

THE MAKING OF MODERNITY: VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL REVOLUTION IN THE SOUTH ASIAN CONTEXT

A construção da modernidade: violência e revolução social no contexto do sul da Ásia

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Introduction

In *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of Peasant Resistance* James C. Scott notes in the Preface that “most subordinate classes throughout most of history have rarely been afforded the luxury of open, organized, political activity” (SCOTT, 1985: xv). In the same Preface, Scott adds, “Formal, organized political activity, even if clandestine and revolutionary, is typically the preserve of the middle class and the intelligentsia” (SCOTT, 1985: xv). While acts of resistance undoubtedly play a role in giving the poor an opportunity to fight an unjust order, these acts might not constitute social and political change. Acts of resistance operate through a politics of negotiation and do not necessarily form the basis of a carefully thought out plan of action engineered to bring about radical gains to working and subaltern classes.

The history of mass politics, by which we mean social groups coming together consciously with a specific purpose, is bound to the history of social revolutions with notions of modernity, as in a futuristic, transformative project, attached to them. Violence which carries with it a sense of immediacy and modernity are intertwined in the politics of social revolutions. The only way modernity, that tries to bring the future as close as possible to the present, can be comprehended at the level of the masses, given the nature of their deliberate anonymity when portrayed in mainstream media as mobs, is in terms of social and political change at a structural level. Modernity is politicization of change or politicized change which implies that every act of transformation, however insignificant it might seem, is assigned a political value.

The basis of this paper is to establish that “modernity” is a fact of life at the level of mass politics. The goal of this modernity is not merely a politics of negotiation meant to acquire limited gains but an attempt to push forth demands through modes of social revolution that give the poor a chance to make their presence

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felt at higher levels of government and in the functioning of the state. In the process of violence becoming a “weapon of the weak” with modernity serving as platform, social revolutions take the masses a step forward towards the achievement of political and economic justice.

Revolutionary methodology or methodology for a revolution

We cannot think of a revolutionary methodology without at the same time conceive of a methodology appropriate for a revolution. A methodology is a perspective one brings to research; when we add the term “revolutionary” it means we are also studying the methodology itself and ensuring that it speaks in a specific manner keeping particular goals in mind. A feminist methodology might foreground women-related concerns, but the term “revolutionary” is not limited by concerns of any one particular group and is bound to impact diverse groups of people at various levels in the social hierarchy. Revolutions are fundamentally structural alterations where both the goals and the means are addressed in equal measure.

In the 1952 film *Viva Zapata!*, a fictionalized version of the peasant revolutionary Emiliano Zapata’s life, John Steinbeck who wrote the screenplay, gives us an insight into the nature of structural changes. When President Porfirio Diaz tells the peasants that they should go to the courts for justice, Zapata retorts with a question: “Do you know of any land suit that was ever won by country people?” (KAZAN, 1952). When the President insists that they should be patient, Zapata points out with the practical wisdom of a peasant, “We make our tortillas out of corn, not patience” (KAZAN, 1952). While voicing the distrust of poor peasants through Emiliano Zapata, Steinbeck enables us to understand how deeply inequality is rooted in the structure of things.

The makers of the law, the executors of the law and the courts where the people are supposed to go when the law fails them, the entire political structure is meant to keep the poor in a perennial state of want and deprivation. Even when it is blatantly oppressive there is a chance that people would be willing to accept the law provided it is evenly administered. This is the case with dictatorships where laws are unjust because they don’t take the masses into consideration as well as unfair because they are selectively applied. Where a law is selectively applied the question of fairness dominates every other concern. People would bear an unjust law rather than an unfairly administered one where some are excluded from mistreatment owing to wealth and privilege. When we talk of structural changes we are talking about changing a system to give it a degree of uniformity; in such a context, the distinction between fairness and justice would be redundant because what we are talking about is to give everyone equal access to food, healthcare and education while also preserving their human dignity and their right to choose a way of life. In summary, the peasants get the corn to make tortillas out of the land owned by them.

Revolutionary methodology addresses structural issues to a large extent though leaderless protests which manage to achieve significant gains should not be undermined as not fitting into the category of *revolutionary*. Built-in the structural argument is a methodology for understanding revolutions. From the point of view of impact, to state that the internet and the mobile phone are far more revolutionary in terms

of how people's lives are globally transformed than the French, Mexican or Russian revolutions put together would not be completely off the mark. When we talk of revolutionary methodology the structures mentioned are about people in relation to power. Possibilities of empowerment need to be explored that provide insight into the nature of revolutionary consciousness. Gramsci uses the word "cathartic" in rather specific ways to indicate that within the idea of a structure one could find modes of liberation:

The term "catharsis" can be employed to indicate the passage from the purely economic (or egoistic-passional) to the ethico-political moment, that is the superior elaboration of the structure into superstructure in the minds of men. This also means the passage from "objective to subjective" and from "necessity to freedom". Structure ceases to be an external force which crushes man, assimilates him to itself and makes him passive; and is transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethico-political form and a source of new initiatives. To establish the "cathartic" moment becomes therefore, it seems to me, the starting-point for all the philosophy of praxis, and the cathartic process coincides with the chain of syntheses which have resulted from the evolution of the dialectic (GRAMSCI, 1988: 366-367).

A revolutionary methodology looks at structure not simply as an oppressive force but a source of freedom as well. Unequal power relations within a structure are obvious to the extent that we accept them for natural. However, Gramsci labors on the point that, "One must keep permanently in mind the two points between which this process oscillates: that no society poses for itself problems the necessary and sufficient conditions for whose solution do not already exist or are coming into being; and that no society comes to an end before it has expressed all its potential content" (GRAMSCI, 1988: 367). From this perspective, structurally generated inequalities that result in mass poverty, class and gender oppression contain potential solutions for transformation within the structures themselves. In *Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices*, Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland cautiously note that, "the point of doing feminist social research is not to score points for political correctness, or to attain methodological purity, but to give insights into gendered social existence that would otherwise not exist" (RAMAZANOGLU, 2002: 147). If the human consciousness is structured to look at reality in a certain manner, a revolutionary methodology will "give insights" into how that consciousness could be expanded to include ways of changing the reality.

A methodology looks at both what it studies and how it is a part of the structure of an existing reality. A research that is done in humanities or social sciences cannot be the statement of a problem without at the same time being a statement for a solution. One cannot, for instance, say that the oppression of women exists without talking about how women are able to counter the oppression. We are not talking about two different realities; it is one reality within which two things are happening at any point in time. By talking about revolutionary methodology we are also providing a methodology to a revolution. We cannot have research that poses a theoretical question in the real world without at the same time having a real answer to the theoretical questions being posed as part of the research. At some level revolutionary methodology is inseparable from revolutionary consciousness. We are looking at a political problem to an aestheticized system of reality that thrives on the unchanging character of an institution. Everything is turned into a set of abstractions through a complex legal system which has no meaning for the masses except to be its inadvertent victims. Walter Benjamin observes that "proletarianization of modern man and the increasing formation of

masses are two aspects of the same process” (BENJAMIN, 2007: 241). In the process of the poor becoming poorer turning into a mass of anonymous entities, “fascism” makes sure that class inequalities remain intact. At the same time, Benjamin adds, “The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life” (BENJAMIN, 2007: 241). The aim of revolutionary methodology is to interrogate the aesthetics that gradually attained a political status of its own; films and football clubs have a cult status in modern life; members of cults end up embracing a kind of pointless violence that defeats the goals of a revolution, which is the making of an egalitarian society. The context in which revolutionary consciousness expands to arrive at knowledge of reality forms the basis for a methodology of a revolution.

In *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach*, Andrew Sayer, in the opening chapter “Knowledge in Context,” observes, “Knowledge is developed and used in two main types of context—work (or ‘labour’) and communicative interaction. These contexts are highly related but neither is wholly reducible to the other. By ‘work’ or ‘labour’, I mean any kind of human activity which is intended to transform, modify, move or manipulate any part of nature...” (SAYER, 2010: 17). What adds to the deceptive nature of certain kinds of self-centered research is the fact that in order to construct an intricate theoretical framework we do not have to address basic issues related to work and interaction. Work-related issues are always deemed less sophisticated when it comes to serious academic research.

Given that human life depends on it, work, as the transformation of nature for human purposes, gets surprisingly little attention in philosophy and even in social science...Many social theories pay great attention to how society is organized and how it coheres, without considering how people (re)produce their means of life. Yet work is the most transformative relationship between people and nature...It is a ‘missing link’ that bridges the gap between knowledge and the world—a gap which has been widened both by the intellectualist prejudice and the real separations of work and ‘living’ of capitalism (SAYER, 2010: 18).

Work, the worker and the working classes and what kind of language-based interaction happens between people, these two aspects lie at how we look at research methods as well as methodologies. With the former we are looking at the source of how people define themselves, which is in relation to the work they do and the social positions they occupy as a consequence; with the latter we are looking at what kind of “intersubjectivity” shapes human relations, where the “subject” is a “a creative agent who brings about change” (SAYER, 2010: 15). Whether we are looking at a social order and its institutions which include the government machinery and the private enterprise as largely unchanging apart from improvisations within a body of rules or we are examining change as a vital component where subjects are not passively trapped in a psychological stasis but are almost always seeking ways of maneuvering through the rules keeping their individual and group interests in mind – it is this choice of viewpoint that will determine both the methods and methodologies available for serious research.

Methods are revolutionary to the extent that they subscribe to how the methodologies shape the imagination of the researcher. A revolutionary methodology can be taken in two senses: it can broadly be applied to every area of social and natural science research that involves the role the subject will play either as a scientist or as a social historian of objects in relation to people; alternatively it could be specifically

applied to situations which demand mass participation in the marathon effort to bring about transformation that will affect both their public as well as private lives. When we use the term “mass” we are referring not to a nameless entity but to a group of creatively thinking individuals or “subjects” who have come together to pursue a common interest. The term “mass” or “masses” has to be viewed in a positive light because it would otherwise mean that revolutions are ill-formulated and accidental rather than planned events built around a set of objectives.

In the anti-fascist novel *Bread and Wine* by Ignazio Silone, we are given a picture of the politics of resistance and the role of the “subject” as threat to the structures of authoritarian regimes. The discussion between the priest Don Paolo and the girl Bianchina elucidates the power of individuals to break the hold that authority has on a society.

“The dictatorship is based on unanimity,” he said. “It’s sufficient for one person to say no and the spell is broken.”
 “Even if that person is a poor, lonely sick man? the girl said.”
 “Certainly.”
 “Even if he’s a peaceful man who thinks in his own way and apart from that does no-one any harm?”
 “Certainly.” (...)
 “Under every dictatorship,” he said, “one man, one perfectly ordinary little man who goes on thinking with his own brain is a threat to public order. Tons of printed paper spread the slogans of the regime; thousands of loudspeakers, hundreds of thousands of posters and freely distributed leaflets, which armies of speakers in all the squares and at all the crossroads, thousands of priests in the pulpit repeat these slogans ad nauseam, to the point of collective stupefaction. But it’s sufficient for one little man, just one ordinary, little man to say no, and the whole of that formidable granite order is imperiled” (SILONE, 2005: 207-8).

It would be impossible to arrive at a revolutionary methodology unless we are able to imagine the “one perfectly ordinary little man who goes on thinking with his own brain.” The methodology for a revolution is predicated upon the notion that this one “ordinary” person has the potential to disrupt public order. By putting the individual at the forefront of how we understand transformation, we recognize that mass struggles could be meaningless unless we are able to see how individuals cause or respond to changes within a specific environment. If a revolutionary methodology will create the context for change, the goal of a proposed methodology for a revolution will be to ensure that the change is validated through the context. The context I insist upon seeing is predominantly the South Asian region, which according to the authors of *South Asian Development* “bears the dubious distinction of being home to more than 400 million (20 per cent) of the world’s poorest people. It also accounts for approximately 50 per cent of the world’s malnourished children” (HOSSAIN, 2010: 3). The extraordinary if not staggering variety of lives and lifestyles that constitute South Asia cannot be reduced to formulaic terms. My paper is however a theoretical exercise in examining the possibility of a social revolution turning into a probability or a plausibility based on a historical need to respond to mass poverty and deprivation that cannot be addressed through piecemeal changes or reforms that are oriented towards making a better society without creating an alternate one that responds to greater concerns of social and economic justice.

The idea of a social revolution

At the beginning of his book *The Age of Revolution 1789-1848* Eric Hobsbawm speaks of “words” as being “witnesses,” and often speaking “louder than documents” (HOBSBAWM, 1996: 1). Hobsbawm notes:

Let us consider a few English words which were invented, or gained their modern meanings, substantially in the period of sixty years with which this volume deals. They are such words as 'industry', 'industrialist', 'factory', 'middle class', 'working class', 'capitalism' and 'socialism'. They include 'aristocracy' as well as 'railway', 'liberal' and 'conservative' as political terms, 'nationality', 'scientist' and 'engineer', 'proletariat' and (economic) 'crisis'. 'Utilitarian' and 'statistics', 'sociology' and several other names of modern sciences, 'journalism' and 'ideology', are all coinages or adaptations of this period. So is 'strike' and 'pauperism' (HOBSBAWM, 1996: 1).

Given the fact, as Hobsbawm himself acknowledges, that the revolution that happened between 1789-1848 “has transformed, and continues to transform, the entire world” (HOBSBAWM, 1996: 1), the vocabulary of what we call a “social revolution” was formed during this very period which forms the title to Hobsbawm’s book: *The Age of Revolution*. Without a clarification of the meanings of the terms, it would be superficial to speak of a social revolution in relation to violence and modernity as if they were happening in a neutral domain where the actors have collectively agreed to see the world around them through a similar set of meanings. In effect, the paper examines what role “violence” and “modernity” will play in the making of a social revolution. If words are about being “witnesses” and not just impartial bystanders, the words used to talk about a social revolution will be part of the language of the methodology used to understand the motives behind the need for a revolution. In an unequal society violence is a fact of life; likewise, to imagine the “modern” would be to come out of an oppressive situation that is less than modern. At the risk of sounding simplistic, it can be said that every attempt to overcome a violent situation is simultaneously a move to embrace the idea of the modern. We attribute meanings to terms such as violence and modernity only to make sure that it enhances one’s own understanding of the world in which one is positioned as an agent. In the essay “The Stage of Modernity,” Timothy Mitchell notes the association between the term “modern” and the “west.” Mitchell says:

Modernity has always been associated with a certain place. In many uses, the modern is just a synonym for the West (or in more recent writings, the North). Modernization continues to be commonly understood as a process begun and finished in Europe, from where it has been exported across ever-expanding regions of the non-West. The destiny of those regions has been to mimic, never quite successfully, the history already performed by the West. To become modern, it is still said, or today to become postmodern, is to act like the West (MITCHELL, 2000: 1).

My point is that as a postcolonial nation it is impossible to escape the influence of the definition of modernity that by default implies westernization in some sense or the other. However, it is precisely the attempt to equate everything “modern” with “western” that needs to be systematically challenged for both the cultural and racist stereotypes that result from such a forced equation. In the South Asian discourse everything deemed “western” ends up becoming anti-national or anti-tradition, while everything “modern” in terms of developments in science and technology ends up meaning European or American.

For instance, anti-Americanism or anti-westernization while carrying within it elements of resistance toward a certain kind of economic and cultural hegemony is also a reactionary force when it privileges a communal worldview over a secular one. Therefore, any attempt to localize the modern in an attempt to secularize the population gets a negative connotation; while all attempts to universalize the modern turns into a western project in the third world. Nowhere is this more blatant than when it comes to gender rights in the global South where the freedom of women often gets associated with sexual permissiveness or even promiscuity. David Ludden seems to take a similar perspective on “modernity” as a project which, by implication, contains a certain disdain for the peasantry and is opposed to tradition.

National histories have formed territoriality and incorporated rustic folk into the project of modernity, so the past of its peasantry maps the rise of national power on the land. Modernity's general alienation from its agrarian environment pervades agrarian studies, and when combined with orientalist stereotypes, it simply pushed peasants more deeply into the margins of history in South Asia than elsewhere (LUDDEN, 1999, 2).

Given the revolutionary methodological slant of the paper, the point is to see the peasant not as a remnant of a pre-modern era who resists change but rather as someone who finds in the “modern” a way out of the repression of custom and the tyranny of a feudal system. While the peasants are pushed into the margins, the nation as such continues to be deeply embedded in a more specific definition of the modernity project that is dedicated to preserving the individualist lifestyles of urban, metropolitan *haves* through the active legitimizing support of the middle classes while abandoning the working poor in the cities or the rural landless to be content with bare survival. The housemaids (domestic workers), construction workers and waste pickers are examples that fall into the categories of people who must barely survive in order to make the social economy functional for the rest. The question that remains is the one that Canclini asks: “What does it mean to be modern? It is possible to condense the current interpretations by saying that four basic movements constitute modernity: an emancipating project, an expansive project, a renovating project, and a democratizing project” (CANCLINI, 1995: 12). By “emancipating project,” Canclini means, “the secularization of cultural fields” (CANCLINI, 1995: 12); the “expansive project” as manifested in development in the areas of technology oriented towards making profits; the “renovating project” that primarily revolves around the “the pursuit of constant improvement and innovation” (CANCLINI, 1995:12); and the “democratizing project” that revolves around a faith in “education, the diffusion of art, and specialized knowledge to achieve rational and moral evolution” (CANCLINI, 1995:12-13). The emancipation and democratization as far as the working poor are concerned revolves around including them within any national project that aims to liberate the masses from a state of starvation or near destitution which leaves them no alternative but to accept whatever terms that keep them barely alive. In the multicultural contexts of South Asia, national and sub-national demands are made within the wider compass of what would be, in the words of John Rawls

a well-ordered society as one designed to advance the good of its members and effectively regulated by a public conception of justice. Thus it is a society in which everyone accepts and knows that the others accept the same principles of justice, and the basic social institutions satisfy and are known to satisfy these principles. Now justice as fairness is framed to accord with this idea of society (RAWLS, 1999: 397).

When we talk of modernity we need to remember that it cannot be separated from either “a well-ordered society” or “justice as fairness.” There are individuals and groups who have every reason to believe that they have been unfairly treated. A sense of unfairness or the feeling of being unjustly deprived of what ideally ought to be theirs, can translate into forms of protest or subtle acts of resistance that make it difficult or impossible for any order to function normally without the use of force or indoctrination or a combination of both. The history of modernity is about the tools of subversion used by the marginalized to argue against what they perceive as “historical” oppression. A sense of being victimized becomes enough reason for the oppressed to arrive at a narrative, “which, even if largely a succession of failures, nonetheless profoundly transformed the ways people thought about what was possible and helped to fuel the explosion of struggles not only for social justice and rights but for the self-determination of peoples” (SELBIN, 2010: 130-31).

My argument is that elements of protest, resistance and change are built into any notion of modernity going by the view that it is an exclusivist discourse with strong colonial overtones in the South Asian contexts. We cannot be “modern” without imagining the antithesis to lop-sided development which excludes the poor. A violently imposed modernity will produce equally violent and modern forms of resistance.

It is important to note whether we are seeing modernity from the development perspective which is about achieving goals without concern for people or from the perspective of those who are left out of the processes of development. Although the classic argument made against globalization is that it creates inequalities and has a destructive impact on the environment owing to overutilization of natural resources, the point that needs to be borne in mind is that the poor are as much enamored with the power of modern technologies and with modernity as a discourse of social transformation as are the rich or the middle classes. The modernity that will become the basis of a social revolution will be a potentially violent one because it challenges the legal basis of modernity. In other words, it challenges the legitimacy of a system that through instruments of repression such as the police, the army and the judiciary preserves the status quo in the form of an unequal system of distribution.

As abstract as the use of the word “revolution” tends to be, so great is the need for clarification in order to identify what we mean by the term. Like the word “change,” a revolution could be used uncritically to mean anything from the arrival of Internet – the Internet revolution – to revolutions that are intellectual – intellectual revolution. A social revolution is more specific in the sense that no revolution, whether intellectual or internet, is outside the domain of the social. In specifying the “social” and attaching it to the word “revolution” the emphasis is on the role of “people” or on the popular aspect in the need to change the world. A combination of an emotional sense of being unjustly deprived along with the need to fight back, operate in tandem to create the rationale for a social revolution. Gramsci makes the observation that, “the creation of the proletarian state is not a thaumaturgical act: it is itself a process of development. It presupposes a preparatory period involving organizing and propaganda” (FORGACS, 2010: 88).

The revolution is not a miracle where people all of a sudden decide to fight to change things; in any mass protest careful planning and mass frustration which sees hope in nothing but a radical upheaval of the

order go hand in hand. The dialectical process of struggle wedded to an understanding of the objective conditions on the ground can play a role in mobilizing the masses to work towards change. A revolution is by definition never a spontaneous occurrence but the result of conscious efforts made by people working at the grassroots to provide an alternative vision to the masses.

Gramsci sounds a warning note when he says that without a tremendous commitment towards building an organized movement, “all our enthusiasm, all the faith of the working masses, will not succeed in preventing the revolution from degenerating pathetically into a new parliament of schemers, talkers and irresponsibles, nor in avoiding the necessity to make further and more dreadful sacrifices to bring about a proletarian state” (FORGACS, 2010: 88). Hence, it must be clear why the historical development of modernity unleashes processes where vast levels of deprivation and a state modeled along colonial lines with an emphasis on “reforms” rather than on the making of an egalitarian society, operate within the same framework. If an egalitarian order is the last thing in the “mind” of a state, “reforms” rather than systemic changes are foregrounded instead of radical transformation. Rosa Luxemburg begins her essay “Reform or Revolution” with the following questions:

At first view the title of this work may be found surprising. Can the social democracy be against reforms? Can we counterpose the social revolution, the transformation of the existing order, our final goal, to social reforms? Certainly not. The daily struggle for reforms, for the amelioration of the condition of the workers within the framework of the existing social order, and for democratic institutions, offers to the social democracy the only means of engaging in the proletarian class war and working in the direction of the final goal—the conquest of political power and the suppression of wage labor. Between social reforms and revolution there exists for the social democracy an indissoluble tie. *The struggle for reforms is its means; the social revolution, its aim* (LUXEMBURG, 2008: 41) (My italics).

While keeping the “social revolution” as the final goal, the struggle for “reforms” that make life bearable to the deprived classes becomes a realistic response to modernity. From Luxemburg’s point of view, reforms are about buying time for the propertied classes; while they alleviate the miseries of the working classes, they could never be long-term solutions to mass poverty. The context for reforms needs to be examined while making a case for a revolution. Reforms might work where there is a democratic process for the redressal of grievances. In a normal scenario, reforms can help in improving a situation where people still have the means for a basic human existence, which translated would mean, food, shelter and clothing. In a situation where starvation, homelessness and lack of means of survival are a day-to-day reality for large sections of the population, reforms would at best imply minimal efforts on the part of the ruling establishment to enable common people have a decent life. In such a situation where the deprived are a majority, revolutionary sentiments become the order of the day and violence one way or another is accepted as a possible means to come out of a set of circumstances that is not going to change any time soon. To the question of whether a “humane, emancipated society” is attainable through reforms, Marcuse responds in the following manner:

Reforms can and must be attempted. Everything that can serve to alleviate poverty, misery, and repression must be attempted. But exploitation and repression belong to the essence of capitalist production just as war and the concentration of economic power do. That means sooner or later the point

is reached where reforms run up against the limits of the system; where to put through reforms would be to sever the roots of capitalist production—namely profit. That is the point at which the system will defend itself, must defend itself, against reforms in the interests of self-preservation, and where the question then arises: "Is revolution possible?" (FERGUSON, 1985: 73-74).

Marcuse sees a problem with the system of capitalist production itself whose sense of modernity is based on "exploitation" and "repression." A system oriented towards making profits, despite reforms of a serious nature and significant impact, is intrinsically incapable of changes that lead to equality because its basic assumptions about the social order are not only rooted in inequality but also in the need to sustain an unequal order. That there is an unequal order is a given; what is *not* given is what could possibly be done to change such an order. Marcuse does not negate the role of reforms but rightly points out that there is a point beyond which reforms will not be carried out because it would defeat the basis of a feudal-capitalist order where you need to have large sections of the population that could be exploited for cheap labor. If reforms would mean drying the sources of cheap labor it creates a contradiction where private ownership of means of production would be unsustainable for all practical purposes. Ayesha Jalal provides a context to the "reforms" which are of a purely populist character in the South Asian context.

The abortive populist initiatives in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh underline the importance of the overall balance of forces within state and civil society in determining the success or failure of party agendas. In each of the three cases the adoption of the populist creed was in response to particular historical conjunctures where the uneven spread of capitalist orientated economic development during the previous decade had led to a precarious balance not only between different social classes and regions but also between them and a centralized post-colonial state. The need for a new social covenant to maintain the legitimacy of the state called for a spate of redistributive reforms without actually disturbing the old alliances with dominant social groups. It is this contradictory requirement of change yet continuity, of evolution in the name of revolution, of running furiously in the same spot, which gives the populist era in the South Asian subcontinent and indeed in most parts of the world its duplicitous character. *It also tells why the opportunities afforded by populism turned out to be mirages in the sand and why the passions that discovery elicited were smothered in an overt display of authoritarianism in all three states* (JALAL, 2002: 89).

A populism-based reformist agenda is bound to lead to bitter disappointments because its outcomes are predictably oriented towards a trickle-down effect in creating a small class of beneficiaries while leaving the masses expectant without giving them either the tools or the real opportunity to transform their condition. If reforms only take a populist character, it is because of the lack of political imagination on the part of the government and state functionaries as much as it is the inertia of the masses who are willing to allow themselves to be deceived through popular culture, especially music and film industry, rather than engage with the community to create the basis for political action. Popular culture thrives on the narcissism and sentimentalism of the populace without giving the masses a realistic way of examining solutions to their predicament. A strange kind of political and cultural illiteracy is created where entertainment replaces religion as the drug industry of the masses. A mirage of development is where people occupy positions that would give them a chance for individualist lifestyles; but, real development is where the masses are able to make individual decisions for themselves with regard to the kind of order they believe is best suited for them. As Jalal further notes

while development has undoubtedly taken place in India, it has occurred alongside rather than broken the vicious cycle of poverty perpetuated by an inequitable distribution of power and assets, high population growth rates and mass illiteracy. Although couched in 'socialist' terms, India's macro-economic efforts have by and large followed the liberal model of planning for capitalist development. An historical assessment of the state-property nexus reveals the political as well as the structural constraints that have hampered the Indian state's ability to carry out any significant redistributive reforms. Without these reforms winning the battle against widespread poverty has remained a distant dream, albeit one which the rising political costs of exploitation and discrimination along lines of class, caste and gender have made more and more unconscionable and perilous for Indian state managers to ignore (JALAL, 2002: 125).

Not only is it not real development where the masses are without a choice, whatever could break the "state-property nexus" was never meant to be considered as development in the first place. In the absence of "redistributive reforms" that empower the weak and the marginalized, a potentially divisive situation bordering a state of continual strife becomes the norm; this in itself, is no assurance of an incipient social revolution, which might need a conscious, inward-looking, self-disciplined population that through a period of resistance has acquired the experience and the ability to revolt against the system that thrives on the contradictions of modernity. Though the contradictions where many are excluded to the benefit of the few are at the heart of globalization, the peculiarity of the South Asian context is defined by the fact that these contradictions are manifested with a clarity that demands brutal repression by powerful governments in order to give the system a semblance of stability. Where violence becomes an endemic feature of modernity, a large section of the population is condemned to despondency and a state of helplessness, while the rest are subjects of fear that could be imaginary as well as generated through how the contradictions reveal themselves in day-to-day life.

Violence: a feature of modernity

An understanding of South Asian modernity throws light on how violence dominates the landscape of social and political change. Whether violence is built into the structure of what we call "modernity" owing to alienation or whether a colonial-style modernity which does not take the people into confidence is leading to violence – both are questions that are intertwined. If change must happen it must happen in the present; it cannot happen in the *non-present* of an advertisement that promises satisfaction that I am expected to derive with the product. I have to experience the present as reality not as fantasy that somehow comes close to reality without in any way being real. Modernity cannot be something that I am promised by the system to which I belong without showing itself in fact. The modern has to be part of my life, who I am and what I want to be. Global and colonial modernity are strikingly similar to the extent that the underlying philosophy is the same: the expectation of change is made to look like change itself. In the process, the result is what Karel Kosik terms insightfully as the "crisis of modernity".

The current crisis is the crisis of modernity. Modernity is in crisis because it has ceased to be "*contemporary*," and has sunk to mere temporality and transience. Modernity is not something substantial that concentrates the past and the future around and in itself, in its setting, but is rather a mere transient point through which temporality and provisionality rush. They are in such a hurry that they do not have time to stop and concentrate on the full present, or on that present which is in the process of fulfillment.

In this permanent lack of time they are forever and always fabricating a disintegrating provisionality, a mere temporality. This is a situation where a family does not have time to sit down around a table together and live like a close community of people, or when a politician is pursued from campaign to campaign and does not have time to reflect on the meaning of his activity. In this situation—one which empties out the present and into the depths of its interior inserts: nothing, nihil—town squares break down to traffic intersections and parking lots, the village green is destroyed because that majestic feature of the age—the department store—overshadows lime trees that have stood for centuries. Baroque church or chapels, architecture declines to the technologically progressive building, and community to a consumer group (KOSIK, 1995: 45).

In the case of colonialism this crisis, where the poor and exploited are deprived of their “present,” is accentuated because it becomes a wholesale imposition of a definition of the modern that does not take the colonized under its purview. The violence that stems from the above-mentioned situation is not because the idea of modernity is rejected but simply because it did not emerge from “contact” with the masses. The masses have no role to play in a modernity in which their existence is merely that of commodified labor. The rise of either extreme left or right-wing movements is a consequence of this failure to make the ones who matter in the making of modernity a part and parcel of the dialogue that ought to precede all attempts towards modernization.

The discourse of modernity is as ambiguous as the violence that we associate with it for the simple reason that we are prioritizing one definition of modernity which does not place any social or moral value on the consent of those who matter without looking at the alternatives as such. Olúfémí Táíwò in his book *How Colonialism preempted Modernity in Africa* throws light on the question of modernity in the African context, an argument that applies to the South Asian region as well. It is not modernity in itself that is to blame but the way it has been applied in two different situations, the European social landscape where modernity meant being progressive in the best sense of the term and in the colonies where modernity had nothing to do with the will of the people. As Táíwò says:

in the same way that the march toward modernity in Europe made imperative the preservation of monuments, knowledges, and identities that came before, a basic acknowledgment of our humanity might have spared many of the monuments, knowledges, and identities that testified to our human achievements in the period preceding the encounter with Europeans. But this was not what happened. The coming of the Europeans, especially the colonial administrators, and their imperiousness, the subsequent denial of our humanity, conjointly underwrote the devaluation of what was useful in our achievements, the undermining of our collective identities and meaning, the destruction of our indigenous technology and modes of knowledge production, and the withering of our capacity for autochthonous history-making (TÁÍWÒ, 2010: 46).

The modernity that occurred in Europe did not happen in the colonies where oppression along with a denial of the humanity of the colonized was a day-to-day reality. By devaluing the knowledge of local cultures it was possible for the colonial administration to highlight one definition of modernity: which is essentially what Europe stood for in relation to the colonies. The African pre-colonial past became irrelevant for an understanding of what could have been viewed as modern in those devastated cultures from a more current perspective. Colonialism changed the conception of time within the cultures of the colonized in order to give the latter an impression that history began with the arrival of Europeans on their landscape and whatever happened earlier was not worthy of consideration. As far as the future was concerned, every so-called attempt

to develop the colonies was meant to impress upon the colonized that the oppressor was going to be there forever. In other words, the past of the colonized was reduced to nothing and their future intertwined with the history of colonialism. In the “Conclusion” chapter to *A Dying Colonialism*, Fanon observes,

French colonialism in Algeria has always developed on the assumption that it would last forever. The structures built, the port facilities, the airdromes, the prohibition of the Arab language, often gave the impression that the enemy committed himself, compromised himself, half lost himself in his prey, precisely in order to make any future break, any separation, impossible. Every manifestation of the French presence expressed a continuous rooting in time and in the Algerian future, and could always be read as a token of an indefinite oppression (FANON, 1965: 179-180).

The development in the colonies was about making any future separation impossible for the colonized. The history of colonialism in the post-colonies continues in insidious forms owing to the reason that the structures of administration and development cannot be autonomous without the role of countries from the global North which keep weaker nations in their grip through financial institutions such as World Bank and IMF in addition to the sale of weapons to third world governments. We cannot therefore be modern except in terms chalked out by the European and American economic institutions such as the WTO and the “culture industry” emanating in the west. The historian Pannikar gives an instance of the moral basis of European modernity which refused to recognize the basic humanity of non-Europeans. This lack of recognition is embodied in the legal framework that defined colonialism as a system of domination.

Da Gama and his associates, even before they reached the coast of India, began to enforce the claim of his sovereign to be ‘the Lord of Navigation’. Without any kind of warning he intercepted and destroyed any vessel he came across on his voyage. The following incident quoted in *Lendas da India* is typical of the policy of terrorism and piracy that he introduced into Indian waters. The Portuguese armada ran across an unarmed vessel returning from Mecca. Vasco da Gama captured it and in the words of Lendas, ‘after making the ship empty of goods, prohibited anyone from taking out of it any Moor and then ordered them to set fire to it’. The explanation for capturing the vessel is perhaps to be found in Barroes’ remark: “It is true that there does exist a common right to all to navigate the seas and in Europe we recognize the rights which others hold against us; but the right does not extend beyond Europe and therefore the Portuguese as Lords of the Sea are justified in confiscating the goods of all those who navigate the seas without their permission” (PANNIKAR, 1959: 35).

Whether we are talking of the legal violence of power or the legitimate violence of resistance, ultimately to imagine modernity is to come to terms with violence in one form or the other. The “rights” that modernity in Europe gave the citizens, which again are a result of struggles over a period of time, kept the non-European outside what is “modern.” The “terrorism and piracy” in the above instance that Pannikar is talking about did not involve any ethical contradictions for the average European in how they dealt with those who did not belong to their imaginary space of selfhood.

What is evident is that a non-violent modernity is not only possible but a reality that needs to be explored from a historical perspective. We’ve been denied the realization of a non-violent modernity owing to the experience of colonialism; and forms of this denial can be observed in the functioning of the neo-colonial nation-states of South Asia where the degradation of the environment and a lack of emotional investment in the landscape which comes from a feeling of patriotism or a true sense of belonging is conspicuous by its absence. The self-defeating not to mention masochistic violence of the colonized

continues in a virulent fashion in caste, class, ethnic and the more familiar gender violence. Táíwò speaks of what would have been modernity in Africa and how it is important to understand the negotiation with modernity that happened in the 19th century.

It is important to record Africa's contribution to modernity not merely to show that Africa's relationship to the phenomenon is neither new nor recent but also to show that some of the conundrums that scholars have run into in their study of Africa may be made more comprehensible thereby. Furthermore, if we can remind our contemporaries how our foreparents negotiated their relationship to modernity in the nineteenth century, when many of them were barely removed from the depredations of slavery in the New World, we might equip them with better and more effective tools to understand the present situation when modernity is again on our plate. Finally, in making the case for the claim that colonialism subverted modernity in the continent, we are enabled to make a stronger indictment of colonialism while simultaneously retrieving what is useful in the legacy of Africa's earlier transition to modernity that was aborted by the imposition of formal colonialism (TÁÍWÒ, 2010: 48).

The modernity that means liberation from the clutches of superstition, the recognition of people as individuals, rights to women and working classes, a system where fairness is identified as a value to be cherished – this is the modernity that needs to be embraced as a goal in the postcolonial South Asian context. The violence that is intertwined with the modernity embodied in the struggle for social and political justice is not the same kind of violence that imposes the modern on the masses with or without their consent. The former kind of violence paradoxically results in a social order where violence is abhorred and peace is the normal social discourse because the fruits of the struggle have been achieved or at least there is a significant rise in mass consciousness. Interestingly, therefore, social revolutions become the basis for both a modern and a peaceful, non-violent society.

Final Considerations: making of a “modern” social revolution

A social revolution far from inciting violence is the one way to respond to the endemic violence of repression, exploitation and alienation. If mass poverty is one feature that broadly defines the condition of the South Asian working classes and the marginalized, a solution that will not bring the poor together or the victims of modernity to revolt is at best a superficial one. This is not to take away the value of the argument James Scott makes in *Weapons of the Weak*:

The reader will detect, correctly, a certain pessimism about the prospects for revolutionary change that will systematically and reliably respect the insistence on small decencies that are at the core of peasant or working-class consciousness. If the revolution cannot even deliver the petty amenities and minor humanities that animate the struggle of its subjects, then there is not much to be said for whatever else it may accomplish. This pessimism is, alas, not so much a prejudice as, I think, a realistic assessment of the fate of workers and peasants in most revolutionary states a fate that makes melancholy reading when set against the revolutionary promise. If revolution were a rare event before the creation of such states, it now seems all but foreclosed. All the more reason, then, to respect, if not celebrate, the weapons of the weak. All the more reason to see in the tenacity of self-preservation in ridicule, in truculence, in irony, in petty acts of noncompliance, in foot dragging, in dissimulation, in resistant mutuality, in the disbelief in elite homilies, in the steady, grinding efforts to hold one's own against overwhelming odds a spirit and practice that prevents the worst and promises something better (SCOTT, 1985: 350).

It would be repetitive to say that countless acts of resistance become one social revolution. My point is that without the promise of a social revolution, no resistance in itself is possible or meaningful to the very

poor. To discover the “weapons of the weak” in day-to-day resistance might be a pragmatic way of looking at how the poor operate in fact rather than theorize at an abstract level, without going into the reality of what the exploited actually do to ameliorate their situation. The limitation in the “weapons” argument that James Scott makes is that the poor are trapped in a condition of exploitation without their will or consent and therefore would at best work for changes that would improve their lives without transforming their existence as such which would be dramatic to say the least. No one chooses to be poor and then decide to resist poverty. The poor are pushed into a condition which gives them little or no chance to escape from it. Unless there is a social revolution in view which actually takes the will and choice of the exploited into view, the exploited will continue to inhabit a world where they seek the minimal benefits possible through a system without ever altering the rules of the game in favor of the downtrodden classes.

The modernity of the poor will be a way of trying to keep alive “tradition” in a manner that enables them to be content with the minimal they could possibly achieve within an order. It is only where the poor actually decide to revolt against their existing condition which until now they accepted as a natural one and seek to replace it with a system over which they could have political control that it is possible for them to come out of their poverty. In this context, it is interesting to look at the distinction Karel Kosik makes between what he calls “known truth” and “would-be truth.”

To stand in the known truth means not to be caught up in ownership of would-be truth. It means to get into motion and take upon oneself the effort and pain of experience, which goes through all of the formations of modernity in order to reveal its true nature, to liberate itself and these formations from the rigidity of reification and personification. To stand in the known truth thus constitutes a revolt against ossified conditions, resurrection to a dignified life. It means always being willing to revolt and stand anew, to come into being and be born, to make another attempt to break out of the closed system to the openness of the world (KOSIK, 1995: 50-51).

The poor in general inhabit the condition of the “known truth”; therefore, the acts of resistance are the means through which they preserve their humanity. In the end resistance in small ways accomplished by the “weak” will legitimize “revolutionary change” but, where there is no insight into the nature and goals of a social revolution, only one kind of modernity is bound to prevail – that of power and not of the resistance. The South Asian problem is compounded because intellectuals inhabit the spaces of “would-be truth.”

The Bollywoodization of popular culture in combination with a romanticized and theoretical view of social change, often personality-centered, is the crux of the problem. The ideal tends to be lost in false idealism while the reality continues to stare in a bleak and cruel manner refusing to go away. One of the items in the agenda for a social revolution is to liberate a certain definition of modernity which is incarcerated by government, big business and politicians from being a lifestyle thing dealing with clothes and fashion to another definition of modernity which deals with “life-worlds” of the common masses. The false binary that there is a time-honored past acting through tradition which is opposed to the modern is a colonial creation and has nothing to do with what the modern ought to stand for in the eyes of the people. For the poor and the weak, the modern is the way forward; what is tradition is in fact only another facet of modernity whose elements are selectively incorporated to ensure that the masses do not exist in a state of contradiction where

they are fighting an internal battle with themselves. What Gunnar Myrdal points out about the South Asian situation in his classic *Asian Drama* stands true today as much as it did when it was first written.

In South Asia the ideals are still more than usually vague and at times internally inconsistent. These logical deficiencies are part of the reality that must be faced; they cannot be disposed of by conceptual tricks that tidy the argument. They indicate that the valuation viewpoint is not really a point but rather a limited space within which the key concepts are often blurred at the edges. Further, the modernization ideals are mainly the ideology of the educated and politically articulate part of the population – particularly the intellectual elite...And we should also be aware that the modernization ideals have to compete with conflicting traditional valuations, established through the centuries and often sanctioned by religion. Even politically alert and active members of the educated class are often of two minds and engage in awkward and frustrating mental compromises. Although such conflicts are characteristic of ideologies of this nature everywhere, in South Asia they are magnified by the vast distance between ideals and reality (MYRDAL, 1971: 28).

The “vast distance between ideals and reality,” the inconsistencies that plague planners as much it does the populace, the unattainable “modernity” of the westernized haves and their middle class non-western imitators, the abandoned poor outside the purview of whatever vaguely resembles the “modern,” the failure of “modern” intellectuals to stand in the “known truth” of the working classes, the face of homelessness and grinding poverty in the slums of the towns and cities, the impoverishment of the rural landless – these aspects set the tone for the rise of extremism rather than a social revolution which is more about educating the masses to become conscious of their rights and be able to fight for them in legitimate, inclusive and democratic ways. Bidyut Chakrabarty and Rajat Kumar Kujur offer a context to Maoism which is not a random occurrence by a group of anti-nationals or “terrorists”, but a discourse rooted in a social and political condition.

Maoism in India has thrived on the objective conditions of poverty that has various ramifications. Undoubtedly, high economic and income disparity and exploitation of the impoverished, especially ‘the wretched of the earth’, contribute to conditions, conducive to revolutionary and radical politics. India’s development strategy since independence was hardly adequate to eradicate the sources of discontent. The situation seems to have become worse with the onset of globalization that has created “islands of deprivation” all over the country (CHAKRABARTY, 2010: 9).

The violence of extremist ideologies such as Maoism that adopt the violence of an authoritarian state as the answer to injustice, end up becoming formulas where there are “good” guys and “bad” guys and the destruction of the latter is the beginning of a golden age where there are no “bad” guys to worry about. While as a political solution, Maoism seems simplistic on the surface owing to its warped logic, the existence of “the objective conditions of poverty,” make it an alternative to be seriously considered by the rural poor who are left without a choice. Two things I seek to emphasize in the making of a “modern” social revolution. One is the insight that violence need not necessarily be an intrinsic feature of mass-based social changes; the coming together of people for a common goal is not about collective paranoia but about carefully thought out ends that will lead to a relatively more humane and just society in comparison with the previous one. Another is that in any revolution, the masses are individuals operating as a collective consciousness and not mobs with random aims and prone to violence which has no personal meaning attached to it as such.

Given this understanding of a social revolution, the “modern” aspect of it lies in the fact that in any change the agents are bound to look at the context in which they are functioning in relation to other social

beings. At the risk of sounding tautological, I would like to say that modernity is the consequence as much as it is the essence of the “modern” social revolution. John Foran gives “five inter-related causal factors must combine in a given conjuncture to produce a successful social revolution: 1) dependent development; 2) a repressive, exclusionary, personalist state; 3) the elaboration of effective and powerful political cultures of resistance; and a revolutionary crisis consisting of 4) an economic downturn; and 5) a world-systemic opening (a let-up of external controls)” (FORAN, 2005: 18). To what extent the South Asian contexts meet these conditions is a question that needs to be investigated on an individual basis. What is clear however is that mass poverty and state repression that preserves the worldviews of the rich and powerful while sustaining the ideological basis of middle class conformity is sufficient reason to generate the basis of a social revolution across South Asia in response to conditions that are violent enough in themselves to provoke a virulent if not an entirely violent overthrow of the existing order of things.

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*Recebido em 23 de julho de 2018.
Aprovado em 27 de julho de 2018.*

RESUMO

O presente artigo examina a inter-relação entre violência e modernidade no contexto do sul da Ásia. Uma revolução social não é nem espontânea nem é um projeto cuidadosamente planejado, com uma linha do tempo preparada com antecedência, mantendo a situação política em mente. Existem condições objetivas a serem atendidas para qualquer transformação social em larga escala; além dessas condições, o papel da intervenção humana deve ser enfatizado para que a mudança seja realizada. O argumento central do artigo é que, no contexto da pobreza em massa, torna-se imperativo que os pobres se unam e se revoltam com a intenção de adquirir ganhos materiais resultantes do crescimento econômico. Até que ponto as vítimas das sociedades de classe sentem a necessidade de se revoltar contra seus opressores é uma questão em aberto. O fato, no entanto, é que existe um potencial de revolução incorporado à natureza da opressão. Onde os pobres são a grande maioria, há uma possibilidade real de que uma faísca seja suficiente para criar uma reação em cadeia que leve a mudanças ao longo de vários níveis. É importante examinar situações aparentemente não relacionadas em que um grupo de pessoas que lutam por uma causa imediata seja capaz de defender suas ideias através de lutas organizadas. O artigo examina a região do sul da Ásia, onde as contradições coloniais estão entrelaçadas com as desigualdades estruturais, a fim de entender o que os pobres fazem no processo de se revoltar contra uma condição desigual; como eles são capazes de se modernizar através do uso da violência que está paradoxalmente emergindo como resultado de uma modernidade desequilibrada

Palavras-chave: modernidade; Sul da Ásia; revolução social.

ABSTRACT

The article examines the interrelationship between violence and modernity in the South Asian context. A social revolution is neither spontaneous nor is it a carefully planned project with a timeline prepared in advance keeping the political situation in mind. There are objective conditions to be met for any large-scale social transformation; apart from those conditions, the role of human intervention must be emphasized for change to be realized. The central argument of the article is that in the context of mass poverty it becomes imperative for the poor to come together and revolt with the intention of acquiring material gains resulting from economic growth. To what extent do victims of class society feel the need to revolt against their oppressors is an open question. The fact, however, is that there is a potential for revolution built into the nature of the oppression. Where the poor are in a vast majority, there is an authentic possibility that a spark is enough to create a chain reaction leading to changes along various levels. It is important to examine seemingly unrelated situations where a group of people fighting for an immediate cause are able to make their point through organized struggles. The paper examines the South Asian region where colonial contradictions are intertwined with structural inequalities in order to understand what the poor do in the process of revolting against an unequal condition; how they are able to modernize themselves through the use of violence that is paradoxically emerging as a result of a lop-sided modernity.

Key-words: modernity; South Asia; Social Revolution.