Fascism, Maoism and the Democratic Left

Jairus Banaji

I’ll start with three meanings of democracy as I see it. 1. Democracy in the sense of the formal framework of a constitutional democracy with the rights to freedom and equality, the right to life and personal liberty, to freedom of religion, etc. that it guarantees. In the Indian Constitution these are the fundamental rights incorporated in Part 3 of the Constitution, under Articles 14–30.

2. Democracy as a culture of resistance grounded in the constitutional rights given under my first meaning, including the Fifth Schedule protecting Adivasi communities in the Scheduled Areas. India today is full of mass struggles and when labour movements are strong we can see what a culture of resistance means.

And 3. democracy as an aspiration for control. One can see the Communist Manifesto as a generalization of democracy in this third sense (of the mass of workers aspiring to control their own lives, economically, politically and culturally) and as a culmination of democracy in both the previous senses. Thus for Communists (in Marx’s sense) the mass element in democracy is crucial, it is what defines democracy in its most complete sense and historical form.

Now contrast this with cultures of resistance and/or struggles for control that are not grounded in democracy in sense 1/. They involve an authoritarian vision of democracy, both in the sense that they set out to overthrow the existing democracy which is seen simply as a mask for the rule of capital or in the sense that they disregard the rights guaranteed by the Constitution on the grounds that no armed struggle can be waged while respecting those rights. In contrast to all of the above, fascism targets democracy in all senses, seeking to overthrow democracy as such without pretensions to replacing it with any more complete form of democracy, as the Maoists claim to do with their notion of a “New Democracy”. What fascism and Maoism share in common is the common goal of overthrowing an existing parliamentary democracy, though they seek to do so in very different ways (the Right being driven by what Arthur Rosenberg called their “hatred of democratic government”). 1 I’ll deal with both a bit later but first let me make another set of distinctions which you may find helpful.

In India we face the paradox of a constitutional democracy that is based on a repressive state apparatus. I call this a paradox because the exercise of repression violates numerous rights guaranteed under the Constitution, so that it generates a contradiction at the heart of the system. By repressive state apparatus I mean (to take the obvious examples) large-scale militarization of the Indian State; the culture of encounter killings (that is, extra-judicial killings) that is specially rife in certain states like Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh; the shocking impunity that exists for politicians who instigate violence against minorities; and so on. All of these have become endemic features of our democracy. But how do we understand this paradox? On the Left the traditional answer has been that this is what “bourgeois democracy” is, there is no contradiction or paradox here, it’s the nature of “bourgeois” democracy to promise more than it can offer. This is an essentialist argument in the sense that it constructs a model of a system and seeks to explain reality by the essential nature of that model. Frankly, I think it’s time to break with this orthodoxy because, to my mind, the expression “bourgeois democracy” is really quite
meaningless. I suggest it would be helpful (as we did with the different meanings of democracy) to draw a line between three things that are, especially on the Left, often conflated, namely, capitalism, democracy and the state apparatus. As a historian I know at least this much that Capitalism and democracy are not functionally related, not even historically, but systems in conflict. Capitalism seeks to limit democracy through its use of the state apparatus. For the democratic Left the crucial element of democracy lies in the ability of the masses to shape their lives through the political system, and that in turns requires mass organizations like unions, workers’ councils, and popular committees of the kind we saw in the recent upsurge in Egypt especially. It is this ‘mass’ element in democracy that capital seeks to contain or subvert through its use of the state apparatus. Mass democracy presupposes a strong and well organized labour movement, as well as a passion for freedom, that is, a culture where people are willing to fight for their rights, and it withers in conditions where capital is able, through the state, to decimate both of these.

With these distinctions, there is nothing particularly paradoxical about a constitutional democracy that survives by requiring some level of repression against its own people. It is not democracy that is at fault but the state apparatus (as an entity distinct from democracy) and the ability of powerful groups to use it to contain both cultures of resistance and aspirations for control, if not actually subvert the Constitution itself. In the case of India, the recent book by Anu and Kamal Chenoy shows brilliantly how the militarization of the Indian State has been grounded in a drive to hold the Union together by force rather than the power of democracy. This is one sense in which we can speak of the subversion of constitutional democracy, which is often secured behind the mask of laws that legitimate repression. The frayed margins of Indian democracy where insurgencies are based on sub-nationalisms or class assertions have seen the worst forms of human rights abuse, that is, departures from the Constitution the state claims to be defending, and of course the marginality of these regions (Kashmir, the Northeast, Jharkhand and other tribal regions) is not just geographical in relation to some imagined Centre, it is also profoundly cultural in the sense that the backbone of “mainstream” India, as we all know, is caste Hindu while the insurgent regions are multi-ethnic, tribal and religiously more diversified. India has been imagined in all sorts of ways, there is no master narrative of the Indian “nation”, but I suggest that one major rift in these different ways of constructing Indian nationalism lies in the issue of how central democracy is to the process and what we mean by democracy. To build a country through the power of democracy is a very different sort of agenda from seeking to hold it together by force or foisting some imaginary unity or commonality on its people when their cultures and sense of community are so diverse.

Now Maoism and fascism share a common hostility to the existing forms of democracy, fascism because it seeks to destroy democracy as such, being unreconciled to the liberal traditions of the 19th century, the Maoists because they claim to want to replace existing forms of democracy by something called New Democracy. Both seek to overthrow constitutional democracies of the kind that emerged in Germany in the 1920s (the Weimar Republic) or that exists in India today, but in very different ways. Fascism is essentially a mass movement, this was the great insight of Arthur Rosenberg’s essay of 1934 in contrast to the orthodoxy that saw it either as a counter-revolution and mainly that, or as a conspiracy hatched by capitalists acting from behind the scenes. The power élites of Germany gave their backing to fascism, they did not create it. It is crucial to understand this point as it has extraordinary relevance to our situation in India. Fascism only succeeds as a mass movement and its strategy of subverting democracy from within
depends on mass mobilizations based on pathological forms of nationalism that identify racial or religious victims (Jews, Muslims) and political enemies (Marxists, ‘Bolsheviks’). When Hitler attacked Marxism in relentless campaigns of propaganda that filled the beerhalls of Munich, it was Social Democracy and the Weimar Republic that he was targeting. In an earlier talk I gave, I suggested that when discussing fascism it’s helpful to make a distinction between the ‘enabling conditions’ and the ‘historical pattern’ itself. For example, a spineless judiciary that refused to contain violence from the Right; or a climate shaped by widespread racial antisemitism, a yearning for national redemption and ‘mystical notions of a uniquely German social order’; or the backing of powerful figures within the ruling establishment; or the profound economic crisis of the late 1920s were all enabling conditions in the success of the Nazis who till then had remained completely marginal. However, to take just one example from this list, there’s no reason to see ‘crisis’ as such as part of the narrower historical pattern of fascism, which is much better defined by the following features: a single-minded concentration on propaganda (for Hitler politics was propaganda, as Kershaw shows in his biography); ‘nationalization of the masses’ as the decisive fascist strategy, that is, their incorporation into extreme forms of nationalism; the combination of paramilitary training with political activism (the use of Stormtroopers); and finally the systematic construction of a Leader cult. All of these features are related to the mobilizing of a mass base as some inert object that the organized group works on in a conscious and systematic way. In India three of these features of the ‘historical pattern’ as I call it are fully present. The racial antisemitism and radical nationalism of the Nazis both have their Indian counterparts in the targeting of Muslims especially, by the Sangh parivar. What the BJP or Sangh parivar lacks at the moment is a leader around whom a fanatical cult can be built which will speed up mass mobilizations and incorporation of the masses into assertive forms of pan-Indian or ‘Hindu’ nationalism that either seek to built up justifications for a war with Pakistan or target minorities as an imagined ‘Fifth Column’ or do both.

Note that there is a political culture here that implicates a specific form of mobilization. I’ll return to this at the end when comparing it with other possible forms of mobilization.

Now in the Communist Manifesto Marx and Engels made a special point of stating ‘The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working-class parties…They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement’. This is a profoundly interesting passage of the Manifesto as it outlines a conception of the role of Communists that would be progressively undermined and discarded in the decades that followed. Far from following the precept that Communists interact with parties formed by the workers themselves (what Marx called ‘working-class parties’), the revolutionary Left of subsequent generations came to believe precisely the opposite. That it is the role of Communists to form a separate exclusive party that will ‘lead’ workers, even if workers have had little to do with its formation or lack any substantial control over its leadership and policies. This is what some of us on the Left call vanguardism. It is a political model that generated an endless cycle of fragmentation on the Left, since each vanguard, originating as a sect, often completely divorced from the mass of workers, proudly asserted its claim to be the vanguard, the exclusive and true representative of proletarian interests in contrast to all other political organizations making the same claim. Theory was then drawn into this dialectic as an elaborate apology for demarcating the numerous vanguards, was progressively doctrinalised and reduced to the repetition of formulas, and lost its strictly scientific function of illuminating reality. In the reified form of doctrine, theory became the ostensible touchstone for discriminating between contending claims
to leadership, even when the real causes of fragmentation lay deeper, in external international
events, as with the split between the CPI and the CPI(M) or the subsequent Maoist split or series
of expulsions from the CPI(M), both of which were essentially motivated by major divisions
within the Stalinist bloc between Russia and China, and permanently weakened the Left in India.
Today vanguardism has reached extreme and ludicrous proportions with the different Left groups
ready to use force against each other, dispensing even with the formality of a political debate,
since what passes for debate on the Indian Left is a series of fierce denunciations and the
constant reassertion of fixed positions, of formulas that have been around often for decades
and lost all meaning in relation to the actual nature of capitalism. Even something so
obvious as the fact that ‘comprador bureaucratic bourgeoisie’ is not the best description one can
have for powerful corporate groups like the Ambanis and the massive influence they exercise
over parliament and the executive doesn’t seem to make the least difference to some of the
Maoist parties that use this characterization.

The Maoist movement in India is a perfect example of the miasma of sectarian politics that
flows from the logic of vanguardism. Since much of this vanguardism is now armed, or has been
so since the eighties, the Naxal groups have been slaughtering each others’ cadre and, more
recently, assassinating the cadre of the Left parties and being killed by them. How could they
possibly justify any of this? The merger between the MCC and People’s War in 2004 was partly
an attempt to stop this bloodletting, especially since each of these parties was converging on
Orissa, one from Andhra Pradesh, the other from Jharkhand. Had the merger not gone through,
their squads would surely have clashed somewhere in the central districts of that state. I have
little sense of the ground reality of the districts where the armed struggle has been raging except
through the reports of journalists who have covered it with some consistency but my impression
is that with the largely tribal base that it has acquired and that helps it to survive, Maoism in
India has mutated into a particularistic movement that has lost both the more general
perspectives that defined it when it emerged in the late sixties and certainly lost any appeal to
industrial workers, even those in the mining areas of Chhattisgarh that were so brilliantly
organized by Shankar Guha Niyogi. The loss of this double orientation is partly a lack of
continuity between different generations of the movement, except at some purely rhetorical level,
and partly their complete absorption by the armed struggle that is consuming all their energies
and the lives of their cadre, not to mention the tribals themselves or state personnel.

The contradiction in the Maoist model stems from its extreme vanguardism, the notion that an
armed and well organized elite can ‘lead’ the masses to victory and usher in democracy on this
basis, through ‘armed struggle’. There is no conception here of a culture of mass democracy
where the masses are not some element to be worked on (like Sartre’s ‘worked matter’) but
subjects shaping their own lives and in control of their own movement. One reflection of this is
the astonishing tenacity of caste discrimination within the ranks of the ‘comrades’. Note K.G.
Satyamurthy’s revealing statement in a recent interview: “When KS was in jail, people started
coming to me and telling me about the caste discrimination they faced”. This of course is a
major issue and one not confined to the Maoists either. Again, the obsession with violence as the
sole means of conducting the struggle assumes that democracy can emerge from a culture of
violence such as any prolonged insurgency must inevitably breed. But in New Democracy,
regardless of its formal proclamations, the masses will fail to hold their own against the armed
vanguards, the ‘mass’ element in democracy will be completely subject to the control of an
armed leadership that will be the core of the new state. Already in the conflict zones the armed
squads often behave like Stormtroopers vis-à-vis the civilian population on the classic pattern of what the Chenoy’s have called a ‘degenerated insurgency’. The CPI(M) embodies a different version of the same sectarian vanguardism (the notion that the masses cannot create their own political movements and cultures), except that it connotes democracy with the state apparatus, seeks to control the latter by contesting elections, and ends up finding itself subject to the will both of capital and of the state apparatus, controlled by them more than it controls them. Note the record of the Left Front in failing to prosecute senior police officers who were known for atrocities committed at various times in the early seventies or the more recent use of the CRPF to suppress both popular movements and the Maoists. Neither armed struggle nor parliamentary absorption offers a way forward.

So what the Left in India desperately needs is a new political culture, one that goes back to the roots of Marxism and reconstructs a vision of the world from classical premises. The relationship between Communists and class has to be rethought in a fundamental way that returns to the vision of the Manifesto. Here the Communists are defined not by party formation but by a role they play in relation to working-class parties where these do exist. In Marx’s day the prime example of a party in this sense was the Chartist movement in England. Indeed, Marx was so impressed by the self-activity of workers that by the 1860s in vol. 3 of Capital he describes the ‘cooperative factories run by workers themselves’ as ‘the first examples of the emergence of a new form’ within capitalism itself. ‘The opposition between capital and labour is abolished here’, he wrote, implying that these self-managed factories were the embryos of a Communist society. Now within the revolutionary Left this early vision of workers’ self-emancipation from capital was largely obliterated by the experience of the Russian Revolution and the doctrine that What is to be done? offered a template of the “revolutionary party” as a small, cohesive group of professional revolutionaries that worked in both clandestine and other ways to raise the mass of workers to the level of politics. When the Maoists in India qualify their Marxism by adding ‘Leninism’, it is this tradition that is being foregrounded. In their historical memory Lenin subsumes Marx so completely that they don’t need to look at Marx any more or take any of his ideas seriously. Lenin speaks for Marx. But the Left internationally also has a rich array of political cultures opposed to these authoritarian and elite-driven forms of politics. Syndicalism in its strict meaning predates even the Communist Manifesto. It reflected the innate belief of workers that their association and solidarity were sources of a massive potential power which, combined with the new forces of large-scale industry, could form the basis for an abolition of the wages system and for collective management of the economy. Syndicalist ideas were popular in Britain in the years leading up to the First War. In the 1920s and 1930s similar ideas resurfaced in the ‘Council Communist’ currents that built on the experience with soviets, factory councils and workers’ committees that emerged in Germany, Russia and Italy after the First War. Without the soviets the Russian Revolution would have been inconceivable. And without the Soldiers and Workers Councils the November Revolution in Germany would have made the German Left even less radical than it proved to be in the 1920s. In Russia itself the ‘Theses of the Workers Opposition’ (defended by Alexander Shlyapnikov and Alexandra Kollontai, the left-wing faction in the Bolshevik party) argued this model of mass democracy as the only basis on which the Bolsheviks could secure the revolution from imminent collapse. They were forcibly disbanded, by Lenin no less, massive numbers of them expelled from the party, and that vision rapidly withered, at least within the ranks of Bolshevism which was now incorporated into a new kind of ideological formation where the party was becoming a state and this new party-state rediscovering ‘national’ interests that were surreptitiously trumping those of
revolutionary movements elsewhere in the world. The instrument of this covert Russian domination of the international movement was of course the Comintern and the role it played in the 1920s and 30s was a watershed in the final defeat and extinction of revolutionary traditions inherited from the 19th century. In this sense at least the Communist Party of India, only fully formed in 1936, was stillborn as a revolutionary force, one that completely lacked any concrete links with the great revolutionary upsurge of 1917–19.

Today capitalism itself has changed in dramatic ways, it is no longer dominated either economically or politically by the representatives of productive capital whose rates of profit have suffered permanent depression, but is much better described, with Altvater, as essentially a ‘finance-driven capitalism’ where a range of financial institutions, from investment banks and hedge funds to insurance companies and pension funds (all embodying fictitious capital in Marx’s sense) have made the debt markets central to the accumulation of capital,9 so that debt servicing becomes the mainstay of accumulation and the ability of governments to service that debt through austerity measures creates a new, second wave of rationalization leading to further job losses, wage cuts, cuts in public expenditure and the huge sense of insecurity that this spreads throughout society. But part of this process of capital transformation is also a new division of labour where countries with vast reserves of cheap labour become key manufacturing sites, so that there is still space for the aggressive expansion of manufacturing and mining capital, of a “real” economy if you like, but now in more brutal predatory forms that are asset stripping nature at a phenomenal rate, revamping whole countrysides,10 that lack even a minimal commitment to notions of welfare and mount continued strong resistance to unions and unionization.

It is in fact the unions and above all the independent and radical unions that offer a way forward. They are mass organizations of the working class and without them workers form an inchoate mass with no sense of their own identity as a class. True, the unions embody that identity in a rudimentary form, but that is where we have to start. The astonishing Arab Spring, the spectacular mass mobilizations that have occurred throughout the Arab world from Morocco to Syria, have suddenly confronted us with a vision of how resilient the striving for mass democracy still remains and the different forms it can assume, from mass demonstrations and popular committees to the occupation of central spaces. But the drive to form independent unions has also been a major way in which workers have been drawn into this great struggle for democracy. Mostafa Omar’s brilliant report ‘The Spring of the Egyptian Revolution’ makes it absolutely clear that independent unions have emerged as the organizational form of the workers’ movement in the recent upsurge. It is these independent unions that are the closest modern equivalents of the factory councils in Germany and elsewhere, the 'mass' element behind the will to power reflected in the fact, reported by Omar, that ‘hundreds of militant trade unionists have come together to initiate the Workers Democratic Party’.11 So here the road to Athens lies via Cairo. Battered by capitalism, large sectors of society, now living in a world of rapidly depleting natural resources and widespread unemployment, know that their fate is bound up with democracy in all of the three senses I outlined at the start. Those meanings of democracy (as a constitution that guarantees fundamental rights; as a culture of resistance or mass struggle; and as an aspiration for control – control over all aspects of our lives), those meanings run concurrently, they are not ‘stages’ in some historical drama scripted by a metaphysical playwright. For example, even when democracy in sense 3 (as Communism if you like) eventually triumphs, if it does, democracy in senses 1 and 2 will have to be part of that society. There will have to a constitution that protects the fundamental rights, now expanded and
redefined. And there will have also to be a culture of resistance, vibrant oppositions, many of them, instead of a single monolithic party-state that decides the fate of humanity as if it speaks in its name.

3 Arthur Rosenberg, *Faschismus als Massenbewegung* (1934); abridged version in Wolfgang Abendroth et al., *Faschismus und Kapitalismus* (1967). The journal *Historical Materialism* will be publishing a translation of this classic essay.
4 All of these are covered well in Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris* (1998).
5 Marx, *Capital Volume Three*, p. 571.
8 *Theses of the Workers Opposition* (1921), http://www.marxists.org/archive/shliapnikov/1921/workers-opposition.htm
10 See Jia Zhangke’s remarkable film *Still Life*, which is set against the background of the obliteration of whole villages caused by the building of the Three Gorges Dam.