

CAPITALISM, NATURE, PEASANTS AND WOMEN: CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS OF MARXISM

by Gail Omvedt

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Introduction

Instead of the hoped for crisis of capitalism, we are seeing in the 1990s a crisis of socialism. But this is linked to a crisis of the theory of capitalism. Social processes predictable from the traditional Marxist theory have not occurred. The proletariat has not emerged as a vanguard. Indeed, unless we redefine it drastically, it is becoming difficult to speak of the proletariat as even emerging: "deindustrialization," decline in the proportion of the manufacturing working class, is a fact in advanced capitalist societies, and in the third world the obvious phenomenon is the growth of the "unorganized" or "informal" sector and, in many countries, the persistence of the peasantry.

Nor is the agrarian class structure behaving as expected. Two decades after the "mode of production" debate we must admit that differentiation is not occurring¹. Numbers of agricultural labourers are increasing, though not drastically by our data, and the largest proportion are impoverished marginal peasants who remain bound to agriculture by the lack of jobs elsewhere, not a "true proletariat" by strict Marxist definitions.² Gini coefficient ratios of landholding do not appear to be widening, at least for India, and small peasants continue to cling to land. If there is any growing "differentiation", it is between the organized employees and the unorganized sector, between (in particular) agriculture and services (to a lesser extent industry).³

All over Asia, "new social movements" have been overtaking traditional trade

union organizing (whether of factory workers or agricultural labourers), both in their mass force and in their political salience. Depiction of these movements through NGO spectacles as small-scale "grassroots," "non economic" movements has masked our understanding of them. They have included some very powerful mass movements such as, for example in India, the dalit and anti-caste movement and the farmers movement of peasants fighting for higher crop prices, relief from indebtedness and similar issues relating to the market and the state—both movements capable of mobilizing in the hundreds of thousands and both seen (as events since the V.P. Singh regime have made clear) as threatening by the bourgeois-bureaucratic ruling class. Peasants in other parts of Asia and the third world are also mobilizing, not simply against local landlords and money lenders, but against oppressors of the market and the state. Environmental movements in many countries, based on tribals and peasants, though taking place on locally defined territories, have also shown themselves capable of mobilizing significant support and halting major "developmental" projects. The women's movement, finally, diffuse and fractured as it is, has become a significant presence in almost all countries.

Many of the issues of these movements are also being expressed in the form of "ethnic-national" movements. Taken as a whole, they represent a major feature of the day, as much as the concurrent rise, on the right, of religiously-based "fundamentalism" and "communalism".

Nor are the movements "non-economic." Presentation of them as such

has done a major disservice. The fundamentalist movements which try to capture some of their base, are non economic. But the movements themselves have been raising issues that not only seek to add new "structures" such as "caste" or "gender" to "class" but directly challenge us to revise and expand our understanding of economic exploitation and capitalism itself.

The women's movement, for example, theorizes the role of household labour and subsistence production as a major factor in accumulation; in the words of Indian feminists it is "redefining exploitation."⁴ Interestingly, this line of analysis going back to Selma James and Mariarossa Dalla Costa and expressed most strongly today with a German feminist group with strong third world contacts⁵—has both linked the exploitation of women and peasants (as non-wage labourers) and developed into an eco-feminist tradition of theorizing. The farmers' movement, in assertions most clearly articulated by Maharashtra's Sharad Joshi, has insisted on the importance of the extraction of surplus, via market mechanisms and the use of state power, from exploited peasant labour, for the accumulation of capital. Here, as with the case of women, "class" defined in terms of wage relations and private property does not adequately correlate with "exploitation" defined in terms of the production and appropriation of surplus labour.

Both the farmers' movement and the women's movement have stressed the role of violence and control of the means of violence in exploitation and oppression, thus pointing to the state as central to accumulation. And, both the farmers' and the environmental movements have taken both political and economic decentralization as goals and fought for local control of resources and surplus. The environmental movement has been weak in dealing with exploitation as a factor (neglecting not only the exploi-

tation of peasant labour but also the way in which low pricing of nature's products has been related to their destruction) but has instead stressed the destructiveness of contemporary capitalist production. More than other movements, and more than slogans of the traditional left, it has pointed to imperialism itself as a factor in this destructiveness, and has questioned the very nature of development itself. Just as Mary argued that the proletariat could not simply take over the existing state machinery but had to build its own state, so now environmental activists stress that socialism cannot be built on the (industrial) forces of production of capitalism.

Finally all movements raise the question of political forms. They tend to be informal in structure and to emphasize a democratic practice critical of the parties' bureaucracies. Where they have large scale organizations, these are often focused around a charismatic leader, rather than a bureaucratic party structure. They show a suspicion of political parties that is as great as Maoist "anti-revisionism." All political parties, including those of the left, are to them alien: upper-caste, patriarchal, urban, representing essentially the interests of the exploiters. However, rather than aiming like the traditional revolutionary left for the capture of state power through armed struggle, they have organized militant but nonviolent mass movements and campaigns, including *rasta rokos*, *gavbands*, *satyagrahas*, *kisan pan-chayats*, fasts, marches and the like. They have sought to exert pressure on parties from without and only occasionally, without great success, have tried to form political platforms/parties themselves. (The dalit movement, which has from the beginning been involved in organizing political parties, is an exception here).

Yet this has not been terribly successful, and the question of the movements' getting an adequate political representation remains unsolved. This is the obverse side of the weakness of the political parties based on toiling sections: as the 1991 Indian elections show, the National Front/Left Front combine has done better than many expected, in spite of the handicaps of the "sympathy vote" and the lack of party organization in many areas, in spite of the fact that it has

been nearly boycotted by capitalists, the bureaucracy and the uppermiddle classes. Indian politics for the first time since the 1950s clearly shows the form of two bourgeois-bureaucratic-brahmanic parties (the Congress and the BJP) versus a "left-democratic" political alliance representing lower castes, classes and marginalized ethnic groups. But that alliance has no program to mobilize its base, aside from the "one-point program" of the Mandal Commission; it has alienated the farmers' movement, has never effectively taken up women's issues, and has from the beginning avoided environmental demands.

The National Front/Left alliance has in reality no economic program, no vision of a way to move towards socialism and a liberatory society. Even now it is coming under pressure from those trying to break up its components—arguing that the Communists will need to support the Congress in at least some cases against fundamentalism, that there are inherent contradictions between "affluent OBCs" and dalits or between peasants and agricultural labourers that make an alliance impossible, and so on. The question is one of theory, of an analysis of exploitation based on a theory of capitalism adequate to comprehend the problems of nature, peasants, women and oppressed communities/ethnic groups today. Let us then look briefly at capitalism itself, beginning from the fundamental analytical issues of wage-labour, capital and commodity production.

The Analysis of Capitalist Production

Theorists such as Samir Amin and Immanuel Wallerstein have in different ways raised the argument that capitalism has to be understood as a system on a world scale that includes the organization of unfree as well as free labour and the extraction of surplus in various forms. Here a slightly different approach will be taken: before looking at the historically concrete form of capitalism as a world system, let us begin with the theory of capitalist production itself; let us start, as Marx did, with the commodity, commodity production, capital and wage labour. I will argue that such a beginning shows that the sphere of capitalist production (capital and wage labour) is of itself

incomplete, and that the very process of analysing it forces us to look to and analyze a wider, more encompassing sphere of capital accumulation.

The question of analyzing *women's labour, domestic labour or the reproduction of labour power* (primarily performed by women) brings this up immediately. After the long debate on housework it is fairly clear that domestic labour does not produce surplus value, since it is carried on under "private" conditions without a wage; the only labour counted in the value of the worker's labour is the labour embodied in the commodities that have to be bought to reproduce his life.⁶ Yet domestic labour does produce surplus, and the performance of this unpaid labour by women (or labour only partially remunerated by a "family wage" controlled by men) makes it possible for capitalists to extract a larger amount of surplus value from their labour force. In the third world, where workers are more often migrants living singly and much reproduction of their own labour power as well as the maintenance of their families is carried out in a rural, mainly subsistence economy, the rate of surplus extraction by capitalists is much higher.

In other words, the question of domestic labour immediately confronts us with a type of non-wage labour, carried on outside the sphere of capitalist production, that nevertheless contributes to accumulation. This means that the process of capital accumulation cannot be analyzed only in terms of the dynamic of wage-labour and capital, and that we have to admit the existence of, and begin to analyze, a sphere of capital accumulation that encompasses, but is wider than, that of capitalist production, or wage labour-based commodity production.

The question of nature brings up a similar problem. Here Marx is quite clear; nature creates use-value, but not exchange value. Nature, he tells us, is the source of all wealth; but at the same time natural resources like water are the arch-typical "free good", without value except for the labour required for their extraction.

Yet, this distinction seems inadequate. The ability of capitalism to treat nature as a "free good" certainly plays a major role in allowing rapid accumulation as well as

environmental destruction. In the terms of analysis of Jim O'Connor and the group based around the journal *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* the ability of capitalism to "externalize" costs allows more rapid accumulation but results in the destruction of the "conditions of production" themselves. But if the products of nature (whether oil, timber, water soil) have a use-value to capitalists, they also do, in a different way, to those inhabitants of the territories from which they are extracted. Capitalists are clearly willing to go to great lengths to secure the use-values of natural products at low exchange values (the Gulf War being the latest awesome example of the politics of international pricing), and the fight for control of natural resources is and has always been a momentous question for capital accumulation. What we have here is, again, a situation in which processes not limited to the sphere of capitalist production itself have crucial significance for capital accumulation.

The question of the value of natural resources intersects with another dilemma of the labour theory of value, the question of time. In part of a collection of articles on "the value controversy," G. A. Cohen argues that the statements that "labour produces value" and "value is determined by socially necessary labour time" are mutually incompatible because

"Suppose a commodity has a certain value at time *t*. Then, that value, says the labour theory, is determined by the socially necessary labour-time required to produce a commodity of that kind. Let us now ask: required to produce it *when*? The answer is: at *t*, the time when it has the value to be explained. The amount of time required to produce it in the past and, a *fortiori*, the amount of time actually spent producing it, are magnitudes strictly irrelevant to its value, if the labour theory is true."

The major example he gives:

"Suppose there is a commodity *b* now on the market, and that *b* was not produced by labour, but that a great deal of labour is now required for *b*-like things to appear. (*B* might be a quantity of clean air bottled before it became necessary to manufacture clean air). Then *b* has a value, even though no labour is embodied in it."⁸

It is not accidental that Cohen's example is one from the environment, since a major correlate of environmental destructiveness is an increase in scarcity of use-values. Thus a "full" theory of capitalist accumulation and the workings of the capitalist system requires an analysis of its interaction with environmental dynamics.

The issue of "nature" thus also raises, in a different way, the question of the way in which the system of capitalist production is embedded in a wider system which has its own "laws of motion." In at least one section of *Capital*, in the discussion of "Modern Industry and Agriculture," Marx is eloquent on the destructiveness of capitalist agriculture. "All progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the labourer, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress towards ruining the lasting sources of that fertility." He refers to it disturbing "the circulation of matter between man and the soil." Taking the "soil" as the paradigm here for all of

the destruction of civilizations in the past.

Analyzing the possible "laws of motion" of this wider system has hardly been attempted by Marxists, though there is now a flourishing school of "environmental economics". Looking at the system in terms of "energy flows" or energy costs rather than just labor costs; seeing "capital" also as congealed energy as well as congealed labour (or rather than?) would broaden the perspective.

While capitalism indeed "views itself" in terms of labour costs and the sphere of capitalists production only, we have to go beyond this appearance and understand the full sphere of the human-nature developmental process in order to understand capitalist accumulation itself.

Capitalism and the Exploitation of Peasant Labour

The peasantry is not only, as Teodor Shanin has called it, the "awkward class"; it is not admitted to be a class or even a category of the capitalist system by most

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nature, Marx has gone a long way to admitting a basic proposition of radical environmentalists. It is worth, then, noting what is missing: the recognition of the existence of a broader environmental system (perhaps comprising the entire earth) such that destructiveness will wreak its vengeance on the destroyers themselves.

Marxists, and Marx himself, have treated nature as primarily an object of capitalism's unlimited expansion, never seeing it as setting limits to expansion or as having a conditioning role on the processes of expansion. They see the destructive aspects of capitalism, but retain a faith that in the end, technology will overcome all obstacles. That nature can be in a sense an "active" component of a wider human-nature system with dynamics and causality working both ways, is not admitted. But "the empire strikes back": soil exhaustion and various forms of environmental destruction have, after all, been responsible for the destruction have, after all, been responsible for

Marxist scholars. Those gathered around the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, for example, which should be renamed the *Journal of Agrarian Studies* since it does not theoretically recognize the existence of "peasants," see the operative categories for analysis as those of "proletarian" or "capitalist" of one kind or another, or they define the peasantry as "petty commodity producers" who are then argued to be not exploited under capitalism. The survival of the peasantry is seen as part of the "articulation" of the capitalist mode of production with still surviving feudal modes, or as petty commodity production which is linked to capitalism through historically contingent processes that are part of the "phenomenal" aspect of the capitalist mode of production and not of its "essence."

In India, for pricing agricultural products since independence, the government's Agricultural Price Commission (now the committee on Agricultural Costs and Prices) has evaluated the labour element of costs at the level of existing

agricultural wages: that is, not only is hired labour evaluated at this level, but the labour of the peasant male, performed on his own land, is also evaluated at this level—more specifically at the level of a year-labourer or “bonded labourer”, while the labour of the woman of his family has been evaluated at a fraction of this, since censuses regularly show (by vastly under-counting the actual agriculturally—connected labour of peasant women) a low level of “work participation” in cultivating households. If the agricultural labourer is exploited, so then is the peasant and the government’s pricing not only “recognizes” the existing low standard of living of the rural producers, but perpetuates it.

If a theory of capitalism cannot analyze these as exploitative relations between the peasants and the state, then it is hard to know how it can be adequate. The question is a central one for analysis, because in one way or another all third world states seem to have relied upon extracting surplus from their peasantry in the form of low crop prices, whether they have perpetuated the “marketing boards” used from colonial times in order to accumulate funds for industrialization, or whether they have concentrated on providing low-priced wage goods and raw materials to their capitalists.

Peasant labour, then, is exploited via market-state mechanisms. Is this historically contingent or an “essential” part of capitalism? In order to answer this, the questions of the forms and mechanisms of the exploitation of peasant labour, its degree in the contemporary working of capitalism, and its significance in the historical accumulation of capital have to be dealt with much more than they have been by theories which generally look for only the emergence of a “peasant bourgeoisie” out of processes of “differentiation in agriculture.”

Marx himself had little developed analysis of peasant production under capitalism, though in his writings on the French peasantry he stressed not only the peasantry as a “sack of potatoes” but as the indispensable ally of the proletariat, not only as failing to become a “class-for-itself” but as being exploited: “The small-holding of the peasant is now only the pretext that allows the capitalist

to draw profits, interest and rent from the soil, while leaving it to the tiller of the soil himself to see how he can extract his wages.⁹ It was only his successors, Kautsky, Lenin and others, who developed a full theory of the differentiation of the peasantry under capitalism. They did not, however, deal with the question of the exploitation of peasant labour as such. Luxemburg spoke of the necessity for existence of noncapitalist sectors (the peasantry, the third world?) for capitalism to survive as a system — and feminist theories like Maria Mies as well as farmers’ movement leaders such as Sharad Joshi have looked back to Luxemburg for this — but this was seen by her as necessary only for the *realization* of surplus value, not so much as a part of its production. Although in fact accumulation of surplus from primarily peasant labour has been central to the historical development of capitalism, it has not been theorized.

This is a crucial gap in research. It is interesting here that feminist theorists have been most ready to see the role of peasant labour in capital accumulation. For instance in regard to indebtedness, most Marxist studies now understand the role of debt in the colonial period as leading to the “formal subsumption” of the peasantry to capital in being forced to turn over a major share of his product to the moneylender, whether “agriculturalist” or “non-agriculturalist”. However, in the contemporary period, when the major share of debt (at least in India) is to public institutions (banks and cooperatives), radicals are inclined to speak only of the “availability of credit” to the poor peasantry; it has taken Veronica Bennholdt-Thomson, who can make an explicit comparison with women’s non-wage labour, to give a critique of the methods (specifically, of the World Bank) in which debt is used to aid the expropriation of peasant labour and generally tie peasants to a particular form of market production.¹⁰ In fact, a serious analysis of the subordination of peasant labour must deal with the way the new system of capitalist agriculture—control by the state, multinational companies and institutions of inputs and various types of conditions of production — not only allows the extraction of surplus but also changes the labour process itself.

This involves recognizing that Marx’s political insights — as expressed in his writings on the French peasantry — did not always have a foundation in his analysis of capitalism. Today, when the development of capitalism has, if anything, meant an intensification of the exploitation of non-wage labour or partially “proletarianized” labour of various kinds in the informal sector, such an analysis is more than ever needed to build up the liberation struggles of the exploited.

“Primitive Accumulation”?

The concept of “primitive accumulation” was the way in which Marx referred to the significance for the historical development of capitalism of some of the processes referred to here—extraction of surplus from third world peasantry, slavery, loot, and so forth, emphasizing now violence “as the midwife of history” rather than simply control of private property. Processes of colonialism and conquest, the relation of the development of capitalism in Europe to the third world, seem encompassed here.

But a “midwife” has no role in conception; the term is symbolic of the fact that ultimately violence is not determinant for Marx and neither is primitive accumulation. It appears at the point of the establishment of the capitalist mode of production, and then seems to vanish being after all non-essential. But, the problem of time here produces a puzzle: If primitive accumulation is not necessary after the “establishment” of capitalism, why was it necessary at the beginning? Why could not capitalism simply develop on its own momentum, out of processes of accumulation and proletarianization in feudal economy or within a structure of petty commodity production?

(Indeed, Marxist theorists have been showing why this should happen). If in Marx’s view loot and extraction of surplus from the third world played an important role in the early history of capitalism, their necessity has not been shown. But, by the same token, the same factors continue to play a historically important role; the question of whether their role was necessary remains.

It seems time to investigate more systematically the ongoing linkages between the capitalist mode of production and the so-called “primitive accumu-

lation." The term encompasses most of what we have been referring to as part of a "sphere of capital accumulation" outside the arena of capitalist production itself: nonwage labour, whether that of slaves, serfs, bonded labourers, apparently independent peasants producing for national and world-level commodity markets and subsistence-producing peasant labour; the nearly unchecked extraction of natural resources; the role of violence in the entire process; and the role of ethnic/community factors in the process and in resistance to it.

Towards a Development of Historical Materialism

Marxist analyses (and much of Communist politics based on them) have so far been mostly confined to the sphere of capitalist production—looked at in terms of the capital/wage labour relationship, with private property or ownership of the means of production seen as

has led a large section of the left — and of radical intelligentsia claiming to speak in the name of the rural proletariat and poor peasantry—to oppose peasant efforts to raise the value of their labour power, thus helping to perpetuate an exploitative and overcentralized developmental policy and the poverty of those they claim to represent.

Clearly there is a need for new theory, new visions of socialism. Most important, there is a need for understanding the way the system of capitalist production is embedded in a wider system that includes the relationship of human society with nature and which has its own dynamics and laws of development determining both the process of capital accumulation and the forms of exploitation of labour power.

The framework that limits the central dynamic of "capitalist mode of production" to the capital/wage labour relation

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central. Certain other very "material" forces such as violence, sexuality, natural/environmental processes have been neglected. The focus has been on the "capitalist mode of production," and the existence of other forms of exploitation or other aspects of accumulation has been seen only in terms of the interaction or "articulation" of this with non-capitalist modes ("feudalism" or "semi-feudalism" being the main favorite in Asian societies), or as a result of some "phenomenal" or non-essential feature resulting from the historical accident of the concrete "social formations" in which the CMP happens to find itself.

This has been inadequate. It has failed drastically in terms of predictive power either in predicting the rapidity of the "fall of socialism" or in explaining the rise of the new social movements and the issues they have raised. It has left societies in which revolutionary parties have gained power (such as Nicaragua) vulnerable to following statist, bureaucratic, anti-people and anti-ecological policies of development because the only models they have had before them have been basically versions of the Soviet model resulting from such assumptions. And it

(and the "class struggle this involves"), in effect centers it on the advanced capitalist societies; the third world, nature, women and the peasantry are only "objects" of the processes of capitalism's expansion, the "class struggles" they are involved in are inadequately analyzed. This framework has failed to help us understand either capitalism itself — the processes of capital accumulation and the historical unfolding of "class struggle" in the variety of forms of resistance to the exploitation of labour power this involves — or the type of society that can overcome it.

Movements against exploitation in the world today are going beyond the traditional working class movement which had as its (explicit) goal, if not trade union gains, the capture by the proletariat of the existing, capitalistically developed and ecologically and humanly destructive industrial forces of productions; they are also, in stressing decentralization and autonomy, going beyond the traditional goal of "national liberation" movements which was to capture the state and build up for the use of the "nation" the same system. Both goals of traditional "anti-systemic movements" repre-

sented the project of simply taking over the system of productive forces and the state of the capitalist mode of production; but in a wider system in which this itself was related in exploitative forms to third world and female labourers and nature in general, this could yield only a state managed system of exploitation. (The contradictoriness of such a project in "peripheral" societies of the world system gives the "inefficiency" or incapacity in economic terms of such an effort, hence the pressures to open up to full-scale capitalist penetration, hence the "fall of socialism").

Instead the new movements are dealing, though often in initial and not always adequately articulated ways, with the full range of exploitative processes linked to the development of capitalism. Women's labour, peasant labour, nature, community and ethnicity, violence, are all within their realm of concern. Their campaigns and goals involve a process of "redefining revolution"; the need is also for a reinterpretation of the theory of historical materialism to help move out of—not the "end of history" by any means, but the historical *cul de sac* in which the left is in danger of getting trapped.

Footnotes

1. All-India Debt and Investment Survey, *Assets of Rural Households as on June 30, 1971* (Bombay: Reserve Bank of India, 1976); *Assets and Liabilities of Rural and Urban Households as on 30 June 1981* (Bombay: RBI, 1986).
2. V. G. Rastayannikov, *Agrarian Evolution in a Multiform Structure Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).
3. Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy, *Basic Statistics Relating to the Indian Economy, 1987, Volume I: All-India* (Bombay, 1985), Table 10.1.
4. Sea Chhaya Datar, *Redefining Exploitation: Towards a Socialist Feminist Critique of Marxist Theory* (Bombay: ISRE, 1981).
5. Selma James and Murielrose dalla Cosh, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the community* (1970) Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (London: Zed Press, 1985); *The Lace-Makers of Narsapur: Housewives Produce for the World Market* (London: Zed Books, 1984); Maria Mies, Veronica Bennholdt-Thomson and Claudia von Werlof, *Women: The Last Colony* (New Delhi: Kali for Women Press, 1989).
6. Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume I* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House), pp. 170-171.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 506.
8. G. A. Cohen, "The Labour Theory of Value and the Concept of Exploitation", in Ian Steedman, et. al., *The Value Controversy* p. 209. (London: Verso)
9. Karl Marx, "Peasantry as a Class", excerpted in Teodor Shanin, ed. *Peasants and Peasant Societies* (Penguin: 1975, 171).
10. Veronica Bennholdt-Thomson, "Investment on the Poor: An Analysis of World Bank Policy," in Maria Mies, Veronica Bennholdt-Thomson and Claudia von Werlof, *Women: The Last Colony* (New Delhi: Kali for Women Press, 1988).