

## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **A Contribution to the Critique of Contemporary Capitalism: Theoretical and International Perspectives**

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Any survey of academic discussion about how – and if – to oppose the onward global march of capital reveals a depressing picture. Opportunistic shapeshifting predominates, as political views are more often than not tailored to meet prevailing intellectual fashion, whatever this might be. Such as it is, current debate concludes with the oft-heard refrain ‘neoliberalism is nasty’, a truism from which these days hardly anyone dissents (there are films promoting this view, e.g., *Inside Job* and *Two Days, One Night*). Even conservatives accept this, whilst insisting that nothing can be done to buck the dominance of ‘the market’. Where people disagree is what to do about this, and here what passes for leftism has not a lot to say (there are exceptions, but very few). Many erstwhile Marxists in academia have abandoned the idea of a socialist transition, and as a result are unable to contribute much beyond repeating that capitalism is not at all nice (which we all know).

It is refreshing, therefore, to encounter a book which departs from this depressing pattern. Its author, Raju Das, has undertaken fieldwork in rural Orissa, and not only knows his Marxism but has also made important theoretical contributions to the analysis of the capitalist State (Das, 1996; Das, 2005; Das, 2007). In what is a wide-ranging analysis, the book covers many subjects, extending from Marxist theory, Maoism, and the State, via agrarian transition, the global capitalist labour regime, and the political economy of India, to anti-capitalist political protest and the nature and object of critique itself. Asking ‘what is *the point* of being critical?’, ‘what really *is* Marxism?’, and ‘*why* does the Indian State do what it does?’, Das (pp. 18, 25, 71) poses deceptively simple but crucial questions. Considered here will be his answers to just three of them: the purpose of criticism, the Marxism/post-Marxism debate, and the path followed by the global capitalist labour regime.

Das (2013) belongs to that all-too-small band of Marxists who regard as problematic the burgeoning contradiction between on the one hand the ubiquity of academic critique, which ‘attracts much grant-money’ and on the other the absence of ‘rigorous theory’ (pp. 4-24, 134ff.). This mismatch he attributes to the fact that the object of critique is not material conditions but language, which is accorded the status of ‘separate reality’ and thus reified. Rightly, he (p. 14) observes that ‘much intellectual work simply runs away from...class divisions and class struggles in society and from [their] implications’. Among those he regards as guilty of this idealization are many leftist academics, and indeed it could be said that these days they appear too busy collecting awards or having prizes named after themselves to bother advocating something as trivial as revolutionary socialism.

Whereas such academics imagine they are speaking truth to power, more usually they are doing the opposite: speaking power to truth. All too often, therefore, one hears of the receipt of yet another sizeable research grant the stated object of which is ‘to understand why global poverty still exists’, as if we didn’t already know, and have done for some time now. This is accompanied by yet more postmodern celebration of ethnically ‘other’ culture as empowering, despite ‘traditional’ or ‘authentic’ identity frequently masking rural poverty. It could be argued that what currently passes for development studies programmes carried

out in universities is akin to the collection of rent on the misery of impoverished others inhabiting the so-called Third World. A case in point is the approach of 'post-Marxist' theory, itself the target of a withering broadside from Das (pp. 55ff.).

Subordinating ever larger portions of the globe to the market, capitalism has triggered not a class politics but a populist reaction. Since many in academia have endorsed the latter epistemology in preference to class analysis, they are consequently unable to criticize such mobilization. This is one of the reasons why there has been a widespread reaffirmation of peasant essentialism, a populist approach to rural grassroots structure and agency rightly criticized by Das (pp. 15, 46-7 n. 117, 67, 85 n. 159, 87 n., 97-8, 101, 106, 161). Because many of those who regard themselves as leftists have forgotten what Marxist theory actually teaches, they have as a result espoused 'new' populist postmodern theoretical positions: not just peasant essentialism, but also the innateness of nationalism, the desirability of grassroots ethnic empowerment, and rural tradition as mobilizing discourse. Epistemologically, these views are no different from the identity politics advocated by conservatives.

Distinguishing between such external critiques of Marxist theory, which are non- or anti-Marxist, and internal critiques which remain Marxist, Das (pp. 25ff., 50 n.127, 57) reminds us that Marxism is about class formation/difference/struggle. Its object is to capture the State, enabling workers and poor peasants to put into practice an agenda that reflects *their* political and economic interests. The significance of this distinction emerges clearly from his analysis of current developments in the global labour regime. Das (pp. 79ff., 89ff.) defends but interrogates the Marxist concept deproletarianization (Brass, 1999; 2011), which reverses and challenges the earlier orthodoxy that, because unfree labour is an obstacle to accumulation, capitalism automatically replaces it with a workforce that is free. Much rather, introducing/reproducing unfree production relations is nowadays part of the way class struggle is waged 'from above'. Along with downsizing/outsourcing, deproletarianization is a method whereby employers restructure their labour process, cutting costs so as to maintain/enhance profitability. An expanding industrial reserve army makes this kind of restructuring not just possible but also necessary.

Nevertheless, asks Das, why resort to deproletarianization when capitalists have so much labour-power from which to choose? The response to this important question is that where accumulation is both international and operates in a *laissez faire* global market, if one business has access to the industrial reserve army then so does the competition. In such an environment, the additional capacity to use unfree labour-power gives any commercial employer a competitive edge. Unfreedom can be deployed in the class struggle as a capitalist weapon for different reasons: in some contexts it is introduced because workers' organization is strong (as a way of undermining this), while in others because such organization is weak or absent. That is to say, either on account of labour having too much bargaining power, or due to the fact it has too little. A workforce is accordingly never composed entirely of labour-power that is unfree, any more than it is of that which is free; the preponderance of one or other is determined by and in turn determines the existing balance of forces in the class struggle.

However, and understandably, Das is concerned that the focus of the development debate may now have shifted too far in the direction of the capitalism/unfreedom link. This can be explained (but not necessarily justified) in three ways. First, where unfreedom has

been reintroduced into a labour process that is capitalist, political economy teaches that such a development corresponds historically to a regression. This is because so much – politically, ideologically and economically – hangs on whether or not worker emancipation has been achieved. Second, it must be remembered that, as announcements of a positive correlation between accumulation and unfree workforce continue to proliferate, accompanied more often than not by unwarranted claims to have ‘discovered’ it (on which see Brass, 2007, 2014), this was not always so. Although at present the global incidence of unfreedom may indeed be trending in terms of investigation/explanation, as Das notes, this did not apply some three decades ago when the case about deproletarianization emerged. And third, the current emphasis on this aspect of economic development can also be attributed in part to the way academic fashion operates, a point he addresses when considering the role/object of criticism.

To conclude: the central theme of this important book, namely that by being a ‘dialectical, historical and materialist way of knowing, Marxism is a form of explanatory critique of society with *a practical intent*’ (p. 28, emphasis added), neatly sums up the tasks socialists face. By doing so, Das has contributed substantially to the defence of Marxist theory, a significant achievement in the present hostile intellectual climate.

## References

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