

# janata

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## **The Christchurch Shooting and the Normalisation of Anti-Muslim Terrorism**

**Whitney Webb**

What is without question the worst mass shooting in New Zealand's history took place on Friday when shooters, 28-year-old Australian Brenton Tarrant among them, opened fire at two Christchurch mosques. Four, including Tarrant, have been arrested for the heinous act, which claimed at least 49 innocent lives. Tarrant was responsible for killing more than 40 victims, among them several children, in a rampage he live-streamed on Facebook, sending chills throughout the Muslim community, particularly Muslims living in Western countries.

Tarrant's motives and ideology, laid bare in a 74-page manifesto, show a concern over the fertility rates of non-white groups as well as the immigration of non-whites to countries like New Zealand and Australia, which he likened to an "invasion" that threatened the white majority in those countries. However, Tarrant—in his ignorance—failed to grasp that many of the Muslim immigrants he targeted had come to New Zealand after fleeing Western-backed invasions, occupations, or persecution in their home countries.

Notable among Tarrant's views

is the fact that he is a clear ethno-nationalist, promoting his view that different ethnic groups must be kept "separate, unique, undiluted in [sic] unrestrained in cultural or ethnic expression and autonomy." Tarrant also claimed that he doesn't necessarily hate Muslims and only targeted those Muslims (i.e., immigrants) that chose "to invade our lands, live on our soil and replace our people."

He also stated that he chose to target Muslims because "Islamic nations, in particular, have high birth rates, regardless of race or ethnicity" and to satiate "a want for revenge against Islam for the 1,300 years of war and devastation that it has brought upon the people of the West and other peoples of the world." His views are remarkably similar to those of Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik, which is unsurprising given that Tarrant named him as an inspiration for the shooting.

Though many—in the hours after the shooting—have sought to place blame and point fingers at notable demagogues like President Donald Trump or "counter-jihad" alt-right figures like Laura Loomer and Jacob Wohl, it is important

to place Tarrant's motivations in context.

Indeed, while Trump's rise to political power has brought Islamophobic rhetoric into the public sphere in an undeniable way, it is a symptom of a much broader effort aimed at propagandising the people of the United States and other Western countries to support wars in and military occupations of Muslim-majority countries. This manufactured Islamophobia, largely a product of Western governments and a compliant mass media, has sought to vilify all Muslims by maligning the religion itself as terrorism, in order to justify the plunder of their countries and deflect attention from their suffering.

It is a classic "divide and conquer" scam aimed at keeping Westerners divided from Muslims in their own countries and abroad. The horrific shooting in Christchurch is a testament to its unfortunate success and pervasiveness, as well as a potent reminder that it must be stopped. Indeed, this manufactured Islamophobia has made it so that Muslims in their home countries are in danger of dying from Western-backed wars and, if they flee to the "safer" West, they have targets on their backs painted by the very war propaganda used to justify Western military adventurism in Muslim-majority nations.

### **Islam, the media and "Forever Wars": Who's the "real" terrorist?**

Since September 11th and the advent of the "War on Terror," mass media reporting increasingly began to conflate Muslims and Muslim-majority nations with war, terrorism and violence in general. Indeed, 9 out of 10 mainstream news reports on Muslims, Islam, and Islamic organisations are related

to violence and Muslims who are named on mainstream media are all-too-frequently warlords or terrorist leaders.

This near-constant association of Islam and violence has created the false perception that the religion of Islam, by its very nature, is violent and that Muslims too must then be violent and thus dangerous. This media-driven association has had very real and troubling consequences. For instance, a 2010 study by the University of Exeter found "empirical evidence to demonstrate that assailants of Muslims are invariably motivated by a negative view of Muslims they have acquired from either mainstream or extremist nationalist reports or commentaries in the media." In other words, Islamophobic media reports are directly related to hate crimes targeting Muslims.

This is no accident, as such biased reporting on Muslim-majority nations also began as Western-backed wars in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan sought to put these countries' natural resources, namely their oil and mineral wealth, into the hands of American corporations. It should be no surprise then that top funders of media outlets that have routinely promoted Islamophobic narratives are also those who have profited considerably from the "War on Terror" and Western-backed regime-change wars in other countries.

This concerted effort to vilify Muslims has had the potent effect, likely by design, of reducing empathy among Westerners for the largely Muslim victims of Western military adventurism in Muslim-majority countries. Indeed, while mainstream news outlets often trumpet the imminent dangers Americans face from "radical Islamic terror," the

death toll of innocent people—most of them Muslim—that have been killed by the US-led "War on Terror" is several orders of magnitude greater than the number of Americans who have died from all terror attacks over that same period.

For instance, from 2001 to 2013, an estimated 3,380 Americans died from domestic and foreign terrorism, including the September 11 attacks as well as acts of domestic terrorism carried out by white nationalists and supremacists. If one excludes the September 11 death toll, the number of American deaths over that same period stands at around 400, most of them victims of mass-killers who were not Muslim.

By comparison, an estimated 8 million innocent people in Muslim-majority nations died as a result of US policies and wars in the Middle East and North Africa from 2001 to 2015. Yet, the magnitude of this loss of life of these "unworthy victims" is minimised by media and government silence, and the creation of a climate of Islamophobia in the West has only served to deepen the ease with which mass murder is accepted by the aggressor countries' populations.

Beyond the staggering disparity in the death tolls caused by terror groups and Western-backed imperialist wars is the fact that many of these very Western governments that purport to be so concerned with "radical Islamic terror" have often created and funded the most notorious terror groups of all. Indeed, the US government helped to create Al Qaeda and continues to protect its Syrian branch—Hayat Tahrir al-Sham—in Syria's Idlib province to this day. In addition, the CIA was just recently revealed to be helping the Islamic State regroup in Syrian refugee camps. Furthermore,

the US has long turned a blind eye to the funding of terror groups by allied states like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The role of Western money, arms and policy in the creation and maintenance of radical Wahhabi terrorist groups is often entirely ignored by Western media portrayals of Muslim-majority nations, thereby creating a false image that such violence is endemic to these nations when, in fact, it is often imported state-sponsored terror.

These nuances of the situation are rarely heard in the narratives parroted out on mainstream media and those who regularly consume mainstream news sources are more likely than not to support those narratives. For that reason, it is easy to see how someone like Donald Trump—who is said to watch television for eight hours every day, much of it Fox News—has espoused the views that he has. Thanks to the manufacturing of Islamophobia of mainstream media, racist policies like the so-called “Muslim ban” have found wide support, as this false narrative has conflated Islam with violence so often that many have come to believe that only by banning Islam can violence and terrorism in the US be reduced.

However, the recent shooting in Christchurch, as well as the Tree of Life Synagogue shooting and other recent acts of domestic terrorism, should alert us to the fact that it is the hate manufactured by this false narrative that is itself endangering American lives while also covering up the mass murder that has been perpetrated by the US and other governments around the world for decades.

### **Israel’s leading role in stoking ethnonationalism**

While the realities of post-9/11 America, as well as the rise in visibility of white ethnonationalism during the Trump Era, have done much to normalise attacks on immigrants, the country that has done the most to normalise anti-Muslim terrorism over this same time frame has been the state of Israel.

Israel, from its founding days, has long been steeped in neocolonialist ideology that is remarkably similar to the ideological basis behind other settler states like the United States, Australia and New Zealand. This system of beliefs holds that the native inhabitants of the land—whether the Palestinians, the Sioux or the Maori—are “primitive” and incompetent and that the land would have remained “wild” and undeveloped were it not for the “fortunate” appearance of European settlers. Such narratives cast these settlers as both superior and normal while the natives become inferior and abnormal, thus obfuscating the settler’s status as foreigner and conqueror.

In Israel’s case, this ideology has promoted the idea that all Arabs are “sons of the desert” while the desert simultaneously represents a barbaric obstacle to “progress” and development. However, the state of Israel, under the lengthy tenure of current Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, has seen these long-standing and somewhat hidden underpinnings of the Zionist state burst out into the open.

The result has been the overt expression of ethnonationalism in such a way that Israel has become an inspiration to white nationalists in the United States, like Richard Spencer, and far-right ethno-fascist leaders like Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro and India’s Narendra Modi. The

inspiration has been mutual, according to reports and testimonials published by Jewish newspaper *The Forward*.

For years, through its military occupation of Palestine, Israel’s government and military have sought to paint all Palestinians, including children, as “terrorists” or “terrorist sympathisers.” Take, for example, current Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked, who wrote in 2014, “This is a war between two people. Who is the enemy? The Palestinian people . . .”

A more recent example came from former Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who asserted just last year that “no innocent people” live in the Gaza Strip and that every inhabitant in the enclave is somehow connected to Hamas, even though nearly half of Gaza’s population are children and teenagers. Such rhetoric has become par for the course and numerous examples show that Shaked and Lieberman’s views are increasingly accepted and “normal” in today’s Israel.

### **No ‘clash of civilisations,’ only manipulation and exploitation of differences**

The tragic and barbaric shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand is yet another horrific and glaring reminder that the “divide and conquer” war propaganda that has sought to promote the so-called “clash of civilisations” between Christianity and Islam, West and East, has not only been monstrously effective but continues to be monstrously destructive to people on both sides.

However, the media’s manufacture of Islamophobia, in seeking to reduce empathy for Muslim suffering and reduce Western empathy for innocent

Muslim civilians, has increasingly placed targets on the back of Muslims everywhere—in the West and the East—making it increasingly difficult for practitioners of the Islamic faith to feel safe regardless of where they live.

With most Muslim-majority countries now killing fields in Western-backed wars, ruled by oppressive, Western-backed dictatorships, or under threat of Western-backed regime change, even those Muslims who have sought a safer, quieter life in the “civilised” West have now found themselves targets thanks to the very war propaganda used to justify the destruction of their home countries.

While the murderer Tarrant had stated that he hoped his horrific crime would help stoke “civil war” in Western countries, this tragedy should and must serve as a wake up call for people everywhere that the real forces responsible for the destruction of many Muslim-majority countries and the current chaos present in many Western countries are not generated by civilian populations or religions but instead by the global oligarchy that engineers and profits from this chaos. These oligarchs loot from the people of the West just as they do from the people of the East and it is time to recognise that they are the real threats to a more peaceful world—not regular people praying, whether it be in a church, a synagogue or a mosque.

*(Whitney Webb is a MintPress News journalist based in Chile, and also contributes to several other independent media outlets. She is the 2019 winner of the Serena Shim Award for Uncompromised Integrity in Journalism.)*

## Bhagat Singh Is Not the Man the Right Wants You to Think He Is

Christophe Jaffrelot

In the mid 1920s, the Kakori Conspiracy Case left the revolutionary movement headless, as all its front-ranking leaders were arrested and sent to the gallows or to jail. The following generation of militants—who were to revive the movement—was of a different kind. The strongest personality in this group, Bhagat Singh, is proof of this. Born in Lyallpur, Punjab, to a Sikh family that came under the influence of the Arya Samaj and the Ghadr Party—his uncle Ajit Singh had been deported to Mandalay along with Lajpat Rai when he was a child—Bhagat Singh was trained at the National College of Lahore. He was particularly shocked by the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre in Amritsar in 1919, where General Dyer killed hundreds of people. He then took part in the non-cooperation movement, and like many others joined the revolutionary movement after Mahatma Gandhi suspended the non-cooperation struggle. In 1926, he started the Naujawan Bharat Sabha and tried to draw the youth from the province into its fold, in order to develop a socialist and non-religious organisation. If the British were naturally the chosen target of Bhagat Singh, he also put the blame on his compatriots, paralysed by superstitions:

*A branch of peepal tree is cut and religious feelings of the Hindus are injured. A corner of a paper idol, tazia of the idol-breaker Mohammedans is broken, and ‘Allah’ gets enraged, who cannot be satisfied with anything less than*

*the blood of the infidel Hindus. Man should receive more attention than the beasts and yet, in India, people break their heads in the name of ‘sacred beasts’.*

The combination of socialism, humanism and nationalism that was the trademark of Bhagat Singh was going to become even stronger after the launch of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA) in September 1928. While Bhagat Singh remained the key figure of the HSRA, among its leaders were other outstanding men, including Sukhdev, a great admirer of communism, Vijay Kumar Sinha, an avid reader, Shiv Verma and Chandrashekhar Azad, who was in charge of the Association’s “military” operations. These men formed a Central Committee, which included two representatives of each province where the movement was well established—Punjab, the United Provinces and Bihar. The organisation was immediately divided into two branches, the ideological and the military. Bhagat Singh was at the helm of the former but took part in the latter too. Indeed, he was directly involved in the assassination of J.P. Saunders, a policeman who had been mistaken for the police chief J.A. Scott, whom Bhagat Singh held responsible for the death of Lala Lajpat Rai. An Arya Samaji and a Congress leader, Lajpat Rai had been killed after a lathi charge while he and others demonstrated against the Simon Commission’s Lahore visit. Like terrorists of the 19th century, the

HRSA thought—expressed in an “official” communiqué—that by killing Saunders, it could “let the world know that India still lives; that the blood of youths has not been totally cooled down and that they can still risk their lives if the honour of their nation is at stake”.

But Bhagat Singh transitioned from terrorism to revolution. In his last piece of writing—drafted in February 1931—he refers to his past action in a very telling manner:

*Apparently I have acted as a terrorist. But I am not a terrorist. I am a revolutionary who has got such definite ideas of a lengthy programme... Let me announce with all the strength at my command, that I am not a terrorist and never was, (except) perhaps at the beginning of my revolutionary career.*

Bhagat Singh’s worldview had been reshaped in the meantime by some rare readings. The list of authors in his library shows many books by various Western authors. One finds there Marx, Engels, Trotsky, Thomas Paine, Upton Sinclair, Morris Hillquit, Jack London, Victor Hugo, Dostoevsky, Spinoza, Bertrand Russell, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Jefferson, Kautsky, Bukharin, Burke, Lenin, Thomas d’Aquin, Danton, Omar Khayyam, Tagore, N.A. Morozov, Herbert Spencer, Henry Maine and Rousseau.

These books, that Bhagat Singh read in jail as much as before being arrested, contributed to making him a rationalist and a socialist. He was the first revolutionary to express clearly his rejection of religion in *Why I am an atheist*, written in prison—just when he was condemned to death. In this text, Bhagat Singh states lucidly how he awaits death without hoping for a life beyond:

*A God-believing Hindu might be expecting to be reborn as a king, a Muslim or a Christian, might dream of the luxuries to be enjoyed in paradise and the reward he is to get for his sufferings and sacrifices. But what am I to expect? I know the moment the rope is fitted round my neck and rafters removed, from under my feet. That will be the final moment—that will be the last moment. I, or to be more precise, my soul, as interpreted in the metaphysical terminology, shall all be finished there. Nothing further. A short life of struggle with no such magnificent end, shall in itself be the reward if I have the courage to take it in that light. That is all. With no selfish motive, or desire to be awarded here or hereafter, quite disinterestedly have I devoted my life to the cause of independence, because I could not do otherwise. The day we find a great number of men and women with this psychology who cannot devote themselves to anything else than the service of mankind and emancipation of the suffering humanity; that day shall inaugurate the era of liberty.*

Bhagat Singh’s rejection of religion, which alienates the masses, complemented his socialist criticism of two systems of oppression—capitalism and casteism. Before that, Indian revolutionaries had only targeted capitalism and colonialism.

In February 1931, Bhagat Singh, inviting the youth to embrace Marxism, pointed out that “Revolution means the complete overthrow of the existing social order and its replacement with the socialist order. For that purpose our immediate aim is the achievement of power. As a matter of fact, the state, the government machinery is just a weapon in the hands of the ruling

class to further safeguard its interest. We want to snatch and handle it to utilise it for the consummation of our ideal, i.e., social reconstruction on new, i. e. Marxist basis.”

In fact, Bhagat Singh is a Janus-like figure, combining different sources of inspiration, some of them Marxist, others harking back to the anarchists’ “propaganda by action”. This is evident from his last deed. On April 8, 1929, along with B.K. Dutt, he threw two bombs in the Central Legislative Assembly “to make the deaf hear”, as written on the tracts they distributed in the assembly after their lightening coup. This formula was borrowed from Auguste Vaillant, a French anarchist. But Bhagat Singh also presented this action as being part of a larger game plan. First, it was aimed at dissuading the assembly from voting for a law—the Public Safety and Trade Disputes Bill—whose implementation would have penalised Indian workers. Second, it was also meant to denounce the manner in which this so-called Indian parliament projected itself—as an accomplice of the British. Finally, it aimed at avenging the death of Lajpat Rai. All these explanations relate this act as much to the anarchist as to the socialist agenda. The latter side of the coin shows that Bhagat Singh did not valorise violence. To get a proper understanding of his political philosophy, one must read till the end the leaflet that Bhagat Singh and Dutt threw in the assembly after hurling their bombs. Its concluding words are remarkable:

*We are sorry to admit that we who attach so great a sanctity to human life, who dream of a glorious future, when man will be enjoying perfect peace and full liberty, have been forced to shed human blood.*

These words reveal a denial of violence, a denial that would take a more systematic form in the declaration of Singh and Dutt made before the judges. There, they would emphasise that the two bombs had been thrown at the unoccupied rows and that their composition—the details of which they provide, like great chemists—made them inoffensive: had they been loaded with some other high explosive, with destructive pellets or darts, they could have wiped out a majority of the members of the legislative assembly.

Singh and Dutt even defended themselves against their recourse to violence—they merely speak of “force”:

*We are next to none in our love for humanity. Far from having any malice against any individual, we hold human life sacred beyond words . . . Our sole purpose was ‘to make the deaf hear’ and to give the heedless a timely warning . . . Force when aggressively applied is ‘violence’ and is therefore, morally unjustifiable, but when it is used in the furtherance of a legitimate cause, it has its moral justification.”*

Interestingly, Bhagat Singh regarded Jesus Christ as one of his role models, like Gandhi: “If we set aside motive, then Jesus Christ will appear a man responsible for breaking peace and preaching revolt, and a dangerous personality in the language of the law. But we worship him. He commands great respect and a place in our hearts; the sight of his image fills us with spiritual energy”.

Not only did Bhagat Singh, a truly exceptional revolutionary, never pay allegiance to Hinduism, but he also actually valued non-violence.

## Macron to Deploy French Army Against “Yellow Vest” Protests

**Anthony Torres**

After a meeting of the council of ministers on March 20, French government spokesman Benjamin Griveaux announced that President Emmanuel Macron would activate army units during this weekend’s “yellow vest” protests. This is the first time since the 1954–1962 war in Algeria that the army is to be mobilised in police operations on French soil against the population.

Griveaux announced that the operation would have the task of “securing fixed and static points in conformity with their mission, that is to say principally the protection of official buildings.” He justified his recourse to the armed forces by claiming this was necessary to allow the police forces to “concentrate on protest movements and on the maintenance and re-establishment of public order.”

The mobilisation of army units comes on top of a series of repressive measures the government announced on Tuesday. These include allowing the state to ban protests if “radicals” attend them, increasing fines for participating in a banned protest from 38 to 135 euros, the setting up of “anti-hooligan brigades” of police, the use of drones, the firing of chemical agents allowing police to trace demonstrators, and the use of police checkpoints to stop and identify demonstrators.

The resort to the French army to threaten protests against social inequality marks a historical turning point of international significance. A wave of strikes and protests is spreading across the world, driven

by mounting political anger at decades of austerity and militarism. These range from protests by the “yellow vests” to strikes against decade-long wage freezes across Europe, to the mass protests against the Algerian military dictatorship, to the strikes of US teachers and Mexican maquiladora workers and mass strikes in Sri Lanka and India.

Macron’s decision to deploy the army against the “yellow vests” is part of the increasingly desperate attempts of the ruling class internationally to intimidate the rising political opposition among workers and, failing that, to create conditions to try to repress it through force of arms.

The government is deploying the army amid the media frenzy that followed the looting of the Champs-Élysées avenue in Paris during last Saturday’s “yellow vest” protests. But there is no hard evidence that “yellow vest” protesters carried out this looting. Top officials, including Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo, have said these actions were committed by far-right groups who exploited a breakdown in the chain of command of the police forces, some of whom were filmed joining in the looting of shops on the Champs-Élysées.

Despite the murkiness of last Saturday’s events, the government is responding by rapidly stepping up threats against protesters. Interior Minister Christophe Castaner brazenly declared that on Saturday, police were facing “10,000 hooligans,” implying that the vast majority of peaceful

“yellow vest” protesters were violent criminals whom police could treat as such. Speaking about the violence on Saturday, Macron for his part provocatively declared that supporters of the “yellow vest” movement “have made themselves complicit in it.”

The looting on Saturday is only a pretext for the implementation of plans that have been long prepared. A possible resort to the army inside France has been publicly discussed for several years, since the then-ruling Socialist Party (PS) began calling for dispatching the army to working class districts of Marseille and other cities under President François Hollande.

The use of troops to crack down on domestic political opposition underscores the correctness of long-standing opposition of radical socialists to fraudulent claims that the “war on terror” launched by Washington and its European allies aims to protect the people. The PS began Operation Sentinel under the state of emergency it declared after the November 13, 2015 terror attacks in Paris. Now Macron, a former minister in the PS government, is using these supposedly “anti-terror” troops to reinforce the mobile police squads he is throwing against the “yellow vests.”

Sensing itself to be deeply isolated and despised by workers internationally, and terrified by rising protests in both France and Algeria, the financial aristocracy intends to wage ruthless class war. A February article in the *Monde diplomatique* titled “Class struggles in France” pointed to the panic seizing broad sections of the ruling class amid the growing political opposition that is for now largely peaceful but also very deep in the French and

international working class.

The monthly wrote, “Fear, not of losing an election, or failing to ‘reform’, or to take stock market losses. But of insurrection, of revolt, of destitution. For a half century, the French elites had not experienced such a feeling. . . . The director of a polling institute mentioned for his part ‘big CEOs who were indeed very worried,’ and an atmosphere ‘that resembles what I have read about 1936 or 1968’ (the two French general strikes). There is a moment where they tell themselves, we have to be able to spend a lot of money to avoid losing what is essential.”

And so the financial aristocracy is pouring resources into repression and breaking with longstanding guarantees that the army would not be sent to fire on the population. After former PS presidential candidate Ségolène Royal called for sending the army to Marseille in 2013, history professor Jean-Marc Berlière reviewed the history of the French army’s use for police operations in an interview in *Le Monde*.

In the 19th century, Berlière explained, the army’s repeated murder of workers, including women and children, during strikes and May Day rallies provoked enormous class anger: “Massacres like those that periodically took place—at Fourmies, Narbonne, and so on—seriously hurt its image, which was already badly damaged by suspicion of social and political collusion due to its engagement during strikes on the side of the employers.”

After the October 1917 Revolution in Russia during World War I, which saw mass mutinies in the French army, the government decided it could no longer trust the army for domestic policing. “After the victory and the sacrifices of the

1914–1918 war, it was no longer possible to use the victorious army for internal operations,” Berlière said. Asked whether the French army was active after World War I in domestic policing inside the borders of current-day France, he added: “Basically, no. The political risk was too great: what would be the attitude of the conscripts?”

After the army’s infamous resort to mass torture and murder in a failed attempt to keep Algeria under French rule during the 1954–1962 independence war, Macron is again turning to the army. His hailing last year of Nazi-collaborationist dictator Philippe Pétain as well as Georges Clemenceau—who as interior minister before World War I oversaw army operations leading to the murder of 18 workers—reflect continuous official attempts to legitimise repression.

This underscores the reactionary character of continuous proclamations from within the political establishment that socialist and working-class politics are irrelevant and dead. They create conditions where a deployment of the army against working people, lacking any shred of legitimacy, proceeds without meaningful opposition in official French life. The central task, in which the “yellow vest” protests mark an initial step, is to independently mobilise the growing political opposition in the working class against this drive to military–police dictatorship.

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## Why India Must Take Seriously the Right to Dissent

Hamid Ansari

I deem it a privilege to be invited to deliver the First Ram Manohar Lohia Lecture. I am also happy for this opportunity to visit the campus of the ITM University, Gwalior and to interact in some measure with the academic community present here.

No single adjective, or set of adjectives, can adequately describe Ram Manohar Lohia. For over two decades he was the 'stormy petrel' of Indian politics. He was erudite and had a passionate interest in all matters relating to human freedom, justice and dignity. He earned recognition of his knowledge of law from none other than the British magistrate trying him for preaching against the war effort in 1939. Earlier, in November 1936, he joined Jawaharlal Nehru when the latter founded the Indian Civil Liberties Union (ICLU) with Rabindranath Tagore as its president. The concept of civil liberties, Lohia said on that occasion, "defines state authority within clear limits. The task of the State is to protect these liberties. But States usually do not like the task and act contrarily. Armed with the concept of civil liberties, the people develop an agitation to force the State to keep within clear and well defined limits".

Dr. Lohia was an idealist and had his icons in the early period; Mahatma Gandhi represented his "dream", Nehru his "desire" and Subhash Bose his "deed". This idealism led him to request Gandhi ji to propose to world leaders a four point program: (1) cancellation

of all past investments by one country in another; (2) unobstructed passage and the right of settlement to everybody all over the world; (3) political freedom of all peoples and nations of the world and constituent assemblies; and (4) some kind of world citizenship.

Gandhi ji was indulgent but did not act on the suggestion.

Lohia was a socialist and an avowed anti-communist. He was amongst the few who struggled with the difficulty of transferring the ideology of socialism from Europe to non-European cultural locations. He differed with the Congress leadership on a whole range of issues. These included the acceptance of the decision on Partition in 1947 and he wrote a detailed monograph entitled *The Guilty Men of India's Partition*. He had pronounced views on the caste system and the damage it has done to Indian psyche. These were candidly, albeit brutally, expressed in another monograph, *The Caste System*. At the same time, he was realistic about ways of modulating it, as is evident from the following passage:

*To stop talking of caste is to shut ones eyes to the most important single reality of the Indian situation. One does not end caste merely by wishing it away. A 5000 year long selection of abilities has been taking place. Certain castes have become especially gifted. Thus for instance the Marwari Bania is on top with regard to industry and finance and the Saraswat Brahmin*

*in respect of intellectual pursuits. It is absurd to talk about competing with these castes unless others are given preferential opportunities and privileges. The narrowing selection of abilities must now be broadened over the whole and that can only be done if for two or three or four decades backward castes and groups are given preferential opportunities. I must here make distinction between opportunities for employment and those for education. No one should be turned away from the portals of an educational institution because of his caste. Society on the other hand would be perfectly justified in turning those away from its employment whom it has so far privileged. Let them earn their living elsewhere. Society is required alone to equip them with the necessary educational ability.*

Despite the adulation of earlier years, Lohia's criticism of Nehru and his policies after early 1940s was trenchant. His articulation of the principles of the Congress Socialist Party transmuted itself in the fifties into the Praja Socialist Party which, as he put it, "is as distant from the Congress party as it is from the communist and the communalist parties." He had a nuanced view of the parliamentary form of government and advocated alongside the option of direct mass action. He told his party colleagues in 1955 that instead of an insurrectionary path they ought to choose a balanced mix of constitutional action and civil resistance where necessary.

*(Complete text of the First Ram Manohar Lohia Memorial lecture delivered by Vice President Hamid Ansari at Gwalior on September 23, 2015.)*

Lohia's advocacy of issues relating to farmers took a practical shape in 1954 when the UP Government increased irrigation rates for water supplied from canals to cultivators. In his speeches in the area, he incited cultivators not to pay "the enhanced irrigation rates" to government. He was severely critical of the state Government. He was arrested and charged under Section 3 of the UP Special Powers Act, 14 of 1932. In a habeas corpus petition in the High Court, he contended that the Act, and particularly Section 3 of it, stood repealed under Article 13 of the Constitution on account of its being inconsistent with the provisions of Article 19. The Court, in its judgment, addressed two questions: firstly, that Section 3 of the Act, making it penal for a person by spoken words to instigate a class of persons not to pay dues recoverable as arrears of land revenue, was inconsistent with Article 19 (1) (a) of the Constitution and secondly, that the restrictions imposed by this section were not in the interests of public order. The Court ordered that he be released, and costs paid.

Throughout the fifties and early part of 1960s, Lohia's critique of government policies was unrelenting. He was elected to the Lok Sabha in August 1963 and a few days later delivered a sharply focused speech in an adjournment motion expressing dissatisfaction with the government's policies and postures. He even used some archaic expressions: "Parliament," he said, "is the master whereas the Prime Minister is its servant. The servant has to behave modestly and politely with his master." He utilised the parliamentary platform to express powerfully his views on what he considered were shortfalls

in domestic and foreign policy issues. At the time of the Presidential election in 1969 in which he was an ardent supporter of the former Chief Justice of India Subba Rao, he called upon the youth to think about politics focused on five principles: socialist unity, unity of all opposition parties, joint demonstrations, single purpose platforms and hard work.

Rammanohar Lohia's political legacy and the impulses generated by it are very much in evidence today and have been so for over two decades. "In the world of politics," as one of his ardent scholar-activist followers has put it, "Lohia is remembered today as the originator of OBC reservations; the champion of backward castes in the politics of north India; the father of non-Congressism; the uncompromising critic of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty; and the man responsible for the politics of anti-English."

Commentary on this graphic summing up is unnecessary. Time and experience will tell if Lohia would have urged a greater measure of flexibility in the strategies of affirmative action currently underway. My purpose this afternoon is to focus on the principle of dissent in democracy that Dr. Lohia personified and its relevance for the continuing success of functioning democracies anywhere in the world.

## II

In 1950, the People of India gave themselves a Constitution that promised to secure to all citizens, inter alia, "liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship." This was given a concrete shape by the specific rights guaranteed by Articles 19 and 25 and the associated framework ensuring their implementation. The past six and a half decades have

witnessed the manner, and the extent, of their actualisation.

The Constitution was not crafted in a vacuum. It was preceded by the Freedom Movement and the values enunciated in it. These were formally encapsulated in the Objectives Resolution of January 22, 1947. At the same time the Constitution-makers, or some amongst them, were not unaware of the pitfalls. In his speech at the end of the drafting process in the Constituent Assembly, Ambedkar had warned about the impending "life of contradictions."

Ambedkar spoke of the danger posed to political democracy by disconnect between political equality and socio-economic inequality. A few decades later two eminent sociologists commented on some of its underlying aspects. They noted the backdrop of two competing narratives: "the civilisational history of co-survival of communities and the political history of ethnic competition and conflicts." They said, "the use of the coercive power of the State for effecting homogenisation in the society and the counter-violence by the political-cultural entities resisting such incursions by the State constitute the problem of the political system in India today." They enquired "whether the institutional imperiousness of the liberal State can be effectively countered by the popular movements" and felt the challenge in India "is to discover and press on the softer edges of the space within which the transformative, democratic movements find themselves enclosed. In this sense, the challenge for these movements is as much intellectual as political."

The quest for correctives often found expression through assertions relating to freedom of expression and its concomitant, the concept

of dissent. It is a concept that contains within it the democratic right to object, oppose, protest and even resist. Cumulatively it can be defined as the unwillingness in an individual or group to cooperate with an established authority—social, cultural or governmental. In that sense, it is associated with critical thinking since, as Albert Einstein put it, “blind faith in authority is the greatest enemy of truth”.

It has been observed with much justice that the history of progress of mankind is a history of informed dissent. This can take many forms ranging from conscientious objection to civil or revolutionary disobedience. In a democratic society, including ours, the need to accept difference of opinion is an essential ingredient of plurality. In that sense, the right of dissent also becomes the duty of dissent since tactics to suppress dissent tend to diminish the democratic essence. In a wider sense, the expression of dissent can and does play a role in preventing serious mistakes arising out of what has been called “social cascades” and “group polarisation” which act as deterrent on free expression of views or sharing of information.

Dissent as a right has been recognised by the Supreme Court of India as one aspect of the right of the freedom of speech guaranteed as a Fundamental Right by Article 19 (1) (a) of the Constitution. The court has observed that “the restrictions on the freedom of speech must be couched in the narrowest possible terms” and that the proviso of Article 19(2) is justiciable in the sense that the restrictions on it have to be “reasonable” and cannot be arbitrary, excessive or disproportionate.

In the globalising world of

today and in most countries having a democratic fabric, the role of civil society in the articulation of dissent has been and continues to be comprehensively discussed; so does the question of its marginalisation or suppression.

### III

Despite the unambiguously stated position in law, civil society concerns about constraints on the right of dissent in actual practice have been articulated powerfully. “On the surface,” wrote one of our eminent academics some time back, “Indian democracy has a cacophony of voices. But if you scratch the surface, dissent in India labours under an immense maze of threats and interdictions.” Referring to the then new reporting requirements for NGOs, he said:

“nothing is more fatal for disagreements and dissent than the idea that all of it can be reduced to hidden sub-texts or external agendas . . . The idea that anyone who disagrees with my views must be the carrier of someone else’s subversive agenda is, in some ways, deeply anti-democratic. It does away with the possibility of genuinely good faith disagreement. It denies equal respect to citizens because it absolves you of taking their ideas seriously. Once we have impugned the source, we don’t have to pay attention to the contents of the claim . . . This has serious consequences for dissent.”

This was written in 2012. It is a moot point if, given the Pavlovian reflexes of the Leviathan, things would have changed for the better since then. Informed commentaries suggest the contrary.

Every citizen of the Republic has the right and the duty to judge. Herein lies the indispensability of dissent.

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# ‘Patriotism’ Made Easy in Times of ‘WhatsApp Elections’

Subhash Gatade

There was a time when ‘Good Morning’ messages were causing much “pain” to internet giants?

It was the beginning of last year when the obsession of Indians with starting their day with a deluge of ‘Good Morning’ messages flooded WhatsApp, and generated a lot of chuckle. But it but also raised serious concerns such as the overloading WhatsApp servers, and clogging Android phones.

We were told how millions of Indians were getting online for the first time and how everyone was getting hooked on to WhatsApp. Their obsession with sending such messages was causing “some serious pain for Internet giants.” Not only WhatsApp but even Google researchers in Silicon Valley had noted how “internet newbies are overloading their Android phones with Good Morning messages.”

Nobody then had any premonition that India would shortly come under scanner for the spread of online disinformation and fake news resulting in a string of murders and growth of anti-minority sentiments. A report published by BBC’s Beyond Fake News Series had tried to corroborate this.

In the programme, Santanu Chakrabarti, the head of audience insight at BBC *World Service*, who conducted the study, shared how the “rise of the Hindu nationalist prime minister, Narendra Modi, had made many Indians feel as though they had a patriotic duty to forward information.”

According to Chakrabarti, Indians “are effectively looking for

validation of their belief systems and on these platforms, then, validation of identity trumps verification of the fact.” The large study, focussing on Kenya, Nigeria and India, studied how people react to and spread fake news. Cheap cost of data coupled with rising (what is construed as) nationalist sentiment was found to be behind the widespread sharing of fake news.

Actor Prakash Raj, speaking on the challenges posed by fake news at the ‘Beyond Fake News Conference’ organised by BBC attributed this phenomenon to the Bharatiya Janata Party and summarised it by saying how “They have intermingled nationalism, religion and patriotism and so they flood posts on social media blurring historical facts to push this agenda.”

What was worrying was that this investigative report clearly suggested a strong overlap between fake news and pro-Modi political activity. It suggested that the ruling party was actively and effectively peddling fake news about Prime Minister Modi across social media platforms such as Twitter, WhatsApp and Facebook.

It was a sheer coincidence that this BBC report had appeared in the immediate aftermath of elections in Brazil, which had elected a highly controversial Right wing politician, Jair Bolsonaro, as its President—someone who had openly expressed nostalgia for the country’s military dictatorship, or has repeatedly denigrated gender non-conformity and homosexuality and considers the issue of climate change as a Marxist plot.

A story by the *Guardian* newspaper had said “If the Brexit vote and Donald Trump’s charge to the White House were jet-propelled by Facebook, the rise of Brazil’s likely next president, the far-right firebrand Jair Bolsonaro, owes much to WhatsApp” which is “wildly popular in Brazil, with about 120 million active users, and has proved to be the ideal tool for mobilising political support—but also for spreading fake news.”

The menace of fake news had caused so much consternation in the highly polarised, social-media obsessed nation, where misinformation flew free and fast that 24 media organisations—ranging from national newspapers and television networks to specialist and local publications—joined forces under the name Comprova, or Prove It.

And now comes the news that a similar fate awaits India where the coming general elections have been dubbed “WhatsApp elections”.

A WhatsApp-sponsored report, which has been prepared in partnership with Queen Mary University and carried by a leading open space e-journal, ‘*The Conversation*’ has raised the alarm that the 2019 elections in India would be what it calls “WhatsApp Elections”, with its huge spread through damaging “fake news”.

According to the report, *India’s 2019 national elections are widely anticipated to be the “WhatsApp elections”. Against a backdrop of rapidly improving internet connectivity and rising*

*smartphone use, the number of people using private messaging service WhatsApp has soared since its India launch in mid-2010 to more than 200 million—more users than in any other democracy.*

And now the country's political parties are moving to capitalise on this mass communication channel. But given WhatsApp has already been used to misinform voters in other elections and spread damaging "fake news" that has led to serious violence in India, there's a danger this could also pose a threat to the democratic process.

Philippa Williams, senior lecturer in human geography, Queen Mary University of London, and Lipika Kamra, assistant professor, Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, OP Jindal Global University, have jointly conducted this study and the report underlines how "the problem has aggravated with the BJP recruiting 900,000 "cell phone pramukhs" across India to disseminate "information" about Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "successes", and Congress is following up by launching appointment of "digital sathis" to counter the BJP."

Underlining how the 'misuse' of WhatsApp has been connected with at least 30 incidents of murder and lynching, for example following the circulation of children abduction rumours' and also success of the Hindu Right 'at mobilising a common socio-political identity', the report expresses grave concerns about the outcome of the coming elections.

How things unfold in the next few weeks would be definitely a matter of concern for everyone, but it is worth raising a debate now on how does one look at the interaction

of technology with wider social and cultural issues. Any technology can at best amplify certain tendencies that already exist in Indian society. A society which already has cleavages on lines of caste, race, gender, religion would be a fertile ground for messages spreading hate.

Remember, it was exactly 25 years ago, that Rwandan genocide

took place. The organised, planned killings of eight lakh Tutsis by Hutus is one of the darkest episodes of the last decade of the 20th century. We should not forget that there was neither WhatsApp then nor any other social media platforms. Newspapers and radio-fitted the bill then.

*(The writer is an independent journalist based in Delhi.)*

## 108 Economists Slam Modi Govt For Tweaking Data

A group of 108 economists and social scientists have sounded a pre-election alarm over the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party government's move to revise or withhold the release of unfavourable or "uncomfortable" economic data.

In an open letter, 108 economists and social scientists have said that Indian statistics and the institutions associated with it have "come under a cloud for being influenced and indeed even controlled by political considerations."

They emphasised the fact that economic statistics are a public good and it is a vital necessity for policy-making and informed public discourse in democracies where citizens seek accountability from its government. Therefore, "it makes it imperative that the agencies associated with collection and dissemination of statistics like Central Statistical Office (CSO) and National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) are not subject to political interference and their work therefore, enjoys total credibility."

The signatories include Abhijit Banerjee, Pranab Bardhan, Jean Dreze, James Boyce, Jayati Ghosh,

Amartya Lahiri, Sudha Narayanan, Ashima Sood, Jayan Jose Thomas, Vamsi Vakulabharanam among others.

### Two glaring examples of data-tweaking

Modi is vulnerable over his economic record in the run-up to the polls starting on April 11. In particular, a failure to meet promises to create enough jobs for the million Indians entering the labour market each month, looms large over the BJP. The Modi-BJP Government's decision to withhold the release of the National Sample Survey Organisation's (NSSO) employment survey for the year 2017-18, despite the nod of the National Statistical Commission (NSC), has worsened it's case.

The survey would have shown a record high unemployment rate, but instead the government said that jobs' data had not been finalised.

In December 2018, the schedule for the release of results from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) of the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) was not met. This was the first economy-wide employment survey conducted

by NSSO after 2011–12 and was therefore deemed important, the letter pointed out.

Following this, two members of the National Statistical Commission, including the acting chairman, subsequently resigned because they felt the NSSO was delaying the release of the report, though the NSC itself had officially cleared it. Subsequently, news reports based on leaks of the report showed an unprecedented rise in unemployment rates in 2017–18; this perhaps explained why the government did not want to release the report. There have since been news reports that the PLFS of 2017–18 will be scrapped altogether by the government, the economists noted.

The government has also been criticised for its new back series GDP data that drastically lowered growth rates during the regime of the previous UPA government. In January this year, for instance, the Central Statistical Offices' revised estimates of GDP growth rate for 2016–17 (the year of demonetisation), shot up by 1.1 percentage points to 8.2%, the highest in a decade! "This seems to be at variance with the evidence marshalled by many economists," the press release stated.

According to the open letter, in 2018, two competing back series for varying lengths of time were prepared—separately by two official bodies, (a committee of) the NSC and later by the CSO. The two showed quite opposite growth rates for the last decade. The National Statistical Commission numbers were removed from the official web site and the CSO numbers were later presented to the public by the Niti Aayog, an advisory body which had hitherto no expertise in statistical

data collection

The numbers released by the NITI Aayog were in complete divergence from the numbers arrived at by a sub-committee of the NSC.

### **Statistical integrity crucial for generating data**

The statement said this situation was different from the past wherein India's statistical machinery enjoyed a high level of reputation for the integrity of the data it produced on a range of economic and social parameters.

While official data was often criticised for the quality of estimates, there were never allegations of political interference influencing decisions and the estimates themselves, it said. In fact, any statistics that cast an iota of doubt on the achievement of the government seem to get revised or suppressed on the basis of some questionable methodology.

The signatories to the open letter urged all professional economists, statisticians, independent researchers in policy—regardless of their political and ideological leanings—to come together to raise their voice against the tendency to suppress uncomfortable data, and impress upon the current and future government authorities to restore access and integrity to public statistics and reestablish institutional independence and integrity to the statistical organisations.

The letter concluded stating, "the national and global reputation of India's statistical bodies is at stake. More than that, statistical integrity is crucial for generating data that would feed into economic policy-making and that would make for honest and democratic public discourse."

### *Additional note (by Editors):*

After stopping the release of the release of the NSSO report on unemployment for 2017–18 and the sixth Labour Bureau annual employment-unemployment survey, it has now come to light that the government has also stopped the publication of a third survey on unemployment, this time by the Labour Bureau on the number of jobs created under the Micro Units Development & Refinance Agency (MUDRA). A report published in the Indian Express quoted sources as saying that the report will not be made public for another two months, that is, till after the Lok Sabha elections. The official reason cited are "errors" and "anomalies" in the methodology used for the jobs survey.

The MUDRA programme was launched in April 2015, and provides loans at low rates for people to set up small business and in order to generate jobs through self-employment. Last August, the Department of Financial Services had stated that around 90% of the loans fell in the lowest category of under Rs 50,000—an amount too measly for any serious, even if small, entrepreneurial venture.

The MUDRA survey by the Labour Bureau has covered an estimated 97,000 Mudra beneficiaries who took loans between April 8, 2015 and January 1, 2019. Given the findings of the two suppressed government reports as well as other recent job surveys, it is anybody's guess that the MUDRA survey results would have told a similar story of job losses and joblessness, and so the Modi Government has suppressed this report too.

## Venezuela is Extremely Important Because it is the Battle of this Century

**Carlos Aznárez, João Pedro Stédile**

*In February 2019, an International People's Assembly was held in Caracas, capital of Venezuela, in solidarity with the people and government of Venezuela represented by Nicolás Maduro. Almost 500 delegates from 90 countries of the world attended the event, and one of the most ardent supporters of this initiative in the last two years is the leader of the Landless Movement of Brazil, Joao Pedro Stédile. This is an interview with him taken during the Assembly:*

**Carlos Aznárez:** Why an International People's Assembly now?

**Joao Pedro Stédile:** The effort that we are making with this coordination, instead of any other action by the parties and unions, is to try to gather all the popular forces in the world so that we can promote common struggles against the common enemy of all of us—the imperialists. That is the main reason to look for new forms of international organisation that promote struggles and try to unite the different types of organisations in our countries. In this first Assembly, because of the extent of conflict in Venezuela, which is now the epicenter of the world class struggle, at least in the West, where imperialism seeks by any means to overthrow Venezuela, the number one task, the absolute priority of all of us, is to leave here with an agenda of actions, of denunciation, so that we can develop movements in solidarity with Venezuela and

against imperialism in each of the countries represented here.

**CA:** I am the devil's advocate: whenever this type of meeting is held, it is proposed to return to the countries and coordinate actions, and then, for some reason or because of the need to respond to the internal situation in each country, these things are not carried out and the documents and resolutions are packed away. Why do you think that this time it is going to happen or it should happen?

**JPS:** That is our self-critical reflection: we have to get out of paperwork and try to promote more actions. I believe that we should promote concrete struggles and actions because the popular forces that are here are accustomed to processes of popular organisation in their countries. The people attending this meeting are involved in real processes of struggle in their countries. So, we are confident that when they return to their countries they will put the issue of Venezuela, the issue of internationalism, permanently on their agenda in the national struggles they are already waging.

**CA:** Venezuela is a turning point today in the anti-imperialist struggle. What do you think is the most valid or most effective way of expressing solidarity with Venezuela on the continent?

**JPS:** It is true that there is tremendous confusion and that is why Venezuela is a key point, because even some left-wing sectors of Latin America and Europe allow

themselves to be influenced by what the capitalist press says. We had invited several European organisations but they refused to come to Venezuela because they claim Venezuela is not a democracy. That is strange. Venezuela is a country that has held 25 elections in 20 years, where the private press is the majority, where the opposition marches every day it wishes; how can we then say that there is no democracy in that country? So, those ideas of the capitalist classes have also influenced sections of the left, especially the most institutional sections, who are moved only by electoral logic, who if they are in an election year believe that it is not very convenient to be seen as being close to Venezuelans because they are radical. It is very similar to what happened in the past, when they isolated themselves from Cuba. But Cuba continues to not only exist, after 60 years of resistance, but is also thriving today with its happy, educated people.

So Venezuela is very important because it is the battle of this century. If the empire succeeds in overthrowing Venezuela, that means that it will have more forces to overthrow Cuba, Nicaragua, and all the processes that propose changes; not only that, even the institutional left that only thinks of elections will have difficulties in winning elections if Venezuela suffers defeat. So, not just for the people's struggles taking place all over the globe, but even for the institutional struggle, it is very important to defend Venezuela

and transform it into a trench of resistance and make it the grave of the Trump government.

**CA:** In your speeches and statements you tend to criticise the errors of the neo-liberal governments, but in several countries, there is a tendency to not face up to the imperialist offensive and compromise like was done in the past by social democracy. How do you see that, is that valid or do we have need to clearly state the need to advance along the path to socialism?

**JPS:** Our assessment is that there is a profound crisis of the capitalist mode of production and solution that they are seeking to their problem of accumulation of capital is to launch an offensive to seize control of resources, be it oil, mining, water or even biodiversity, and simultaneously increase the rate of exploitation of the working class by rolling back the gains that have been made by the people during the immediate decades after World War II. In ideological terms, what capital is promoting is the return of the extreme right, as happened in the crisis of the 1930s when it resorted to fascist and Nazi ideology.

The advantage we now have is that the fascists cannot repeat what they did in the 1930s as there is no mass movement of the working class today which can be re-directed along fascist and Nazi lines, and that gives us some security. But, on the other hand, since they don't have the masses, they wage an ideological struggle and use all the weapons they have, television, internet, networks, fake news, to defeat us with their ideology.

The capitalists have themselves defeated social democracy. In Latin America, Europe and the whole world, social democracy was a

means of humanising capital, but capital no longer wants to be human. Capital, in order to recover from its present crisis, has to be the devil and go to the extremes, whether in terms of manipulation of the State or of super-exploitation of nature and human labour, without bothering about the consequences.

Therefore, it would be a mistake for socialists today to think that in order to win elections we have to become like social democrats of the 1950s-60s. Now we need to return to grassroots work, to engage in ideological struggle, to recover our social base which is the working class that has been uprooted, is in a precarious condition, and faces numerous challenges. But we have to reorganise it under forms that are not just unions and the party as we have been used to, but are also new forms, new movements; we need to build a grassroots movement that builds up new forms of participatory democracy, because winning elections alone is not enough, as has been proven in Uruguay, Brazil and Argentina. Of course it is important to win elections, but we must have powerful grassroots forces and movements to achieve structural changes in the economy and in the political system.

**CA:** There is a phenomenon in Europe that is attracting attention and that is the yellow vests. Strangely enough, this wave comes from Europe and not from Latin America as one might imagine, but one can see elements of an anti-system approach there. Do you think that this phenomenon could help you in building up the new forms of struggle that must be applied to fighting the empire?

**JPS:** Without a doubt. We are very interested in the movements

that are developing in Europe and the processes that led to their development, and we are going to try to send our people to spend some time there and learn from them the forms they have adopted. It caught our attention because the people participating in the yellow vest movement are part of the working class, it is not a movement of the petty bourgeoisie or disillusioned students as it was once the case in Europe with camps in public squares. We perceive that initiatives are being promoted there by the precarious working class outside the traditional unions and the parties, who when they realised that capitalism is no longer solving their daily problems adopted this form of struggle that seems very interesting to us.

However, it is not question of copying a form and applying it to every country, the significance of it is that the working class in France are being very creative and they have discovered a form that is very suitable to the French reality. That's what we have to look for in Brazil, in Argentina and in each of our countries. In other words, we need to promote a debate in grassroots movements to look for new forms of struggle that will effectively fight the onslaught of capital and cause damage to it, because just with demonstrations, slogans and rallies, we are not being able to stop capital. The yellow vests of France have caused difficulties for capital because they are blocking the roads and so blocking the movement of trucks carrying goods. I congratulate the comrades and I hope that the French left will learn from them and get involved in the movement and also learn how to build links with the disorganised masses.

**CA:** How is the MST

approaching the struggle at this moment of time in Brazil, where Lula is still in prison, and where even though the government is facing difficulties, but it has been able to force the working class to retreat and withdraw several gains and rights won by the workers in the past?

**JPS:** The MST is now in a very complex situation. We need to redouble our work and our efforts. Our movement has a peasant base, it developed its experience of class struggle by organising people in the countryside against the landlords and agricultural capital, which are the big transnationals. It is there that we were formed, we became politicised and we understood that Agrarian Reform does not mean only ownership of land for those who work on the land, which was dominant understanding of the Zapatista ideas during the 20th century, but that now Agrarian Reform also means that it primarily a struggle against international capital and its transgenic and agro-toxic technology. It was that struggle that politicised us to understand the limitations of the classic peasant movements.

After the defeats suffered by us because of Lula's imprisonment and now with Bolsonaro's victory, we now face new challenges that require that we advance beyond the struggle for Agrarian Reform and build a broad political struggle. At the same time, we also need to consolidate our movement for Agrarian Reform. But in this, the MST needs to proceed more carefully because the right wing is preparing traps for us, and we fall in them, they will seek to defeat us. Therefore, we need to act with much more wisdom in the countryside, and we will need to mobilise people on a much larger

scale to protect ourselves from the repression that the right-wing is preparing to launch to defeat us. So far, this offensive is being launched by the militias funded by big capital, we have not yet faced repression from the State, from the government of Bolsonaro, but we do not doubt that this is precisely what they desire.

In political terms, what we need to do is to go to the cities and with our militancy and experience, develop a movement that solidly supports the peasantry in the countryside. We have already made our plans and begun their implementation, and for that, we have created in Brazil a broad united front of popular movements called the Popular Brazil Front. To strengthen the grassroots movement, we are developing new forms, one of which is what we call the People's Congress. It is a pompous-sounding name, but it an attempt to challenge the existing political structure. We are going from house to house to talk with the people about their problems, and to motivate them to build and participate in a popular assembly in their neighbourhood, parish, work place. Once these assemblies are held and they are able to attract a significant number of people to participate in them, we then plan to organise municipal assemblies, and then provincial assemblies, to ultimately culminate in the organising of a National People's Congress sometime next year or the end of this year. Through the organising of these assemblies, we hope to motivate the people to participate in politics. We also seeking to discover new means of communication with the people including how to better use the internet networks and how to expand the distribution of our newspaper

among the people, and how to use the cultural medium such as music and theatre more effectively to reach out to the people as these are forms that are more effective in reaching out to the people rather than political discourses to which no one listens today. We have to use other forms of mass pedagogies to interact with the people in Brazil and politicise them, develop new creative forms, like the working people are doing in France about which I talked earlier.

**CA:** Will Lula and his freedom continue to be on the agenda of the MST?

**JPS:** That's another big issue in politics in Brazil today. Lula's freedom is at the center of the class struggle in Brazil. There is no successor to Lula because popular leadership is chosen not by the parties but by the people, which is why it is called popular leadership, and Lula is the popular leader of Brazil.

It is a fundamental task for the class struggle that we succeed in liberating Lula so that he becomes the principal spokesman, he is the one who has the capacity to help mobilise the masses against the system and the project of the extreme right. That's why the extreme right is terrified and prevents him from even speaking, giving interviews, something that goes against the Constitution. Any narco-trafficker in Brazil speaks on national television, but Lula cannot give an interview even to a written newspaper.

So, we are fighting for Lula's freedom, which is going to depend on two important factors. One is international solidarity, which is why I take this opportunity through this interview with you to ask everyone to help us. The second factor is the national mobilisation that we are

developing in Brazil, in which we are linking up the campaign for freeing Lula to the concrete struggle against neo-liberal policies. We want

people to realise that if they want to defend the rights they have won in the past, which the government is seeking to eliminate today, they will

have to fight against the policies of neoliberal government in power in Brazil today.

## What can Karl Marx Offer to the 21st Century?

**Anjan Basu**

Eric Hobsbawm, the well-known historian, recalls how George Soros once asked him about what Hobsbawm thought of Karl Marx. This was at the turn of the 21st century.

Surprised, and also aware that there was hardly any meeting ground between the billionaire hedge-funds wizard and champion of the free market and a Marxist historian who refused to renounce his membership of the British Communist Party even when the party faced liquidation, Hobsbawm chose to give an ambiguous answer.

Soros' rejoinder was startling. "That man," he said, "discovered something about capitalism 150 years ago that we must take notice of."

Also, in 1998, as the *Communist Manifesto* turned 150, the editor of the inflight magazine of United Airlines (UA) approached Hobsbawm with a request that amazed the historian. Would he consent to UA using, for their magazine, portions of an article Hobsbawm had written to mark the anniversary, so that American (mostly business) travellers could acquaint themselves with what the *Manifesto* talked about?

But this curiosity about what Karl Marx wrote or stood for is more than matched by a frequent desire to pummel him no matter what. I remember watching a panel discussion on a prominent Bengali TV channel two or three years back.

The subject at hand was of the chit fund scams that rocked the state just then.

The BJP spokesperson, a recent convert to the saffron world-view, was speaking just after a left-wing leader had had his say. He began by declaiming that "since Marx, from whom the Indian left draws its inspiration, died more than 150 years ago, it is pointless to engage with the left."

A gentle reminder that his timelines were somewhat awry provoked a sharper response: the gentleman couldn't care less if Marx had lived a hundred or a thousand years ago—for, one way or another, he was evil.

Surely the BJP *karyakarta* was in august company. During the 136 years that it has stood inside London's Highgate Cemetery, the many benedictions that Marx's grave has received from solicitous hands make for a fascinating story. People have splashed emulsion paint of sundry colours over the tomb. The Swastika has made its appearance upon the memorial with unflinching regularity. Marx's massive head has remained an inviting target for hammer-wielders.

As recently as in February, 2019, the memorial plaque (bearing the names of the members of the Marx family who lie buried here) was vandalised so meticulously that the trust looking after the tomb feels that the monument may never be the

same again.

Connoisseurs also pasted loving messages reading 'Doctrine of Hate', 'Bolshevik Holocaust' and 'Architect of Genocide' on the pedestal, taking care to write only in red, presumably Marx's favourite colour. An exasperated Maxwell Blowfield, from the British Museum, said he was "just surprised that somebody in 2019 feels they need to go and do something like that."

Ian Dungavell, CEO, Friends of Highgate Cemetery Trust, had a somewhat different take on the incident: "That's the only consolation—he [Marx] has not been forgotten about."

Now, both the visceral hatred of the man as well as the wide-eyed curiosity about what he was all about give the lie to what was once believed to be a settled fact: that Karl Marx was no longer worth bothering about; that, indeed, there was no point trying to rescue him from the no-man's land of history to which the dismantling of the USSR (and the 'socialist camp') had consigned him to.

I will in fact argue that, as much as the renewed interest in his work, the animosity towards him derives from a realisation that the central core of Marxism—even his political economy—has not dated, never mind that Marx didn't live to see either of the two World Wars, or the Cold War, or the 1930s' Great Depression, or its later equivalent—

the great financial sector earthquakes of 2008–09 whose tremors are yet to run their course fully.

Marx was well and truly back on the public scene when, on September 19, 2008, the Financial Times of London ran that unnerving headline—*Capitalism in Convulsion: Toxic Assets head towards the Public Balance Sheet*. It was the time when a lot of management-school-trained experts were obliged to recall what Walter Bagehot, the 19th century economist who lived and worked in London in much the same time that Marx did, had said about common sense:

“Common sense teaches that booksellers should not speculate in hops, or bankers in turpentine; that railways should not be promoted by maiden ladies, or canals by beneficed clergymen . . . in the name of common sense, let there be common sense.”

As an over-leveraged global financial system continued to unwind, common sense reclaimed—if only for a while—some of the space in the public discourse that jargon-laden sophistry had monopolised since the disappearance, in the 1990s, of all competing visions of public finance. The foremost of those visions—more accurately, of the ways of looking at the economic organisation of human society—was Karl Marx’s critique of capitalism. A look back to that critique was inescapable in the circumstances, at any rate for those who, like George Soros, had begun to hear the roll of thunder some time before the storm hit home with unspeakable fury.

For them, the meltdown of 2008–09 was clearly a throwback, through the Asian financial turmoil of 1997–98, to capitalism’s existential crisis of the tumultuous 1930s. In

the US alone, 9 million women and men lost their jobs during 2007–09, pushing the national unemployed number to 10% of the labour force. The crisis wiped out nearly one whole year’s national output from the country’s balance sheet, with aggregate household net worth plunging \$16 trillion, or 24%. Only a self-deluding observer could deny that there was more than a grain of truth in what Marx had to say on the subject as early as in 1848:

*It is enough to mention the commercial crises that by their periodical return put the existence of the entire bourgeois society on trial, each time more threateningly. In these crises, a great part not only of the existing products, but also of the previously created productive forces, are periodically destroyed. In these crises, there breaks out an epidemic that, in all earlier epochs, would have seemed an absurdity . . .*

For those in Europe and the US—and even in countries that managed to escape the direct fallout of the crisis—whose very lives were coming apart even as capital and debt markets were unravelling at breathless speed, Marx’s ringing indictment of globalised capitalism couldn’t but have struck a chord:

*Modern bourgeois society, with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells. . . . The conditions of bourgeois society are too narrow to comprise the wealth created by them (the productive forces at the disposal of that society).*

Relentlessly, Marx pursues this theme of the self-destructive force

built into the process of capitalist development:

*And how does the bourgeoisie get over these crises? On the one hand, by the enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces; on the other, by the conquest of new markets, and by the more thorough exploitation of the old ones. That is to say, by paving the way for more extensive and more destructive crises, and by diminishing the means whereby crises are prevented.*

As powerful as the image of the necromancer struggling to put the genie back into the bottle is, it need not blind us to the broader point that is being made here. Capitalist growth inevitably leads to disruption and crisis, but the system reinvents itself after every such upheaval—by conquering new markets and deepening the exploitation of existing ones.

The price that every new incarnation extracts from society escalates in each cycle, but what Schumpeter called the unending process of ‘creative destruction’ rolls on regardless. The capitalist system lives to see another day. How?

The answer that Marx provides to this question remains one of the most brilliant insights that any economist/philosopher brought to his craft in any period of recorded history. Here is Marx’s reply, in its bare essentials:

*The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of Reactionists, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are*

*dislodged by new industries . . . that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed not only at home but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. . . . The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication . . . compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production . . . In other words, it creates a world after its own image.*

Marx believed that this process would eventually lead to an enormously concentrated political economy. He also believed that this concentration was bound to assume such humongous proportions that, beyond a point, the system could no longer reinvent itself. It would then founder under its own weight—helped, as Marx had hoped, by “the grave-diggers of capitalism”—the class of the industrial proletariat, the impoverished manual wage-earner who, in Marx’s England of the 1840s, lived at best a sub-human life.

It was this idea, of capitalism being the last stage in a process of social evolution based on implacable class antagonisms, that became the point of departure for all major political revolutions of the 20th century. The most significant among these was the Russian (Bolshevik) Revolution of October/November 1917 which happened to stake

its claim as the ‘real’ inheritor of Marx’s legacy. When the USSR, into which this revolution had resulted, collapsed in a heap in the 1990s, popular imagination saw this as the unravelling of Marxist political economy itself.

Liberal scholarship has always lent credence to this gross oversimplification and, for neoliberal orthodoxy, such an equation is an article of faith. From the late 1990s till the market mayhem of 2008–09, therefore, Marx the political economist was cited more often for rebuttal than for any meaningful engagement with his ideas. This, despite the fact that everybody agreed, however grudgingly, that Marx’s contributions to the social sciences, historiography, aesthetics and philosophy were seminal.

It took the tectonic shift in fundamental economic thinking caused by the 2008 crisis for the world to once again recognise, with Eric Hobsbawm, that,

“we cannot foresee the solutions of the problems facing the world in the twenty-first century, but if they are to have a chance of success they must ask Marx’s questions, even if they do not wish to accept his various disciples’ answers.”

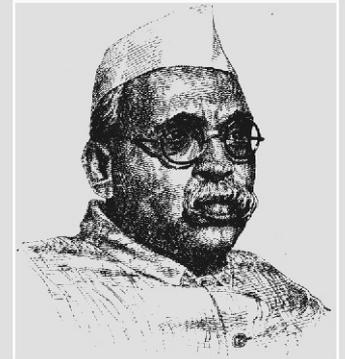
*(Anjan Basu is a literary critic, commentator and translator of poetry. He is based in Bangalore.)*

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