



CRISIS OF MARXISM AND THE NEW LEFT PROJECT

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Abstract:

Marxism is in crisis. It cannot continue in its old form any longer. It needs to reinvent itself in order to take up the challenges of the 21st century. The failure of Marxism both in addressing the theoretical assertions of the new social movements and in accommodating the differences among them based on gender, class, race and ethnicity had influenced the imagining of a new left alternative. Radical plural democracy expounded by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe as an alternative to the Left succeeds in offering theoretical explanations to the new social movements, working within the Marxist category. Moreover, this 'new left' project doesn't show any hesitation even in embracing some of the theoretical underpinnings of the liberal democracy and post-modernism.

Key Words : Marxism, New Left, Radical Plural Democracy, Laclau and Mouffe

2.0: INTRODUCTION:

Marxism inspired the principal socialist political movement which made its appearance as the most powerful theoretical articulation on behalf of the oppressed. It was in its name that the two most important social revolutions of the twentieth century took place; the 1917 Soviet revolution and the 1949 Chinese revolution. It subsequently became the guiding philosophy of various socialist regimes in the world by constituting the theoretical backbone of the various Left¹ movements all over the world. Thus, it became the emancipatory doctrine of thousands of

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workers who had been subjected to exploitation and oppression by the capitalist system. Marx combined various intellectual currents inherent in an economically advanced western European situation to conceptualize his theory. Marxian theory was a combination of the 19th century German idealism, the revolutionary tradition of the French socialism and the classical British economic thought. Marx and Engels forged a philosophy which they thought is coherent and revolutionary.

Nevertheless, with the mid of 20th century, Marxism started to face certain challenges due to its incapacity to offer solutions to some of the burning issues of the time. On the intellectual front, Marxist theory was ineffective to address the challenges posed by the new social movements, especially in the capitalist world. According to Jack Lindsay, this crisis in Marxism was “one of inadequacy, of inability to recognize outworn formulations and to keep abreast of history in all its complexity and richness” (Lindsay, 1981:3). By the end of the 20th century, the ‘crisis’ in Marxism was much more visible and hence, it was important to think about a new left alternative that can address these challenges. This paper will examine some of the causal factors that led to the crisis in Marxism in the 20th century and will analyze the ‘new left’² alternative proposed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe to overcome the challenges in the Marxian theoretical framework.

2.1: CRITIQUE OF TRADITIONAL MARXISM:

Marxism failed to provide an adequate theoretical input for the project of the left. The demise of Marxism and the triumph of liberal democracy, heralded as the ‘end of history’ by Francis Fukuyama, represent an extreme view in this regard.³ According to classical Marxism, society is structured by a principal antagonism of capital and labour and the social interests and of political actors are given and known. Capitalism is the structure that governs class interests and political identity. However, this interpretation seems to be insufficient in capturing the nuances of contemporary politics. ‘In the “Introduction” to “Hegemony and Socialist Strategy”’, Laclau and Mouffe have tried to place their critique of traditional Marxism by making references to the existing strategic and theoretical dilemma in the Left’ (Smith:1998:1). While trying to do so, they also made significant interventions both in the theory and the project of the Left.

Firstly, Laclau and Mouffe note that it is imperative to examine to what extent Marxism as a theoretical framework of the left has actually succeeded in uniting the working class and



establish socialism all around the world. Secondly, they pinpoint the inadequacy of Marxism as a theory to address various social phenomena. In 1917, all Communist Parties had assumed that the strategies of Lenin, leading to the revolution of 1917, constituted a model for bringing about fundamental social change in the world. However, just after three years, in 1920, the revolutionary forces in Central Europe and Germany failed bringing about such a social change. Again in the 1930s, with the political crisis represented by Hitler, none of the parties succeeded in dominating the situation. This history of the ‘crisis in Marxism’ entered its most intensive phase by the 1970s.

In the last three decades of the 20th century, the world was experiencing a great historical mutation due to the occurrence of certain incidents. ‘The extraordinary upheavals happened in New York, Paris, Beijing, Berlin, Tokyo, Chicago, Civil rights and antiwar movements, youth and student rebellions, mobilizations in defense of regional autonomy, movements for the rights of women, gays, lesbians, elderly, disabled, and a host of other emergent groups coupled with an unprecedented wave of anti- colonial and anti-imperial insurgencies in poorer regions of the globe sought a new alternative to address their issues’ (Edelman, 1985:1-5).

The traditional social science methodology was then insufficient to address this newly emerged social scenario. Marxism, both as a theory and as a movement, could not explain much about the contemporary social situation evolved through the advancement of new democratic movements all over the world. It was in this context, the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: towards a Radical Democratic Politics* co-authored by Laclau and Mouffe, brought a new perspective in the reimagining of Marxian philosophy. In spite of them being influenced by a series of intellectual currents which are outside the Marxist tradition, Laclau and Mouffe seemed to be successful in their effort to impart a theoretical dignity to Marxism working within the existing intellectual and political climate.

2.2: CONTEXT OF IMAGINING A NEW LEFT ALTERNATIVE:

Writing in the early 1980s, Laclau and Mouffe noted that the traditional leftist forces in Western Europe had lost their substantial ground while the right-wing forces gained more legitimacy.⁴ Laclau and Mouffe (1985:1-5) note that ‘at the same time, new autonomous movements had also emerged to engage in political struggles that were not adequately addressed by the traditional left earlier. Feminists, peace activists, environmentalists, lesbian



and gay activists, and the movements of race and ethnicity also radically redefined the very meaning of leftist politics.’ The main aim of these movements was to end all forms of relationship of subordination and the hierarchical structure constructed in the surface of the society. These were the groups that traditionally excluded from the mainstream of the society; in Laclau and Mouffe’s word ‘the surplus of the social’. They articulated for an independent theoretical position; a cultural framing of race, gender, ethnicity and sexuality. However, the traditional Marxist theory kept its focus on the material/economic conditions. It is the clash of classes defined by the ownership of the means of production that drives Marxist theory; there is no room for differences of gender, class, race and ethnicity. Hence, these newly emerged social movements identified themselves as oppositional or resistance movements. Though they fell under the traditional purview of the left, Marxist theory with its old framework was not able to accommodate these movements without violating its basic tenets. This has created a peculiar dilemma for contemporary Marxists. Laclau and Mouffe (1985:151) argue that “Marxian concept of class opposition was incapable of dividing the totality of the social body into two antagonistic camps, of reproducing itself automatically as a line of demarcation in the political sphere.”

Simultaneously, several events that were taking place in different parts of the world also had its impact in losing the ground for Left. For example, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the imperial hegemony it had in Eastern Europe, events like the unification of the Germany and the fall of Yugoslavia and finally the war in Bosnia put the Left in crisis. Anna Marie Smith⁵ writes; in the OECD countries⁶, assaults on trade union movements were a day to day happening. The gap between rich and poor were increasing gradually. Protests erupted in Italy, Germany and France against the cut off in health benefits and public pensions. Racial and ethnic tensions which were already there in Europe and U.S. in the beginning of 1980’s escalated by the end of 1980s and 1990s (Smith, 1998). Smith (1998:1-2) notes that “the resurgence of identity-based antagonisms cannot be dismissed as ‘a return of the archaic’ or a temporary deviation from an otherwise seamless progression towards liberal democracy’s triumphant resolution of political conflict.”

Trade unions which were the backbone of the struggles of traditional Left faced some serious challenges. Smith (1998:2) notes “the globalization of production; de-industrialization; de-skilling; the substitution of non-union workers for unionized workers; the growth of “freelance,” sub-contracted, part-time and temporary contract work; and new worker-



management “productivity development” schemes etc had radically altered the nature of trade union organizing during this period.’ Moreover, the events like ‘Tiananmen Square tragedy in China, revolt in Mexico, election victories of Bill Clinton in U.S., Vladimir Zhirinovsky’s Liberal Democratic Party in Russia, Tony Blair’s ‘New Labour’ in U.K and the emergence of Post-Communist Parties in Eastern Europe had their role in weakening the Left ground (Smith,1998:2). Laclau and Mouffe (as cited in Smith, 1998:2) points out that all these transformations and social conflicts had their role in altering the theoretical discourses of the Left and in the way Left conceives the agents of social change.

Susan Hekman notes ‘for structuring the social spaces, the old Marxist framework was inadequate’ (Hekman, 1996:41).On the intellectual front, Marxist theory hasn’t been able to accommodate three significant intellectual movements in the last decades of the twentieth century; in the first instance the theory of Postmodernism/ Post structuralism, secondly the theoretical assertion of the new social movements such as Feminism, Eco-Politics, Identity Politics etc. These social movements gave a crippling blow to Marxism in the late 20th century. Feminists, ecologists, advocates of identity politics rooted in race, ethnicity, or sexuality failed to find a theoretical space within Marxism. They instead articulated an independent theoretical position; a cultural framing of race, gender, ethnicity and sexuality. The central focus of traditional Marxist theory was always on the material/economic conditions. It is the clash of classes defined by the ownership of the means of production that drives the Marxist theory. It never offered any room for differences on the basis of gender, class, race and ethnicity. This created a peculiar dilemma for the contemporary Marxists.

Finally, the revitalized theory of liberal democracy also posed challenges to the left. The Marxian principle of class contradiction was not sufficient to understand contemporary social realities. Laclau and Mouffe (1985:151) note that “this principle is undermined from the start by a radical insufficiency; arising from the fact that class opposition is incapable of dividing the totality of the social body into two antagonistic camps, of reproducing itself automatically as a line of demarcation in the political sphere.”

In brief, they argue that (Laclau and Mouffe as cited in Smith:1998:2) “nothing less than the “whole concept of socialism” is in crisis: its “ontological centrality of the working class,” its notion of “Revolution” as the “founding moment in the transition from one type of society to another,” and its utopian dream of a post-revolutionary and post-political society in



which a “perfectly unitary and homogeneous collective will” would prevail.” Laclau and Mouffe point out that ‘the new social movements emerged in these years not only articulated their new demands but also politicized new areas of the social and brought a new form of political contestation. These struggles were extremely complex and plural. Because, classical Marxism presupposes the existence of ‘universal’ subjects and conceptualizes the social as a rational, transparent order, it cannot adequately capture these movements’ complex negotiations of difference’ (Laclau and Mouffe as cited in Smith 1998:2).

It was in this scenario, being influenced by a number of various traditions including Gramscian socialism, liberal democratic theory and post-structuralism, Laclau and Mouffe attempted to shape a new political theory that captures the specificities of contemporary antagonisms. Laclau and Mouffe were convinced of the fact that, if the Left is failing to accommodate the newly emerged social movements and take the message passed out from the victories of Post-Communist Parties in Eastern Europe, it will lose the viability it still possess. Hence, working within the Marxist paradigm, they attempted to shape a new theory that accommodates all these aspects. Smith (1998:2) notes that ‘Laclau and Mouffe had a belief that their new theory can provide a useful framework for the conceptualization of radical democratic pluralist practice, namely the political activism that aims to overthrow oppression and exploitation in all different manifestation.’

2.3: FROM MARXISM TO RADICAL PLURAL DEMOCRACY:

Today in academics, the traditional social science methodologies like class analysis, has become insufficient to analyze the complexity of contemporary societal realities. According to Gail Omvedt, ‘today the new theorists of discourse prefer to talk about people talking about reality, rather than the reality itself’ (Omvedt, 1994:127). In such a context, the study about Laclau and Mouffe’s theory is of critical importance. New antagonism has emerged not only in the advanced capitalist countries but also in the third world countries. Their theory of radical plural democracy successfully deals with the new issues that emerged since the 1970’s in various parts of the world. Their theoretical position can be seen as a real alternative of authoritarian tendencies which is inherent in the Marxist socialist theories and experienced under various socialist regimes.

What is radical plural democracy and to what extent radical plural democracy can be an alternative to traditional Marxism is a question that has to be discussed at length. Laclau and



Mouffe (1985: 176) argue that “the historical task of the left cannot be to renounce liberal-democratic ideology, but on the contrary, to deepen and expand it in the direction of a radical and plural democracy.” The concept of Radical plural democracy, proposed by Laclau and Mouffe is basically rooted in the idea of post modernism. What Laclau and Mouffe is attempting is to approach this concept of radical plural democracy by operating deconstructively within the Marxist categories. Radical plural democracy helps to rethink the politics of the left in terms of expanding democracy within the framework of a liberal democratic regime.

Laclau and Mouffe (1985:57) assert that the left should learn from the tragic experiences of totalitarianism⁷ and has to adopt a different attitude towards Liberal democracy by recognizing its strength as well as revealing its shortcomings. In other words, the objective of the left should be the extension and deepening of the democratic revolution initiated two hundred years ago. In order to construct such a theoretical framework, Laclau and Mouffe strongly argue for an anti-essentialist approach in the field of politics.

The theory of Radical plural democracy takes the principles of liberty and equality as its basic idea and aims at maximum implementation of these principles towards the wider arena of society. Radical democracy acknowledges the articulation of the ideas of popular sovereignty and civic equality with the liberal themes of natural rights-constitutional government and separation of powers. An articulation that is constitutive of liberal democracy has made it possible for new rights to be claimed. The central concern of radical plural democratic thought is that how is it possible to create or maintain a pluralistic democratic order under the antagonistic conditions.

The project of radical plural democracy that Laclau and Mouffe advance is indeed a challenge to the traditional left. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) asserted that the crisis in Marxism can be approached in terms of the problems in economism. In classical Marxism economism mainly appears in two forms: ‘Epiphenomenalism’ and ‘Class reductionism’. The former is the role played by “superstructures”, which are seen as epiphenomena of the economic structure, mechanically reflecting the latter while playing no active part in the historical process. Class reductionism on the other hand is concerned with the *nature* of the superstructures. In this case, politics and ideology are determined by the position of agents in the relations of production. Their critique of economism seems to have a much wider deconstructive effect on the



traditional Marxism. They deny the autonomous status of economy that follows its own endogenous laws of development. According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985) the functioning of the economy itself is a political functioning and cannot be understood in terms of a single logic. Therefore they argue for a non- economic understanding of the economy and introduce the primacy of the political in the realm of social. This is exactly an anti- economic reading of the classical Marxism of Laclau and Mouffe.

By theorizing radical plural democracy what both of them tried to do was to incorporate both postmodernism and liberal democracy into a leftist, quasi-Marxist politics. One of the principal goals of this politics is to accommodate the new social movements that Marxism had previously excluded. Laclau and Mouffe rejected several of the central tenets of Marxism while nonetheless claiming a Marxist inspiration. The privileged standpoint of the proletariat, determination by material conditions and the centrality of class conflict are all invalid here. They further incorporate a concept that has been the object of Marxist critique since its inception: the liberal notion of individual rights. Liberalism strongly emphasizes the values of individualism, universal human rights and the rule of law. The separation between church and state and, between the realms of the public and the private are central to the politics of liberalism. Finally, they embrace a position- postmodernism, which denies the legitimacy of both the Marxist and liberal projects. Here, the convergence of Marxism and post- modernism offers fruitful possibilities for a left alternative politics in which multiple voices will be accommodated.

2.4: CONCLUSION:

It has to be acknowledged that Marxism cannot continue in its old form. It is important that it has to reinvent itself in order to address the challenges of contemporary times. What Laclau and Mouffe attempted through their conceptualization of radical plural democracy was equipping the old Marxist framework to address certain challenges of the present time which were not earlier addressed by Marxism. Laclau and Mouffe believe that their concept of radical plural democracy is radical in the sense that it allows participation of all disparities and it is plural as well, as it fully recognizes all forms of differences and does not allow the domination of one logic over the other. Laclau and Mouffe tried their best to accommodate new social movements and identity politics also by offering this new left alternative. This new left alternative imagined in the form of radical plural democracy permits new voices, new demands



and new participation from all walks of life. It extends and implements the principles of liberty and equality towards the most remote social relations.

2.5: NOTES:

¹ By Left, it is meant that the political movements inspired essentially by the writings of Karl Marx. Political activities began during the life time of Marx itself; which was a kind of workers struggle initially manifested itself in the form of ‘Paris Commune’ of 1871. This was crushed in a few days; yet it is regarded as the first and foremost revolutionary attempt to bring about human social order as envisaged by Marx. Although very short lived and imperfect in its form and composition, Paris Commune has been a great inspiration for the workers movements across the globe.

² Laclau and Mouffe accommodate new social movements and identity politics in their theory for the left which were not able to find a place in the purview of the traditional left. Therefore, I would like to call their theory as a new left project. It was in their work ‘Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: towards a Radical Democratic Politics, they introduced this concept.

³ Francis Fukuyama's claim that the ‘demise of Marxism and the triumph of liberal democracy heralded the "end of history"’³ represents an extreme interpretation that liberal democracy has proven its superiority over Marxism.

⁴ In Western Europe, by 1980s, the leftist political parties and the trade union movements started to lose their ground. The victory of Post-Communist Parties in different parts of the Europe weakened the basis of Left.

⁵ Anna Marie Smith was a follower of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. She provided a clear overview of the works of Laclau and Mouffe and even brought out some of the weaknesses in their theory.

⁶ In 1960, 20 countries signed the Convention on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and formed the OECD bloc. OECD countries through their policies aim at the economic and social well being of people all around the world.

⁷ In communist regimes totalitarianism appears in the form of state authoritarianism. Thus in Leninism we can see a schism between the masses and the party and the party occupies the place of universal. This is the root of Soviet totalitarianism. According to Laclau and Mouffe it



is there in classical Marxist theory itself. “from the moment in which a limited actor- the working class- was raised to the status of ‘universal class’.

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