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Global Marxism – learning from 20th century revolutionaries of the Global South

Can we learn from revolutionaries of the past? Iconic figures such as Che Guevara may still appear on t-shirts, posters, and in movies, but pop culture does not encourage us to deeply understand their historical role and pathways. The book “Global Marxism” by Simin Fadaee (2024) provides exactly that. Her primary objective is ‘to make available to a large community of readers, the lives, ideas and legacies of a selection of revolutionary figures from the global South who have played an exceptional role in contributing to counter-hegemonic change’ (p. 13f.) I aim to convey why the core argument of Fadaee’s book is a timely contribution despite, or precisely because of, telling the stories of historical figures acutely at risk of being forgotten. After giving a taste of the book’s content, I will sketch what we can learn from it about today’s state of the world.

The book is not focused on the 21st century but looks back at the reception of Marxist theory and revolutionary practice during anti-colonial struggles of the 20th century to provide a perspective for today’s relevance of Marxism worldwide. Some of the nine revolutionaries are more, others less known on the international stage, but all of them embodied the relationship between Marxism and decolonial struggle, the examples comprising: Jawaharlal Nehru in India; Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam; Mao Zedong in China; Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana; Amilcar Cabral in Guinea-Bissau; Frantz Fanon in Algeria; Ernesto Che Guevara in Cuba; Ali Shariati in Iran; and Subcomandante Marcos in Mexico. Marcos is the only one who is still alive and active in the indigenous Zapatista movement that controls the state of Chiapas against the central government in Mexico. Most other revolutionaries in the book were active in the 1950 and 1960s at the height of independence movements against colonial empires.

Postcolonial, not Marxist, eurocentrism

However, the book does more than just telling the story of their pathways and heritage. Fadaee shows how inspiring and influential Marx, but also Lenin’s work on imperialism, and the appearance of the Soviet Union as a world power were to the people at the forefront of democratic and socialist movements of the Global South. Her book is in defence of Marxism against the critique from postcolonial studies that has accused Marx of eurocentrism. The main message of the book is indeed that accusing Marx of eurocentrism is itself eurocentric. Marxism, despite its origins in the 19th century, still provides the theoretical set of tools to understand the current state of the world. In the same way capitalism is globalised, its counterpart is relevant to people across the globe. Not even the undeniable divide between the Global North and South, including pathways of extractivism that go mostly one way, can undo that.

Postcolonial studies acknowledge that imperialism did not end with formal independence. And while the British, French, and other empires are formally gone, the extraction of resources from the Global South and the exploitation of its workers and ecosystems continues. Thanks to powerful “mergers and acquisitions” and executed by the forces of imperialism in Lenin’s (1917) understanding – as the concentration of capital in the hands of monopolistic syndicates – the exploitation of human and nonhuman life is as intense as ever. Without any doubt, this affects people and natural systems across the globe.

Nonetheless, in particular scholars of postcolonial studies, such as Said (1978), have accused Marxism of being eurocentric – applicable only to the working class of industrialised countries. People in the Global South, it is said, need to find their own voice and be granted to express it to tackle imperialism. However, it is a false assumption that people in the Global South find no value in Marxism to express their voices. The fact that the theory took shape by the hands of a white man

from Europe is a poor indicator of eurocentrism when the whole point of communism is, and always has been, to abolish the class antagonism globally. And the revolutionaries that Fadaee outlines in her book drew significantly on Marxist theory. Fadaee's take home message for academics is that 'Marxism is inseparable from anti-colonial thought and practice, and therefore the rejoining of Marxism and debates on decolonisation is imperative' (p. 20).

Revolution and reaction

While the book's structure dedicates one chapter each to the nine revolutionaries, I cannot summarise the specific chapters here and confine myself to some rather selective thoughts. Across the chapters, Fadaee conveys well how the revolutionaries incorporate Marxism into their regional or national contexts, where mostly the situation of acting within colonised countries required alterations. Due to the absence of industrialisation, for example, the revolutionary base was often the peasantry rather than the working class. Moreover, there were circumstantial differences due to various philosophical or religious traditions that influenced the populations and to which the revolutionaries felt urged to respond. Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh, for example, established Marxism against the background of the philosophy of Confucius, whereas Ali Shariati linked Marxism to the forgotten revolutionary spirit of Islam. His reading of the history of Islam was that the clerics had become an established class that, over the course of time, had distanced itself from Shiism's progressive essence – a succession of contradiction, revolutionary motion and change, a new establishment, and eventually oppressive conservatism by that establishment maintaining itself.

A similar example provides Jawaharlal Nehru who was instrumental to Indian independence and, as its first prime minister, became one of the most prominent spokespeople for socialist ideas in India. Taking office, his socialism was focused on state planning and largely confined to policy reforms towards democracy, secularism, and making the state an actor of equitable distribution of wealth. That the state, not the workers, was supposed to be that actor led, like elsewhere, to the current situation. The progressive beginnings – expressed in the hesitant spirit of reforms – have been led astray and back to capitalism, along with impudent religious fundamentalism and inequality. What people most commonly associate with "socialism" today are indeed reforms in the sense of social policy, and this seems to be what Nehru's politics came down to in practice. However, one quote from 1936 shows that this is not the meaning of socialism that the early Nehru had in mind:

'I am convinced that the only key to the solution of the world's problem and of India's problem lies in socialism and when I use this word I do so not in a vague, humanitarian way but in the scientific, economic sense. I see no way of ending poverty, the vast unemployment, the degradation and subjection of the Indian people except through socialism. That involves vast revolutionary changes in the social structure, the ending of vested interest in land and industry, as well as the feudal and autocratic Indian States system.' (p. 29 f.)

Socialism in the scientific, economic – in other words: Marxist – sense is indeed different from humanitarian reforms that alleviate, but ultimately *maintain*, the antagonism between workers and capital owners. Ending the vested interest of the latter class in land and industry would by principle require revolutionary changes that bring the means of production under public control. In that sense, Nehru's (early) definition of socialism seemed, at least in theory, aligned with Lenin's (1918) notion of socialism as the post-revolutionary stage in which the "dictatorship" of the proletariat brings the bourgeois state and, thereby, the class antagonism to wither away until a communist society is established that is entirely free of classes. Fadaee is right to emphasise that, against the appearance of the term, the "dictatorship" of the proletariat is a concept of an entirely 'democratic nature [...]

which is supposed to enable the rule of the majority (the workers)' (p. 225) until there is no proletariat and no bourgeoisie because everybody is a worker, and land and industry are owned publicly. The flaw, however, is to favour state-directed planning over workers-directed planning. As Fadaee points out, Nehru was influenced by Soviet "Marxism" which, under Stalin's rule, 'was using the resources of the state to build a self-sufficient economy' (p. 33). Enforced by state bureaucracy, which itself became a class, the Stalinist model had little to do with workers' control. Without a genuine international revolutionary outlook – *Global* Marxism – both Russia and India, each in their own way, regressed from socialism into their current forms of capitalism with authoritarian heads of state. Thus, when socialism abandons foundational pillars of Marxism it is condemned to regress. In a similar context, Fadaee draws on Gopal's critique of academic decolonisation debates as being degenerated to 'any form of critical engagement with race and representation, or indeed, the mildest of curricular reforms' (p. 19). When decolonisation becomes a shorthand for reforms, is Fadaee's point, it is not a useful tool for transformation anymore and far removed from the revolutionary ambitions that genuine, and indeed global, Marxism entails.

The author finds a well-balanced way of dealing with a contentious topic. Fadaee patiently unravels the paths and conditions under which these nine men helped to unfold revolutions. Neither does she heroize them nor does she fall into the trap of rejection. That she has sympathy for their cause of liberation would be to state the obvious, but she also defends them against critics who might point to outcomes of the revolutions that turned problematic. It is in the nature of struggles, she claims, that they unfold in challenging circumstances – which are inherited, not chosen, as Marx wrote – and thus the best way forward is not always apparent. This is an important point that avoids reducing the emergence and outcome of a revolutionary situation to an individual. While Fadaee rightfully acknowledges the importance of leadership for the success of revolutionary transformation, it would be a mistake to attribute its success or failure to an individual.

An additional point is the counter-revolutionary pushback any genuinely democratic revolutionary movement faces. Fadaee reminds us of 'the fact that in 1973, Salvador Allende, the world's first democratically elected Marxist head of state [in Chile], was violently overthrown by a coup supported by the United States and was replaced by a military dictatorship' (p. 225). In 1966, the government of Ghana's revolutionary socialist and first prime minister, Kwame Nkrumah, was overthrown by military and police forces backed by the CIA while he was on a state visit to North Vietnam and China. Nkrumah was unable to return to Ghana and died in exile. Similarly, after contributing to the successful revolution in Cuba and a failed attempt to support the Congolese independence struggle, Che Guevara led a guerilla fight in Bolivia where in 1967, he was captured and executed by the Bolivian army assisted by the CIA. In Iran, Shariati had been arrested for advocating Islamic Marxism and his books were banned. A month after he eventually left for England in 1977, he died from what was officially declared to be a heart attack, though the circumstances of his death were suspicious. His supporters saw the Shah's intelligence service behind his untimely passing. Amilcar Cabral, the leader of the liberation movements of Guinea and Cape Verde, was assassinated by Portuguese colonialist agents in 1973 and, sadly, did not live to see the formal independence of both countries shortly after that. Reactionary forces, and above all US imperialism, have heavily influenced and exacerbated the circumstances under which Marxists, whether revolutionary or democratically elected, have tried to overcome both colonialism and exploitation on the basis of social classes. The downfall of Marxism towards the end of the 20th century must be seen against that backlash.

Strengths and weaknesses

Has the book any weaknesses? One of them is addressed in the book by the author herself. The absence of women as protagonists, Fadaee clarifies, 'does not mean that women played no role in the production, circulation and practice of the ideas discussed here' (p. 17). While she highlights the role of revolutionary women wherever they emerge, it was simply the course of history that they did not become as visible in the transformation of their societies, not least because many of them 'had to disguise their identities to be heard or remain safe within the dominant patriarchal revolutionary culture' (ibid.). In a book launch that I attended at the University of Manchester, Fadaee added that examining and telling the story of female revolutionaries is itself an entire and worthwhile research project for the future.

A small point of critique is that the book deploys the terms socialism and communism without providing definitions or at least elaborations of different meanings – for example, the abovementioned and common confusion of socialism either as mere humanitarian reforms or a post-revolutionary stage on the way to a communist society. The term communism is mostly used in the book when it is embedded in historical terms such as the Chinese Communist Party, The Communist Manifesto, and the Communist International. By contrast, the term socialism occurs more frequently on its own right. Today, in a world where British prime minister Keir Starmer has called himself a "socialist", that term has little to do with Marxism and all to do with the reformism that Fadaee, rightfully, criticises. A bit more conceptual signposting would have prevented some of the confusion that one must suspect about the meanings of these terms.

The nine main chapters, one for each revolutionary, only provide brief introductions to each case. I would not frame this as a weakness, though. The aim to describe the adoption of Marxist theory and practice *globally*, with a focus on the Global South, entails the need to provide examples from various continents. The broad outlook provides an insightful cross-country spectrum of commonalities and differences. As such, it is a book with an ambitious purpose, one which Fadaee accomplishes brilliantly overall.

Lessons for the 21st century

Fadaee observes a 'growing call to reconnect with Marxism as a framework for analysing global capitalism's multiple crises and the prospects for revolutionary change' (p. 23). Unfortunately, she does not elaborate on where she derives that impression from. Yet, her point is not just credible but *vital* with a look at the social and ecological conditions worldwide (see also Nimmo 2024).

How good at haunting is the spectre of communism in 21st century? The 20th century began with revolutionary victories: next to formal independence of the colonies most notably the October Revolution. It proceeded in the decay brought by the degenerative forces of fascism, Stalinism, and capitalism. Stalinism is what the mainstream today associates with communism, but its focus on socialism in one country contradicted and often hindered a truly global application of Marxism. While the century ended with a falling curtain and an apparent defeat by neoliberal, globalised capitalism, the spectre has never actually disappeared, and it is starting to howl louder again.

To be fair, the spectre is far from full blast today. In form of the dramatic transgression of planetary boundaries (Richardson et al. 2023), the intensification of violent conflicts and right-wing populism, today's existential threats appear rather indicative of capitalism haunting itself. However, the more capitalism ensnarls itself in its own contradictions, the stronger the thirst of the masses worldwide for alternatives – be it from the left or right. While the parliamentary "left" and "centre" promise reforms that they fail to implement, the right-wing demagogues, despite their often-successful

slogans against the social-democratic establishment, have no actual programme to improve the lives of the workforce either. By definition, the Global South has been exploited and left behind for hundreds of years, but whoever rules, political parties now cannot even conjure confidence in their ability to at least *uphold* current living standards in the Global North. With extreme weather events, rising food prices, and crumbling healthcare and education systems from decades of austerity, living standards are not just stagnating, but for many in decline. In this heated physical and political atmosphere, it is imminent that younger generations will venture out to the roots of the problems again, and slogans such as “system change, not climate change” are already a tentative indication of that mood.

Academia, all the while, has been “busy” re-defining sustainability and eagerly asking to “change business models”. Here, too, it seems only a question of time until the sobering effect of failing climate and biodiversity policies and the resulting bleak materiality will incline more minds towards the scientific method and political ideology that was the first to name and analyse the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production: (global) Marxism.

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