

**7th WORLD SOCIALIST FORUM:
MARXISM IN THE 21st CENTURY**
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REFLECTIONS ON GLOBAL REALITIES AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE CURRENT AGE

INTRODUCTION

This paper is informed by the central theme of the Forum, *Marxism in the 21st Century*, primarily to interrogate the meaning of transformative theory and praxis against the backdrop of the trajectory of the capitalist market economy and the fundamental questions of political economy in the current epoch. This broad setting forms the basis for brief reflections on the South African revolution and how it relates to the broader cause of social justice.

In addressing these issues, a cursory summation of more than a century of revolutionary thought is attempted, the better to posit this against current realities. The paper avoids mechanical superimposition of international experiences on South Africa's unique circumstances. However, it is recognised that the general laws of social development apply equally to South Africa. At the same time, the form and content of South Africa's struggles over the years has bequeathed unique insights that, in turn, are of value to the global search for social justice.

TRAJECTORIES OF HUMAN SOCIAL RELATIONS

At the centre of Marxism is the effort to attain a unique equilibrium in which social antagonisms are eliminated. This proceeds from the understanding that the best in human civilisation is the ability of the individual freely to exercise personal faculties and at the same time maximally contribute to the commons. This represents the finest in human civilisation, affirming the fundamental attribute of human beings, first and foremost, as social beings.

In *A critique of the German Ideology*, Marx emphasises the joy of variegated labour without the chains of specialisation as one of the critical expressions of civilisation, a society in which "*...nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he (sic) wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic*".
(Marx: 1845)

Combined with appropriation of the means of production by a few, capitalism developed to evince high levels of division of labour combined with exploitation and alienation of the majority. That evolution entailed various forms of oppression, represented in essence by the appropriation of surplus value, and the wretchedness that the system imposed on a national and global scale. However, this system did not constitute a movement backwards in terms of advances in human

civilisation. With the development of productive forces, organisation of production processes, the expansion of global trade and the efforts to create the world after the image of the bourgeoisie, this class became an unconscious tool of history (Marx: 1848 & 1853).

In what sense is the concept of human civilisation used in this treatise; and of what relevance is it to Marxism in the 21st century? The first indicator of human civilisation has to be the capacity of human beings to use, transform and preserve nature to human advantage. Without the maximum development of technology, human freedom is well-nigh impossible. The second indicator of human civilisation should manifest in the management of human relations, both economic and political. Production relations should be fashioned in a manner that ensures social justice.

This definition of human civilisation encompasses the base and the superstructure. While the former speaks for itself in Marxist literature, debate on the latter persists. Is it correct to identify – beyond economic, social and environmental rights – political freedoms as a necessary component of human civilisation? What form should such freedoms take; and of what value are such notions as separation of powers between the legislature, the executive and the judiciary? What about institutions independent of both the party and the executive, such as an Ombuds (Public Protector) with a specific mandate to safeguard human rights and good governance? Three observations from Marxist thought bear relevance in this regard.

Firstly, communism entails the disappearance of the state as such, and according to Friedrich Engels, the state ... *is a product of society at a certain stage of development; it is the admission that this society has become entangled in an insoluble contradiction with itself, that it has split into irreconcilable antagonisms which it is powerless to dispel. But in order that these antagonisms, these classes with conflicting economic interests, might not consume themselves and society in fruitless struggle, it became necessary to have a power, seemingly standing above society, that would alleviate the conflict and keep it within the bounds of 'order'; and this power, arisen out of society but placing itself above it, and alienating itself more and more from it, is the state*"(Engels: 1884)

Secondly, in their description of the Paris Commune, Marx and Engels celebrate the exercise of popular democracy by the Communards. The manifestations of such included elections and recall, material status of the political leadership in relation to the working people and popular armed organisation. (Marx: 1871). But, as they reiterate in their study of the defeat of the Commune, *"the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes."* (Marx: 1871)

This brings us to the third observation, about class dictatorship. At the centre of this is the issue of managing a transition against the backdrop of resistance, requiring efforts to suppress such resistance. However, the generic meaning of class dictatorship derives not so much from what the proletariat should do with state power when faced with domestic and global resistance; but from the very definition of management of political relations in a class-divided society. In all such societies, the dominant class takes charge of the state, and its ideas become the ruling ideas. In this context, ideational capacity becomes fundamental in understanding class rule – beyond legality, legitimacy should be based on popular consent. The ultimate aim, in Marxist terms, is the attainment of a global community where class division is obliterated, and, along with this, class rule and the state are dispensed with.

MAIN ATTRIBUTES OF CONTEMPORARY CAPITALISM

Over the years, the capitalist system has evolved through various phases, described in the classics of Marxists in developed and developing countries. Many concepts have been used to describe these phases, including imperialism and neo-colonialism. All these, though, merely extended the fundamental theorisation of the capitalist system as elucidated by Marx, Engels and their peers.

Pertinent in the evolution of human society in the past century, was the rise of the working class and oppressed peoples to attain societies that pursue, as their *raison d'être*, elements of social justice. Much debate attaches to why the ostensibly most advanced of these attempts, in eastern Europe, bit the dust during the last decade of the 20th century. These debates include reflections on the relationship between socialism and democracy, the sequence in the management of reform under socialism (between politics and economics), and the impact of global resistance against socialism, including the debilitating arms race.

Important as these issues are, however, this discourse has tended to limit itself to a circumstantial level of abstraction, and thus misses the fundamental questions that informed Marxist thought in its philosophical origins. To reiterate, the kernel of a scientific approach to human civilisation is the appreciation of the capacity of a social system continually and optimally to modernise the forces of production, without the production relations becoming a systemic fetter.

What are some of the core attributes of the capitalist system at a global level, and what conclusions can be drawn from their manifestations over the past thirty years?

Primary unipolarity and secondary multipolarity: The global economic system is essentially capitalist, with the major non-capitalist economies such as China and Vietnam at least mired in multifaceted relations of mutual dependence with global capitalism. Combined with the current unassailable predominance of US military power (larger than that of the next 10 powers combined), this characterises the current state of global unipolarity. The emergence of China as the world's second largest economy, and regional alliances such as the Eurasian initiative, the EU and BRICS do underline a form of multipolarity. But the latter is a secondary feature, subsumed under the broader reality of unipolarity.

Technological development: The system of capitalism has evinced striking capacity for continuing development of productive forces. Over the past thirty years this has included the rapid advances in ICT, leading to the 'internet of things', artificial intelligence and the so-called 4th industrial revolution. Combined with progress in nano-technology and genetics, these developments impact not only on the organisation of production processes; but also on people's quality of life. This is not to subtract from some advances attained under conditions of socialism; but compared to the global trends, these mostly pale into insignificance. Further, account also has to be taken of such rapacious licence as degradation of the environment that has accompanied the evolution of global capitalism.

Global economic coupling, decoupling and recoupling: The advances in technology and the search for cheap labour and new markets has resulted in the dispersal of production sites across the globe. This has seen to the emergence of a world economy "*whose core components have the institutional, organizational, and technological capacity to work as a unit in real time, or in chosen time, on a planetary scale*" (Castells: 2010). In part, this has informed the rise of Asian economies in complex

interdependencies with mainly the developed countries, ranging from cheap labour and consumer goods, trade surpluses and deficits, large state bond holdings and consumer credit binges. In addition, for its rapid growth and development, China and other Asian economies have relied on raw materials from other developing countries and on these markets for manufactures, creating another layer of coupling. Minor trends towards decoupling and recoupling across the globe have been observed; but these have yet to congeal on a decisive scale.

Dominance of finance capital: Marx's treatise, *Das Kapital*, traces the evolution of the market from barter, to money as a means of exchange (C-M-C) to (M-M) i.e. money as finance capital begetting money. (Marx: 1867 and other volumes). VI Lenin (1916) and others since have written extensively about the growing dominance of finance capital, a form of financialisation that has, in the recent period, resulted in the trading in financial products actually exceeding value of exports of goods and services. Gilpin (2001) asserts: *Since the mid-1970s, financial deregulation and the creation of new financial instruments, such as derivatives, and technological advances in communications have contributed to a much more highly integrated international financial system. The volume of foreign exchange trading (buying and selling national currencies) in the late 1990s reached approximately \$1.5 trillion per day, an eightyfold increase since 1986; by contrast, the global volume of exports (goods and services) for all of 1997 was \$6.6 trillion, or \$2.5 billion per day.*

Trends in the global political economy: A variety of trends have manifested themselves in terms of the basic question of political economy, the functional distribution of national (and global) income. On the one hand, there has been convergence among some regions of the world, in particular East Asian countries (developmental states) in relation to the most developed economies. Even Africa, which had largely been left behind, has recently experienced high rates of economic growth, some technological leapfrogging and some improvements in social conditions. In addition to this, off-shoring of basic manufacturing as countries climb up the manufacturing sophistication ladder (from Japan, to South Korea, to China and now Vietnam, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Kenya) does pose a question whether, at a macro-level, there is a global relay-race under way; and how this will evolve with the 'fourth industrial revolution'.

On the other hand, there has been growing inequality in virtually all societies (with the temporal exception of some countries of Latin America). The essence of this is captured in the Global Wage Report (ILO:2013): *"During much of the past century, a stable labour income share was accepted as a natural corollary or 'stylized fact' of economic growth. As industrialised countries became more prosperous, the total incomes both of workers and of capital owners grew at almost exactly the same rate, and the division of national income between labour and capital therefore remained constant over a long period of time, with only minor fluctuations... An outpouring of literature has provided consistent new empirical evidence indicating that recent decades have seen a downward trend for the labour share in a majority of countries for which data are available".*

IMPLICATIONS OF CURRENT GLOBAL ECONOMIC CRISIS

This truncated characterisation of extant global capitalism does bring to the fore the issue of its sustenance, regeneration and self-perpetuation over the past three centuries. From its origins, capitalism has been through crises of differing levels of intensity at a national and international level including overproduction, high inflation and interest rates, major accidents at production sites, massive job-shedding and environmental degradation. In the past century, such crises have included

politico-economic meltdowns such as the ones which preceded and followed the First and Second World Wars including anti-capitalist revolutions in Eastern Europe and parts of Asia, the struggles for national emancipation from colonialism, and a variety of mass upheavals in the developed countries.

“In the period of neo-liberal triumphalism, the current global economic crisis with its systemic effects does stand out. It was preceded by the 1998 crisis, which had started to foreground many of the causal factors now more acutely exposed. In other words, what makes the current crisis similar and yet different from previous ones is the depth of its impact, the extensiveness of its reach, the length of its persistence, the generalised socio-political questions it brings to the fore, and the seeming incapacity of societal leadership to deal with the challenges.” [Joel Netshitenzhe, Vusi Gumede and Samuel Oloruntoba: 2016)

In this context, from within the capitalist class and among the political elites in the developed countries, serious questions have been posed about the future trajectory of the system. Lynn Forester de Rothschild (2014) captures this well: *“[F]aith in market institutions has rarely been lower... If these tendencies are left unchecked, the public cannot be expected to show faith in capitalism. Although it is not the business of business to solve society’s problems, it is dangerous when business itself is viewed as the problem. To reverse this...will mean investments must be measured not just by short-term returns but by the development of human capital, management of innovative potential, compensation aligned with true value creation, supply chains that are sustainable and measurable evidence of the overall contribution of the enterprise to society.”*

Similar sentiments have been echoed by Ms Hilary Clinton in the US presidential election campaign in her attack on ‘quarterly capitalism’ (2015), CEO of Unilever Paul Polman (2012) as well as leaders of, among others, McKinsey and Company and the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board (2015). Beyond this, left insurgencies within the dominant political establishments in the US, the UK and Greece are also reflective of the existential challenges that face the system. At the same time, when faced with crises, the ruling elite has not shied away from resorting to right-wing jingoism including fascism and militarism.

However, through these twists and turns, the system as such has survived. In part, this rests on its continuing success in developing productive forces. Although there are many instances of monopoly self-interest constraining the development and utilisation of new technologies, overall, the question does arise whether production relations under contemporary capitalism are, at a systemic level, truly a break on the development of productive forces. Related to this is the manner in which the organisation of production processes has evolved and how this has impacted on the stratification of society. This is besides the notable improvements in the quality of life of broad swathes of humanity, and how this has had its own impact on the social consciousness and aspirational dynamic even among workers.

At the subjective level, in the context of all this, the manner in which the capitalist ruling class has entrenched its ideas as the ideas of society, classically reflects what Marx and Engels had observed more than a century-and-half ago. Both as a reflection of tensions among the capitalist countries and in the context of the Cold War, the political leadership in the leading capitalist countries has utilised geo-politics and the arms race to entrench the military-industrial complex which in turn helps to sustain the system as a whole. It has often succeeded, through chauvinism, to pit worker against worker. In this context, and over the recent period, the political elite has exploited and ingeniously

managed crises such as migration and terrorism to shore up the polity and the economic system, and divert attention from the core issues facing the mass of the population. Indeed, what may appear as ineptitude and crass irrationality in handling the challenges of migration and terrorism, the crisis in the Middle East and the Maghreb, the so-called Asia Pivot and ratcheting up of tensions in Eastern Europe, may in fact represent a calculated system in the madness.

Further, the evolving division of labour and the changing character of the working class in the most advanced countries has had serious implications for organisation and mobilisation of this class and the poor in general. Whilst a multitude of issues and lived experience have presented opportunities for resistance, Left theorisation of the existing reality and the strategy and tactics required to combat it have been woeful. The Left project has been weak, and many within its ranks have been co-opted into the dominant paradigm, latterly, neo-liberalism. As such, the positive technical elements of globalisation have been appropriated by this dominant paradigm, with the Left shorn of the arsenal to pose a counter-hegemonic narrative which would strengthen global solidarity among the working people.

It should also be underlined that, over its period of existence, capitalism has taken various forms; there is 'capitalism and capitalism'.

From the stock exchange-based system of the Anglo-American variety, to the productive enterprise approach of the German model, a number of variants have been implemented. Beyond this, in most of Europe – but more intensely in the Nordic countries – welfare states have sought, through post-tax redistribution, to guarantee basic social rights. In Japan, pre-tax distribution, based on regulation of income differentials, has limited the ravages of inequality.

In developing countries, various approaches have been attempted, including industrialisation and socialisation drives in parts of Africa after the attainment of political independence. Many of these experiments, however, petered out; and Africa is only now – at the turn of the 21st century – experiencing a new surge, 'Africa Rising', characterised by high rates of economic growth and some improvement in macrosocial indicators, though this has been affected by the slowing global economy. The gains of the past decade in Latin America in reducing inequality do stand out. Critically, the social advances that have been attained in Southeast Asia, in the form of rapid technological modernisation and the lifting of hundreds of millions of people out of extreme poverty, have occasioned a theoretical category, 'developmental state', which is currently much in vogue. There is all manner of causal factors to this Southeast Asian experience, not least assistance from the West in the context of the Cold War; but the experience in its totality does posit fundamental questions about trajectories of economic and social development within the capitalist mode of production.

Arising from the aforesaid, fundamental questions confront Marxist theory about the basic propositions in relation to when and how productive relations under capitalism become a systemic break on the development of productive forces! Is this already at play, and thus the absence of fundamental change would merely be a function of weak subjective factors in the form of mobilised working people and the dearth of Left theory? With the current trends in the development of productive forces essentially under capitalism, including the so-called 4th industrial revolution – and the possibility of developing countries to leapfrog stages of development – what trajectories is humanity likely to follow towards what was referred to earlier as 'a unique equilibrium' with

dialectical contradictions necessary for continuing development; but without social antagonisms? Are the theory and praxis of Marx, Engels and their adherents over the past two-and-half centuries adequate to chart a path to that global society in which human beings are no longer prisoners of division of labour and inequitable distribution of income, and are thus able “...to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner... without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic”? (Ibid) This is the fundamental question that Marxism in the 21st century has to interrogate.

Without at all trying to examine in any depth the evolution of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’, as it has evolved over the past 35 years or so, the questions posed above do bring out in bold relief the lessons of Chinese society, with major implications for the theory and praxis of Marxism. Besides ‘the new ideas, new strategy and new practice’ elucidated by CPC Central Committee with Xi Jinping as General Secretary, there has over the years been debate precisely about the level of development of productive forces that would render socialism – let alone communism – a practical proposition; and indeed, the scores, if not hundreds, of years that this will take to attain!

REFLECTIONS ON SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL DEMOCRACY

Historically, and broadly informed by Marxist tools of analysis, the South African liberation movement characterised the country’s society as Colonialism of a Special Type: with the colonisers and the colonised residing in one state. Also taken into account in the analysis was the level of development of the country’s productive forces, the size of the working class and the aspirational content of the various classes and strata who constitute the motive forces of change: black workers and the rural poor, black middle strata as well as the (real or aspirant) black bourgeoisie.

Proceeding from the understanding that the social antagonisms that the national democratic revolution sought to resolve were national oppression of the black majority, class super-exploitation, and patriarchal relations, the liberation movement posited as the anti-thesis a society founded on non-racialism, non-sexism, democracy and shared prosperity in a mixed economy. On whether the attainment of a national democratic society would resolve all matters to do with social injustice, the liberation movement argues: “*Whether such common social decency is achievable under a market-based system with its tendency to reproduce underdevelopment and inequality, in a globalised world, is an issue on which society should continually engage its mind. Concrete practice, rather than mere theory, will help answer this question. What is clear though is that such was the symbiosis between political oppression and the apartheid capitalist system that, if decisive action is not taken to deal with economic subjugation and exclusion, the essence of apartheid will remain, with a few black men and women incorporated into the courtyard of privilege. The old fault-lines will persist, and social stability will be threatened.*” (ANC S&T: 2007)

However, all sections of the liberation movement, including socialists, accept that pursuit of a national democratic society is the most immediate task of the South African project of social transformation. To summarise the major theoretical and practical challenges, seven theses are posited below, some of which bear relevance to the debate on Marxism in the 21st century.

A democratic society should reflect all generations of human rights: The South Africa constitution, which defines the legal framework for the management of social relations and the society towards

which the country aspires, enshrines four generations of rights contained in a justiciable Bill of Rights. These include civil and political freedoms that encompass regular elections; separation of powers between the executive, the legislature and the judiciary; freedoms pertaining to speech, the media and association; principles and systems of accountability including a host of institutions to guarantee such; as well as inviolability of the person and respect for privacy. These can be characterised as ‘liberal freedoms’, which the liberation movement characterises as generic achievements of human civilisation. The other generations of human rights pertain to economic and social rights; environmental and resource rights and rights pertaining to gender equality and access to information. Most of these rights are of course aspirational; and the constitution calls for efforts progressively to attain them.

Transformation of the state is critical to social transformation: The inherited state reflected the domination of one race and pursued the interests of the (white) capitalist ruling class. In theory, the new state is meant to reflect the combination of classes and strata that stand to benefit from the cause of social change. While in definitional terms these motive forces have remained largely the same, the demographic changes taking place in society – mostly a consequence of progress in social transformation – have seen the emergence of swathes of black middle strata and a black bourgeoisie; and the coincidence of interests across the racial divide is starting to play out, though still in rudimentary form. Two fundamental issues, in what is essentially a capitalist society, attach to this. The first one is about the change in the demographics of the political ruling elite most of whom are rising to the social status of upper middle strata or even capitalist class, with major implications for socio-political dynamics in society. These implications include challenges of social distance from the mass of the people, the majority of whom are black and poor, as well as manifestations of cronyism and corruption. Secondly, at a broader level, though the new state may in theory seek to represent and serve broader society, the fact of the social system as a whole being capitalist, does pose a question about the actual ruling class in South African society.

Social equity requires reconfiguration of social relations: Massive programmes have been undertaken through post-tax redistribution to transform the conditions of life of the poor. These relate to access to basic services including education, health, sanitation, electricity and social welfare. As such, poverty has been reduced. But the dissonance between access and quality in relation to these services seems largely to have the effect of reproducing social marginalisation. Efforts at affirmative action in the socio-economic arena have also had some impact; but in terms of distribution of wealth and income, South African evinces what can be characterised as ‘racial capitalism’. On state ownership of the means of production, the governing ANC argues: *“A national democratic society will have a mixed economy, with state, co-operative and other forms of social ownership, and private capital. The balance between social and private ownership of investment resources will be determined on the balance of evidence in relation to national development needs and the concrete tasks of the NDR [National Democratic Revolution] at any point in time...”* (ANC S&T:2007)

Developmentalism should encompass both economic and social tasks: In an attempt to address these challenges, and learning from practical experience in governance, the liberation movement has in the past ten years tended towards the notion of a developmental state – with strategic foresight, popular legitimacy, organisational capacity and technical acumen – drawing from the experiences, among others, of East Asian nations. The state, in this instance, is meant to play a more

active role in directing the country towards higher rates of economic growth. This, it argues, should be combined with the best attributes of social democracy which it defines as *“a system which places the needs of the poor and social issues such as health care, education and a social safety net at the top of the national agenda; intense role of the state in economic life; pursuit of full employment; quest for equality; strong partnership with the trade union movement; and promotion of international solidarity”*. (ANC S&T: 2007)

Social partnership is fundamental to developmentalism: In the context of experiences of developmental states, the issue of social compacting arises in stark form. Required is a state that has both the strategic and technical acumen and the legitimacy and leverage to direct economic activity. Through a pilot agency that is able to plan, to incentivise and to cajole the private sector towards the desired growth path, the state assumes leadership in directing national economic activity. Such leverage derives from the state’s multifaceted role as a regulator, a major procurer of goods and services, and critically as the owner of state-owned enterprises. This implies a clear strategy to win over the private sector behind the transformative vision: they should appreciate that their long-term interests are tied up with those of society as a whole. Critically, all other sectors of society, particularly the trade union movement and workers in general, should be part of such a compact.

There is need creatively to negotiate global realities: The trajectory of global capitalism described above presents both opportunities and challenges. Asian nations, including China, have shown how the dispersal of global value chains can be exploited, at the same time as efforts are made to climb up the manufacturing sophistication ladder. This may not apply to South Africa, given its level of development; but the high rates of unemployment call for creative thinking on these issues. South African reality includes the fact that it is a small open economy. Further, the evolution of the colonial capitalist system created a relationship of dependence on the major capitalist powers; and the domestic capitalist class is not only networked across the globe, but also highly mobile.

The regional environment matters: Many countries that have experienced high rates of economic growth for a sustained period seem also to have benefitted from similar efforts in their neighbourhood. South Africa is advantageously poised in this regard, given the growth dynamics in Sub-Saharan Africa. While the global economic crisis has dampened prospects in the region, the overall drift remains a positive one, with major investments in infrastructure bound to continue; and with the growth in the number of employed workers and middle strata transforming consumer demand. Combined with the offshoring referred to earlier, all these dynamics should give a spur to Africa’s manufacturing capacity. With appropriate strategies, South Africa – otherwise a growth laggard in the region – can benefit hugely from these developments.

Overall, the journey that South Africa has embarked on towards a national democratic society is a critical step towards attaining social justice. This should be seen as a protracted process, requiring adept mastery of statecraft and international relations, conscious of the objective domestic and global conditions within which the leaders of social transformation have to operate.

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

The fundamental message of Marxism about attaining social justice and the best in human civilisation remains relevant in the current age. However, the evolution of capitalism over the past two centuries, the continuing development of productive forces under this system, and the setbacks

of socialist projects over the past century – all these cry out for creative reflection among Left forces across the globe. The perennial questions about how and when humanity may advance to ‘a unique equilibrium without social antagonisms’ requires ongoing interrogation. So does the issue of the form such ‘equilibrium’ may assume. Theory and practice should feed one another to guide countries in various geographic locations and at varying levels of development. In that endeavour, there should be no holy cows.

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