

Raju J. Das, Ph.D.



A Contribution to the Critique of Contemporary Capitalism

Theoretical and Real Perspectives



GLOBAL POLITICAL STUDIES

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OF CONTEMPORARY CAPITALISM
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RAJU J. DAS, PH.D.

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I wish to dedicate this book to my parents.

They both taught me, through their words and actions, to be sympathetic towards people who live in difficult conditions. And my father, who studied philosophy and mathematics, taught me the value of freedom to think and the idea that one cannot take things at their face value. Both of them taught me to value labor and respect laborers. My mother, who could not always satisfy her need for nutritious food during my childhood, taught me the importance of human need in a way she might not realize. My parents wanted me to be a civil servant to be able to make an immediate difference in the world of poor people. I initially agreed but finally betrayed them. I am grateful to them that they did not insist on what they thought I should be.

INTRODUCTION

The word 'critique', or 'critical', is everywhere. In the academic world we hear of critical sociology, critical human geography, critical anthropology, critical development studies, and so on. The ubiquity of critique is partly associated with the nature of the contemporary world. It is a world of inequality and insecurity. It is a world, which is experiencing economic, political and ecological crisis. And not surprisingly, it is a world that is characterized by resistance, i.e., resistance against globalization and monopolies, against wars and austerity, against social injustice and cultural oppression. Indeed, the system is haunted by the specter of occupy movements, Arab Springs, and movements against dispossession in its various forms.¹

While we appear to be living in an age of critique, the quality of the critique of society can generally be a lot better. This book, therefore, deals with the theme of social critique. It is about the critique of the capitalist world, *including* of the operations of capitalism and Leftist political responses to it. And the book is a critique of ideas about that world – particularly, of what are considered progressive critiques of capitalism. Its aim is to clarify, in a very basic way, the contours of what it considers to be genuine critique. Its argument is that critique is a fundamental human activity, and that social science can and must be critical and explanatory (of ideas and the world) at the same time. Social science must be critical of the world because of the contradictions and inadequacies in the world. It must be critical of itself and ideas of 'ordinary people', because these ideas contribute to the reproduction of a world that is inadequate and contradiction-ridden. We live in a world which keeps on creating new needs but which frustrates the satisfaction of these needs on the part of the majority. In fact, the majority cannot even satisfy their very basic needs, in spite of the existence of an adequate amount of resources in society.² Such a situation demands that our thinking become critical, genuinely critical. And, human beings have an essential ability to be critical: they are 'homo criticus'. That general ability – that 'species' ability -- must be exercised in a very specific way: the mode of critique must reflect the social contradictions of the world and from the

¹ Harvey (2010) discusses many different types of resistance against the system.

² In mainstream economics, scholars talk more about wants than needs, and that wants are unlimited, in relations to the resources, which are considered scarce (Dowd, 2002). Indeed, the *raison de tre* of mainstream economics lies in this thesis. It forgets, however, that wants are created and are not naturally unlimited, and that society's resources are abused to satisfy *the wants of the well-off*, the resources that could be used to satisfy *the needs of the majority*. It also forgets that the so-called resource is usually socially engineered through class-mechanisms and associated profit logics: including through the monopolization of resources in the hands of a few.

standpoint of negating those contradictions in order to make our world a better, a more humane, place.

In thinking about critique, several questions come to mind. What does 'critique' or 'critical' really mean? Why is critique necessary, and what makes it possible? What forms does critique take? What are the ingredients of philosophical, theoretical, and practical critiques? The idea of critique of ideas implies that there are inadequate ideas. Where do such ideas – 'ideological ideas' – come from then? What social groups should social critique speak to or target as its main audience, and why? These are the questions that Chapter one deals with, at a very basic level, and without using too many references to the academic literature.

What a body of ideas *is* can be seen in relation to what it *is not*, what it is critical of. So a body of ideas seeking to describe/explain its objects of analysis can be seen *as a critique*.. A specific form of the latter is Marxist critique, which is simultaneously the Marxist theory of society. Given much misunderstanding of this body of work, and given that its categories are essential to correctly comprehend contemporary problems facing the humanity, it is necessary to reassert and rearticulate the central categories of the Marxist critique. If Chapter one talks more about critique of ideas as such (e.g., what are the properties of inadequate ideas?), what is presented in Chapter 2 (Marxist theory/critique) is more about inadequacies of the world itself, in its various dimensions (economic, political, cultural, ecological and spatial).

There are four components of Marxist critique: philosophy (a dialectical and materialist worldview); social theory (historical materialism); political economy; and political practice. Marxist explanatory critique must be dialectical, and materialist (in both philosophical and scientific senses). This critique must be multi-scalar, and especially internationalist, emphasizing the international nature of both capitalism and of the fact that a potentially successful fight against it must be ultimately international in scope. The application of fundamental philosophical and social-theoretical Marxist principles sheds important light on the world we live in and on our history. It is the most fundamental and the most uncompromising form of philosophical, theoretical and practical critique of society.³ Such a critique can be suitably applied to the world we live in and to the ideas about it, including the proposals for changing it. The Marxist critique is the class-based social critique, one that integrates non-class oppression such as that based on race and gender. It shows that people's fight for autonomy and democracy including gender and racial equality and for democratic transparency cannot but be a part of the fight against capitalism itself. An *implicit* aim of the discussion on the *Marxist* critique is to distinguish it from not only *non-Marxism* but also so-called *post-Marxism*. In the process, it indirectly speaks to some of the unfounded criticisms against Marxist critique/analysis that it is intellectually simplistic/rigid/ reductionist, as economistic, and as race- and gender-blind; it is also wrongly seen as a politically undemocratic project.⁴ Those who wish to critique the Marxist critique should have a basic understanding of what that critique really is,⁵ and not what one thinks what that critique is.⁶

³ Eagleton (2012:1) makes this point as well. It is a book worth reading.

⁴ The discussion – as Part 1 as a whole and Part 3 -- is pitched at the level of beginning graduate and advanced undergraduate scholars; it is also aimed at any person who seeks to, at least, explore what Marxism is in an open-minded way.

⁵ I am consciously using the singular noun. One can say that: there is no such thing as *the* Marxist critique, there are rather Marxist critiques. One can say that there is no such thing as Marxism, there are rather Marxisms. My criticism of such a position is this: there must be something common to Marxisms or Marxist critiques, which represents different forms of that substance, that essence. Otherwise, what is that thing which has many forms (Marxisms, Marxist critiques)? The unity precedes the difference, partly through which the unity is reproduced.

And those who wish to do some trekking in the vast terrain of the Marxist critique in order to enjoy good health and exercise their muscles, a little map of that terrain may come in handy. Chapter 2 aims to offer this opportunity. There are various ways in which the world in which we live and the ideas about this world have been interpreted. The point of Marxist critique is to seek to change some of these interpretations.

Ideas about critique and the Marxist critique in Chapters 1-2 constitute Part 1 of the book, laying the foundations. These ideas are put into action in Parts 2-3. In Part 2, specific academic *ideas about the world* of capitalism are critiqued. In Part 3, particular *aspects of the capitalist world* are questioned from the standpoint of ideas laid out in Part 1. While Part 2 is more for specialist readers, Part 1 and 3 are more for non-specialists.

The importance of the state to our lives cannot be overemphasized. There have been various interpretations of the state. One of these is from standpoint of post-Marxism. Chapter 3 targets the post-Marxist theory, by taking one representative author (John Hoffman). By critically examining the work of this influential British theorist, this chapter shows on what basis one can offer criticisms of much thinking about the capitalist state, including what appears to be Marxist, and thus it shows how not to think about the state. The chapter argues, more specifically, that the material basis of the political is inadequately theorized.

It is one thing to explore the nature of the political in the abstract. It is another thing to scrutinize it in a concrete context. The next chapter – Chapter 4 – does this. It critically discusses the relation between the political and the economic in a given body of academic work about India. This chapter reveals the deficient ways in which some of the best-known authors, including the Nobel Laureate economist-philosopher, Amartya Sen, imagine the relation between the economic on the one hand and the political, including state policies and democracy on the other, in the context of the world's largest and fastest growing democracy.

There has to be something before it can take different forms. Note that whether what is presented as the Marxist critique represents that common thing – that substance – is a different matter. Besides, what is the substance cannot be seen un-dialectically: that is, the boundary between the substance and what is not it is not a final and absolute one. There will be some gray areas, or a certain degree of 'un-decidability'. One of the ways in which the problem of what is the substance is resolved is the way one resolves the question of whether a man who has a few counts of hair on his head is still bald or not. It is about the law of quantity and quality transformation, which is raised numerous times in the book.

⁶ One can see why I would disagree with David Laibman's definition of a Marxist as 'anyone who sincerely believes her/himself to be one' (2007: x). Such a definition would work if we could judge a person by what he/she says about himself/herself. The Marxist label indeed can be used and is used ideologically: X and Y (e.g. *post-Marxists*; supporters of certain types of authoritarian regime) can say they are Marxists while their intellectual and political work has little to do with the substance of Marxism, so by doing this they are bringing disrepute to Marxism, and therefore these people's claim that they are Marxists must be forcefully rejected by Marxists. But I entirely agree with Laibman that one must distinguish between good and bad Marxist work. But then a new question arises which is similar to the one raised in the previous footnote: what is common to both good and bad Marxist work? In any case, the question of what is Marxism and what is not Marxism – and therefore who is Marxist and who is not – cannot be avoided at all. Lenin dealt with the issue of what is Marxism numerous times. A rigorous definition of Marxism is a political necessity, and not just an intellectual one. In the academic world, the question is especially pertinent because of two contradictory tendencies. One is that the academia generally is after fads. Another is that: Marxism is associated with rigor and therefore a certain amount of prestige, which many people seek (including for extra-intellectual reasons), but it is not a fad, because it deals with issues that are not going away – class relations and their adverse effects.. In relation to Marxism, what many in the academia, therefore, do to 'resolve' the contradiction, is this: while chasing the fads of the day, many appropriate some words and concepts from Marxism (these concepts usually do not belong to the core of Marxism and/or are used differently from the way Marxists use them). So what we get is a combination of chasing fads (fashionable trends) and some flirtation with Marxism. The resultant product fits with the following description: *post-Marxism*, which is the form that much of so-called critical scholarship takes now-a-days. I will return to this in the next chapter, although briefly.

Chapter 5 discusses theoretical ideas concerning the question of freedom: to what extent is labor free under capitalism? Much scholarly work, including that of Marx, generally assumes that workers are economically free, i.e., they are free to choose their employers. This chapter, revolving around the theme of workers' freedom, performs a double critique. It examines the work of a powerful Marxist scholar (Tom Brass) on the topic of freedom and unfreedom. It first examines the critique by this scholar of existing work, both Marxist and non-Marxist, on freedom/unfreedom. Then the Chapter subjects his own critical views to a sympathetic critique, which poses several questions. For example, should the issue of freedom of labor be posed at the level of capitalist relation as a whole or at the level of capitalist class-fraction (or, correspondingly, capitalist totality or a part of this totality)? Further, while it is evidently true that labor unfreedom is an *empirical* reality, both in the North and in the South, what *conceptual* implication does it have for what it means for a system to be capitalist? Or, more precisely, if all wage-labor in a society becomes unfree labor, will that society be (seen as) capitalist? The critique also raises questions about the unfreedom/freedom issue and the development of productive forces under the dominance of capitalist class relations.

Whether labor is free or not occupies an important location on the map of the discourse on capitalism. This larger discourse has shed light on the class character of capitalism and how its class relations promote or fetter the process of economic development (i.e., development productive forces). These ideas have been explored in the debate on the transition to capitalism in Europe (as in the *Science & Society* debate as well as in the famous Brenner debate). Usually these ideas concern rural areas. Chapter 6 subjects several significant writings on the development of capitalist relations in rural areas in India and show their theoretical contributions and limitations. It discusses how extant class relations and class struggle affect, directly and/or through state mediation, the emergence of new class alliances and the development of the productive forces. Among the major deficiencies in the selected literature discussed is that it conceptualizes class relations more in terms of development of productive forces than social relations and that it ignores imperialism as a class relation at the international scale. The critique offered in the Chapter suggests that the theoretical parameters of the discussion on development of class relations – and more generally, the debate on fettering of productive forces by social relations – need to be expanded in order epistemologically to accommodate the current impact of imperialism on the rural areas of the less developed world.

As mentioned earlier, we seem to be living in an age of critique. One reason is that we live in a world of growing inequality. Progressive people have been trying to explain inequality, including in newly developing countries or emerging economies, and to suggest proposals for change. Social democracy has been an important explanatory critique here: it seeks to explain the problems of inequality and poverty, and economic development, more generally, in terms of the relation between the state and businesses and the resultant inadequate policies. Social democracy seeks to remedy the situation by suggesting ideas about what the state can do. Much of this discussion goes back to the debates on the developmental state in East Asia. In this literature, some social democratic-minded scholars argued that developmental success was due to an activist state that guided and directed the market and businesses. The larger conceptual-political theory underlying this model has travelled from East Asia to India and other places. Chapter 7 critiques a recent, wide-ranging and well-written book, entitled '*Poverty Amid Plenty in the new India*' written by a Princeton professor, Atul Kohli. Kohli is

sympathetic to the East Asian model. Kohli argues that the Indian state is becoming more and more pro-business, but not necessarily pro-market, and that because of this alliance between the state and business, there is an impressive growth but inequality is rising, and that a modest social democracy is a potential solution to the problem. The chapter appreciates the argument about the increasing big business influence on the affairs of the state and its adverse effect on democracy and the poor people. But Kohli's criticism of the state is limited because it is from the standpoint *not* of the working masses and their democratic rights but from the standpoint of weaker sections of the private property-owning class, with their interests rooted regionally and nationally. His criticism is also limited because it is from a social-democratic standpoint according to which conditions of the masses could be improved through state interventions *within capitalism*, and that nothing more is necessary. Kohli's view is part of a larger mode of thinking – 'egalitarian liberalism' -- which argues that substantive egalitarianism can be achieved without transcending the present order itself. The chapter's critique has potentially wider implications for discussion on social democracy as a proposal for change, including in the global periphery. The critique also indicates how not to think about poverty and inequality issues which the world is experiencing now. The critique points to the fact that there is a need for more rigorous class-analysis of the state, society and economic development issues, which has more progressive practical implications than suggested by Kohli's limited critique of inequality and state-business relations. Any knowledge claim that explains social problems merely in terms of inadequate government policies and seek their solution in better policies has not understood the material-class character of policies in particular and of the state in general, and therefore is inadequate.

The Part 3 focuses on the critique, not so much of ideas about the world, but of certain aspects of the world itself, in the light of the ideas explored in Part 1 as well as in Part 2. This world itself is seen in terms of what exists (e.g., neoliberal capitalism and its outcomes for ordinary people) and in terms of how people politically respond to it. Although most of the chapters in Part 3 concern, empirically, the US or India, the ideas explored will have wider implications. Chapters 8, 9 and 10 provide a critique of 'neoliberalism' as it is played out in India and the USA. Chapter 8 reveals the winners and the losers from the neoliberal-capitalist project, and its impact on the production of social and spatial inequalities in India. It also explores the political possibilities of the neoliberal-capitalist project: what does neoliberalism mean for democratic, agrarian, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist revolutions?

Chapters 9 and 10 speak to neoliberal capitalism in the US context, revealing how it is treating the working bodies of ordinary citizens in the US. The commercial conduct of drugs companies shows that science, both in the sense of production of new ideas as well as the material fruits of science (e.g., medicines), has been subordinated to the profit-motive. The example of drug companies in the USA discussed in Chapter 9 sheds light on the state's complicity in this process and state's 'inability' to discipline and punish 'erring' companies. It also briefly discusses the potential effect of all this for the legitimacy of the state itself in the eyes of ordinary citizens. Chapter 10 draws attention to a recurrent phenomenon in the history of the US, the most advanced economy in the world: industrial disasters and absence of work-place safety. More than the 'happenstance', i.e., the negligent behavior of individual firms, what is involved is something *systemic*: the capitalist character of the economy and associated profit logic, all supported by the state.

Neoliberalism, as widely known, is a specific form that capitalism has assumed since the 1970s. Whether in the US or in India, neoliberalism has had two kinds of success. One is political-economic and another is ideological. The political-economic success refers to the transfer of the burdens of the capitalist crisis (of profitability, etc.) on: to the working class in a given place (a class fix), to areas other than the origin of the problems (a spatial fix), and to the environment which is subjected to ruthless degradation and commodification (an ecological fix). And there is a political fix in the form of the direct political attack on organizations of the masses (e.g., unions). Neoliberalism's ideological success has come in at least two forms. One is that: while neoliberalism is supposed to be a system where market relations are freer vis a vis state interventions, all this is in the realm of ideas, and is therefore ideological. By using this ideology, the state has legitimized two opposite tendencies: its very active interventions on behalf of the business class, and its withdrawal of the provision of limited welfare to the masses. The second form of the ideological success of neoliberalism is this: the critique of capitalism as such in media and academia, of the *essence* as such, has been more or less diverted to the critique of the neoliberal *form* of capitalism (and of globalization, the geographical form of contemporary capitalism). Critique of *neoliberalism as capitalism* is not necessarily the same thing as the *critique of capitalism as neoliberalism*. Critique of capitalism as merely neoliberalism is the kind of critique, which seeks to find salvation in a more regulated and more nationally-oriented capitalism. Given neoliberalism's multiple successes, it is an imperative that scholars scrutinize its genuine class character: neoliberalism is an accumulation strategy of the capitalist class and its various competing fractions, a strategy that is articulated, and sought to be implemented, with varying success as a governmental policy. Neoliberalism is more than a form of government intervention.

Anthony Giddens, a long time ago, said something useful: unless one is drunk, one will fight injustice. Indeed. Injustice and the fight for justice form the totality in which we live. No class-system goes un-opposed. The practice and ideology of resistance against neoliberalism and indeed against the capitalist system as such has taken many forms. So, chapters 11-12 turn to two of the important ways in which millions of people have tried to respond to the system. One is the politics of Maoism. Maoist movements have a significant presence in a wide array of countries, including the Philippines, Peru, Nepal and India, and indeed in several advanced countries at a more limited scale (e.g., Canada, and the USA). Chapter 9 offers a critique of the Maoist resistance (in India). This movement is not as radical as it appears to be. Its main problem is its inadequate class analysis, theoretically and politically. In other words: it fails to recognize the nature of dominant class relations as capitalist, so therefore it misses the target. It is, more or less, focused on the rural, and therefore effectively divorced from the urban working class. Besides, a part of the movement conflates the power of arms with the power of words; it turns to the use of force, not recognizing that any movement for change must work on, and change, the current level of consciousness of the masses in order to help them become more class conscious, and that it must engage in the ideological-political organization of the masses as a necessary, time-consuming tool of resistance and struggle against the system.

Neoliberalism is characterized by accumulation by dispossession and accumulation by exploitation. Yet, much of the contestation of neoliberalism and indeed much of 'radical' political activity as such one-sidedly takes the form of resistance around local issues (including dispossession, etc.) and without the goal of transcending the system.

The final Chapter is a critique of the limits of this form of Left (micro-) politics: protest politics. This chapter concludes by making some concrete proposals in terms of what is to be done about the low levels of class-consciousness and mobilization of masses, and indeed about the crisis of the leadership of the masses.

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PART 1: LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS