this revolution has done for them. Women coming from the westernized middle classes and upper middle classes detest the revolution in Iran but women coming from the lower classes tend to support it. It has sent them to universities and high paying jobs and the participation of women in society has escalated.

And then there is a struggle going on within the regime. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad represents a very puritanical sort, though he himself is not a cleric. It is the first government in Iran since the revolution that is not headed by clerics. Apart from all kinds of other things that one might say, he does represent the tendency within the revolution committed to a radical redistribution of wealth.

But it was a revolution from the right and it was never destined to become a left wing movement. It was about the making of a counter elite, about creating a state with a middle class character and a social basis in traditional capital in opposition to the monarcho-bourgeoisie. At the time, you had this bizarre situation where the balance of forces actually shifted with the proletarian uprising in the oil sector, but this opening was closed and its dénouement was the defeat of the left and the consolidation of the Islamicist character of the revolution.

Doesn't your position end up endorsing the idea that what is going on in the world today is a war between Islam and the West, that there is a clash of civilizations in which the Islamic world is mobilized behind organizations like Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Iranian state that are resisting the organized forces of Zionism and US imperialism? Isn't there a secular working class alternative that we could look to instead? Aren't you putting us in a position where we have to support Islamic movements that may have some historic validity but whose success has been based on the marginalization of the left?

Look, I believe that there is only one civilization in the world. It is global and it is capitalist. There is no other civilization. Since there is only one civilization, there can't be a "clash of civilizations." Secondly, even if you're talking about things like Islam and the West, civilizations don't clash for the simple reasons that civilizations don't have armies. Civilizations don't have states. Civilizations historically have interpenetrated each other through cultural and material exchanges. Civilizations don't clash, they never have. So that's a completely false hypothesis.

Nor do I believe that there is such a thing as "Islam versus the West." There are many Islams. There is Saudi Islam, for example, which is quite happy with the so called West. I think what you need to do is to specify which Islamic groups you are talking about. In Iraq Shia Islam is working with the Americans, Sunni Islam is fighting against them. Kurdish Sunni Islam is working with the Americans while Iraq Sunni Islam is against them. So if you start looking at things more carefully, there is no "Islam." You have to have a very different kind of analysis, leaving aside the history of "Islam" and

looking at how Islam is used to legitimate this and that.

As for the other part of your question, one must ground an analysis within the existing field of forces. The Iranian regime represents Iranian capital as it is now, and it wants to make alliances with Russian and Chinese capital as they are now. So one is talking about that field of force. In Iran, there is virtually no sizable organized movement of communists which can even vaguely be a partner to the struggle or an element in the struggle for power. So one is actually talking about the way the field of force is now constituted after a comprehensive defeat of the left across the Middle East.

Similarly, if one is talking about Hamas, the backdrop to our analysis must be this comprehensive defeat of the left. What little of it is left today, the Israelis keep picking on and killing. Every leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) has been killed. New ones come up, and they are killed. We have to look at the realities of Zionism and imperialism and look at those who may be struggling against them.

My sense is that the Iranian regime is halfway there, halfway towards coming to a comprehensive settlement with the Americans. The Americans certainly rule Iraq at the pleasure of the Iranians. So I have no illusions about the Iranian regime as an anti-imperialist force. These are not anti-imperialists. These are people who want to build a strong capitalist state in Iran and expand like any other capitalist state. The Shia clergy in Iraq and Iran are sneaky bastards: they are cooperating with the Americans.

Turning to the example of contemporary Iraq, I think the only organization with any real capacity is the Shia, who have been delivered to the Americans by the Iranians. The so-called Sunni opposition is not capable of making a revolution on the scale of Iraq. Sooner or later, we shall see whether the Shia join the insurgency, in which case American power will collapse, or whether they will remain a part of American power, in which case the insurgency will be defeated over the coming months and years. It is in the context of class power as a whole that I advance this formulation. Hopefully as this complication develops some other forces will emerge from the left. But there is a severe crisis on the left. The official Communist Party of Iraq has joined the American regime and, one by one, many communists have fled and joined the resistance. So, at this point, we are talking about very limited possibilities.

By and large, Iran is a unique case. The Islamicists prevailed in Afghanistan because of American power and Saudi power. Pakistani military forces were leading them. It was an organized counterrevolution, organized by all of these powers through mercenary Islamicists from different countries. Afghanis themselves did not make a revolution and it's very unlikely that the Islamic opposition itself, as we see it now, will make another revolution.

How do you make sense of the resistance movement led by Hamas in Palestine or Hezbollah in Lebanon? On the one hand, they are movements for national liberation fighting against occupation. On the other hand, they are often bound to reactionary Islamic politics.

It is a very complex history. In both cases they have very right wing origins, and deliberately so. The Shia in south Lebanon were the historic base for the Communist Party of Lebanon and, at a certain point in the 1970s, an organization was created with the full support and instigation of Yasir Arafat and others to capture that base for a religious organization. The essential trajectory was very right wing. In Palestine, there is good reason to believe that the Israeli state was instrumental in patronizing Hamas in its early evolution, again, against the Palestinian left.

The Palestinian left, the PFLP in particular and the left wing of Fatah, were once very powerful in

the occupied territories. It was to displace them and to fight against them that movements like Hamas were created, both by the Palestinian elite and, we have reason to believe, with support from the Israelis. After the defeat of the left in Lebanon during the Civil War, thanks to the Syrian interventions sponsored by Israel and the United States, the left was wiped off the map as an organized force. Although substantial pockets remain, the organized left was largely defeated.

An important turning point was the 1982 Israeli invasion and occupation of southern Lebanon, which they thought was going to be permanent, just as they believe that their occupation of the Golan Heights in Syria is permanent. They wanted to annex south Lebanon. At that point, Hezbollah and a number of patriotic left wing forces formed a united front against Israel. This was the only time in Israeli history that Israel had been forced through armed struggle to vacate a territory. Hezbollah was transformed in the process.

After its victory, Hezbollah entered Parliament and is now a very strong parliamentary force. Within the new configuration of forces, and compared to other elements of Lebanese politics, Hezbollah is actually the left within that country. Hezbollah's commitment to become a political party in a multi-confessional state and to occupy just the space in Parliament that its constituency gives it makes it politically a very different kind of organization than any of the Islamicist organizations you have elsewhere. In that sense, Hezbollah is a very different kind of force. Hezbollah and many of the left wing organizations have actually worked together. The armed struggle was fought together by the left and Hezbollah against the Israelis.

Hamas has a different history. One of its origins is in the Muslim brotherhood. The Egyptian Muslim brotherhood was very powerful in Gaza even before the Israeli occupation. Its opposition to communism and secularism drove it very close to the Israelis at one point. So Hamas has been deeply opposed to the Fatah, to Arafat's movement. With the defeat of the left, which culminated with the defeat of the first Intifada, only two significant players were left. Arafat used the first Intifada to get the Oslo Accords and the Oslo Accords sold out the left wing platform of the Palestinian liberation movement. The forces of the left were defeated and became isolated during that process. That left only the so called Palestinian Authority and Hamas in the field because Hamas was never a part of the PLO. It was opposed to the PLO.

Hamas solidified its basis in the petty bourgeoisie and working class by going into the service of the people, providing what the Palestinian Authority would not and could not provide, owing in part to its own corruption. The social character of Hamas is very different from that of the PLO. Hamas was able not only to mount criticism of the occupation and the PA, but to make daily life under the occupation possible. The legitimacy of Hamas, and the legitimacy of Islamic ideology, actually comes out of this.

I think it's very simple. You don't have to approve of Hamas in order to see it as a force that is, at the moment, on the cutting edge of the resistance to Israel.

Let's get back to the question of organization. What is the difference between the Shia theocracy that you have described and a communist movement that you would support? Is the form of these movements identical in both of those cases even though they are marked by very different political content?

I don't know what one means by form, because form can't be distinguished from the social relations within which it is embedded. It can't be a disembodied form. The particular brand of Iranian Shiaism had a ready-made hierarchy of a religious nature. For example, every mosque and every imam has employees who draw their salaries from the establishment. It is a hierarchy of belief and faith and all of that. Communists have no such advantage. Communists actually have to build their bases and it is

in the process of building them that they gain allegiances and legitimacy among the masses.

It is a matter of practical work, not only one of setting up organizations. Organizations don't function unless they deliver something to people. Trade unions are just one form of this dynamic. It was always the "social work" of the communists that gave them grounding amongst the masses. Communists have always done what the social movements say that they do: sanitation and sewers, women's organizations, solving the problems of the people at the base. That was not something discovered by the so called "new" social movements. That is what communists always did. That is what Gandhi did. Any movement that takes strong root among the masses rises on this basis.

When Pakistan came into being and this migrant proletariat came from the north, there were no trade unions in Karachi. One great fear the workers had was that they would die and be buried away from home. The first communist organization that arose in Karachi was a "coffins and burial committee." This was the first communist organization. So it is out of these kinds of activities that you build your legitimacy. In any country that is what you have to do. Now, you have to have forms that are rooted in the realities of your lives. So a Canadian is not much concerned about where he will die and be buried. The issues will be different, but we have to do similar work.

That is the kind of thing that most social movements are doing. I entirely support them because it's a very familiar kind of work. Where I part company with most of them is in their very narrow ideology of micro-politics, where one assumes that you will progress from these activities to yearly congresses and social forums where some coordination might happen and somehow society will change. That exclusive emphasis on micro-politics is populism of the highest order, and I don't find it very convincing.

One argument many people are making is that left organizations of the old kind are no longer either necessary or desirable, that there are horizontal networks being developed, and that the anti-globalization movement is an example of a "movement of movements" that offers an alternative to the old way of doing politics. What do you think about the Zapatistas or John Holloway's arguments?

Yes, that question. I believe that the question of state power is absolutely central. At the heart of state power are mechanisms of violence – not only national violence, but imperialist violence. Revolutions from below that do not address the question of state power will never succeed. The Zapatistas will never make a revolution. The Zapatistas may change conditions for the Mexican indigenous peoples in some parts of Mexico – which is very much worth doing and I am entirely in support of them – but they will not make a revolution unless they transform themselves.

In my view, the Zapatistas are making a mistake by staying out of the electoral field and not throwing their support behind Obrador. In any country where the electoral field is open you cannot simply vacate it. You may do many other things, but you must engage with it. That was the superiority of the social movements in Bolivia: they coalesced behind Morales in order to at least change the government and give it a chance. The government can provide movements with a great advantage in terms of what they can do. It's not a revolutionary situation but it provides a certain technical advantage.

Revolutions from below have a ceiling beyond which they will not pass. That is the problem. I really don't follow contemporary anarchist thinking with its particular neglect of the state and of the question of the resolution of the state as a contradictory field of force. I think this is a great weakness theoretically, and I think Bakunin was actually much more subtle. There is an unavoidable question of building a counter-state.

CLR James and some theorists of the Italian autonomist Marxist tradition have argued that different stages of capitalism (competitive, monopoly, fordist, postmodern/social factory) produced particular forms of proletarian self-organization (from the craft union to the vanguard party to the multitude). Does the particular nature of US empire and late capitalism point to new frameworks for revolutionary organizing in the 21st century?

I think we are talking about several different things here. When you are talking about a vanguard party, when CLR James was talking about a vanguard party, you have in mind the Leninist form of the professional revolutionary organization on the *What Is to Be Done* model. Interrogation of this model begins with people like Gramsci. What do you do in a situation where you don't have a Czarist state but a stable bourgeois republic? When the form of political rule is so radically different, what happens to that kind of vanguard party?

In the 1950s, communist thinkers in India argued that there was no going around the parliamentary form. Because bourgeois consciousness is constantly being created on a mass scale through the parliamentary form and the state comes back to it for its legitimation, you can and must represent yourself in this arena. I think this is the first crisis of the vanguard party formation. In countries like Nepal you don't have a republic of the bourgeoisie. In this case, the Communists have been coming from the countryside, and yet the Nepalese Communists are now having to deal with precisely this question. In most cases, the kind of vanguardism proposed in *What Is to Be Done* is no longer viable. I don't think it has very much to do with stages of capitalism. I think it has more to do with the political form of rule under capitalism.

How is parliamentary communism in India different from social democracy in Europe?

That is a very good question. Fundamentally, social democracy was committed to the idea that the transformation of capitalism could come about through a series of step by step reforms achieved by building a welfare state. Building and deepening the welfare state was seen as the project of social democracy. And that project reached its limits with the crisis of Keynesianism. Indian Marxism is under no illusion that it will ever be able to even build a proper welfare state. That's one difference.

In this respect, once it broke with Marxism during the early 1950s (at the latest), I do not see social democracy as ever having been an anti-capitalist force. Indian parliamentary communism actually thinks of itself as an anti-capitalist force. Again, the question of reform cannot be looked at abstractly. You work for reforms if you win elections in a certain state, as they keep doing in West Bengal. But the illusion is never put forward that this is how we will build socialism. That illusion is not there.

What they are saying is that, since you have elected us, we will do for you the best we can. So what they do in practice in that situation is not very different from social democratic reform in a largely peasant society. The difference is that it is not seen as the fundamental building block. They are clear about the fact that you can't build socialism in a province of a state, and that you have to build mass revolutionary organizations. It is revolutionary in the sense that parliamentary work is seen as only one kind of work, and you're constantly organizing for completely extra-parliamentary confrontations with the state.

It is a matter of building the mass movements out of which will come, on the one hand, beneficial effects on parliamentary politics and the kind of elections the masses go through, but on the other hand it is actually about building organs of popular political power at the base. More broadly, it is a question of building what Sam Gindin and Leo Panitch have called, very vaguely, "capabilities." For example, you have a women's movement that addresses all kinds of things, from electricity to power to housing and it is not simply subordinated to the electoral machine. So there is a very different

conception in India from that in Europe.

Returning to your question about periodization and forms of organization: the fact of the matter is that, in their organizing efforts within the working class in the United States, Communists' words have fallen on deaf ears, with the exception of the 1930s when they did become a fairly prominent political force. The reasons for that are diverse, but it is not a matter of periodization, of Fordism and so on.

Something that does need to be said, however, is that there has been a shift in the very composition of classes that requires a shift in our understanding of organization. Classical Marxism was based on the notion that the majority of the population would become proletarianized and at the heart of that process would be the great industrial working class. If you use the term "proletarian" or "working class" to connote the very precise relationship between wage labour and capital, then yes the great majority, certainly in the advanced capitalist countries, has become working class in that sense. But the weight of the industrial working class is, if anything, on the decline with automation, etc. So the great bulk of the working class in the advanced capitalist countries is not the industrial proletariat. In fact, at no point did the industrial working class come to constitute much more than 30% of the population. It was never a majority.

What does constitute a majority is the category of wage work, and varieties of wage work have proliferated - in the service sector in general, but even within the service sector the varieties of wage work have proliferated. This has consequences for forms of organization. There are negative consequences for traditional forms of working class organization but it is also true that, as I keep saying, the number and variety of potentially revolutionary agents has multiplied. Indigenous people are now demanding their rights in the Americas, and are entering the political field in a way that they never did in the past. That is a question that must be correctly addressed by the left on a very large scale. Otherwise, we are doomed to repeat the past. For example, part of the failure of the Communist Party in the USA was based on not correctly addressing the race question in the days of CLR James.

Throughout the world, women have entered into the political field within the last 30 years in a way that they never did before. Consequently, our understanding of women as autonomous agents itself has had to change. Women have always done the majority of the productive and not just the reproductive work. The hardest work in peasant societies is done by women, which was something we never took into account when we thought of the peasantry. We thought of the male peasant who goes out to work in the fields. Our understanding of the proletariat has changed and needs to change.

Issues of that kind are tangentially connected with periods of capitalism. However, if we look at the question of periodization in the context of the two great economies in terms of demographic weight, India and China are in the midst of a period of massive proletarianization on a scale unknown in the history of humankind. Precisely at the moment when there is a kind of "post-modernization" of work in the United States, there is an immense proletarianization going on. So, if there are periods, they are clearly not synchronic. In India, something like 78 percent of the population is still in the villages. They no longer do subsistence farming and the great bulk of them are joining the rural proletariat and the *lumpenproletariat*. Mike Davis' brilliant book *Planet of Slums* documents what is happening with global urbanization. Today, entire patterns of social life cannot be understood in the same way that we once thought of cities, for example.

What are the possibilities for rebuilding the left globally? Are you optimistic about the coming decades?

First, one has to start with the fact that the globe is still politically a conglomeration of nation states. The nation state is a very real form and you can't simply bypass it. Therefore, the kind of left that develops in any part of the globe will have quite strong national characteristics, by which I mean characteristics that are objectively rooted in the reality of the particular nation state within which it operates. This remains true despite the fact that, modern means of communication and, especially for the Western left, the ability to travel being what they are, there can be far greater global coordination amongst movements than was ever possible before.

Secondly, as I have been arguing for some time, we are in a period of great experimentation. By "we" I mean the left broadly speaking. This left itself has a great many tendencies, very few of which are socialist or revolutionary, strictly speaking. In the context of what I would call a global united front, what they called the anti-globalization movement was a great advance. In any national situation the nucleus of such movements will be very different. In Brazil, it was strongest when the left wing of the Workers' Party was at the heart of it. It's not for nothing that the World Social Forum happened in Brazil. It couldn't happen in a great many places around the globe. The Workers Party was very central to that. When that same World Social Forum happened in Mumbai it had a completely different character because at the heart of it was the communist left. For the first time on the platform of the WSF you had some twenty events directly organized by communist parties, which was never allowed in Porto Alegre.

So the center of gravity also changes and to that extent I think that we, and here I am talking about the socialist or Marxist left, need to have a very clear understanding of how important it is to build these united fronts. How important it is to bring together all kinds of tendencies in the world which are oppositional in character! It is out of all of these organizational forms that our movements will advance.

P.S.

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