



# DAWN: MARXISM AND NATIONAL LIBERATION



Dossier n° 37 | Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research  
February 2021

‘True, we may stumble in pathless darkness, we may stand on the brink of the yawning chasms, but we are not afraid, because we know that in order to see the dawn one has to pass through the dark night’.

Najiya Hanum (Turkey), First Congress of the Peoples of the East, Baku, USSR, 1920.

Only at the end of his life did Karl Marx leave the shores of Europe and travel to a country under colonial dominion. This was when he went to Algeria in 1882. ‘For Mussulmans, there is no such thing as subordination’, Marx wrote to his daughter Laura Lafargue. Inequality is an abomination to ‘a true Mussulman’ (a Muslim), but these sentiments, Marx felt, ‘will go to rack and ruin without a revolutionary movement’. A movement of revolutionary understanding would, he thought, easily be able to grow where there was a deeply rooted cultural feeling against inequality. Marx did not write more about Algeria or about Islam. These were observations made by a father to his daughter. But they do tell us a great deal about Marx’s sensibility.

Marxism is fundamentally opposed to the idea that certain people needed to be ruled because they are treated as racial or social inferiors. In fact, from Marx’s early writings onward, Marxism has always understood human freedom as a universal objective. Human slavery and the degradation of human beings into wage slavery awoke in Marx a prophetic indignation. In a major statement by Marx at the First International in 1865, he demanded that all citizens of the United States ‘be declared free and equal, without reserve’ and warned the United States that a failure to decisively deal with the grim legacy

of slavery could ‘stain your country with your people’s blood’. W.E.B. Du Bois, the great African American intellectual, cited this statement in his magnum opus, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), welcoming it as a ‘bold’ intervention.

One of Marx’s most famous passages in *Capital* (1867) pointed out that the ‘rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production’ could not be found in the antiseptic bank or factory. The origin of capitalism had to be found – among other processes – in ‘the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of Black skins’. Capitalism grew and was sustained by the degradation of humanity the world over. No wonder, then, that anti-colonialism would play such an important role in the Marxist movement.

Once you drifted outside the boundaries of the North Atlantic region, from Europe to the United States of America, the categories of Marxism had to be ‘slightly stretched’ and the narrative of historical materialism had to be enhanced, as Caribbean intellectual Frantz Fanon argued. Otherwise, people would be adopting categories that surely had a universal application but were not applied in the same way everywhere. Few Marxists adopted the vast continent of dialectical and historical materialism without translating it into their own contexts and into their own dilemmas.

This has been one of the richest elements of the Marxist tradition, and one that is very rarely considered.

Furthermore, in the colonies, the structure of capitalist accumulation and theft determined the fact that these regions would not see their productive forces developed by the capitalist system; the social development of their means of labour (including machinery and infrastructure) and their human capacity would be held down to privilege the lands of their colonial rulers. This stagnation of social development posed challenges for Marxists in the colonised regions, where their tasks were expanded and confoundingly difficult: they had to overthrow colonial rule, develop productive forces in an adverse context, and advance social relations towards socialism. These simultaneous processes had to be developed during a sustained attack by imperialist forces that included open warfare (as Vietnam experienced for decades), but also the technique of hybrid war (including sanctions and blockades).

Dossier no. 37 is an invitation to a dialogue, a conversation about the entangled tradition of Marxism and national liberation – a tradition that emerges out of the October Revolution and that deepens its roots in the anti-colonial conflicts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This is an introduction to a wide-ranging conversation that includes many different revolutionary movements, mostly rooted in the continents of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. At Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, we are interested in reviving a serious discussion about this tradition.





## *The Living Soul of Marxism*

When Marxism travelled outside the domain where Marx first developed his theory, it had to engage with what Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924) called, in 1920, ‘the very gist, the living soul, of Marxism – a concrete analysis of concrete conditions’. In fact, Lenin’s contribution opened the door for the assessment of Marxism outside Europe.

Lenin was not alone in understanding the need for a ‘concrete analysis of concrete conditions’, for a creative interpretation of Marxism for different social contexts. The Cuban intellectual and revolutionary Julio Antonio Mella (1903-1929) understood that the mood of the time was for socialism: ‘The cause for socialism in general is the cause of the moment: in Cuba, in Russia, in India, in the United States, and in China – everywhere’. But the ‘only obstacle’ for socialism was ‘in knowing to adapt it to the reality of different environments’. Marxists must not, Mella wrote, make ‘servile copies of revolutions made by other people in other climates’.

From the early days of the establishment of the communist party in South Africa, its members, too, discussed the importance of organising amongst the non-European working class. In 1934, Moses Kotane (1905-1978) – who led the party from 1939 till his death – argued in a letter to the Johannesburg District Committee of the party that it was imperative that ‘the Party become more Africanised’ and that it ‘pay special attention to South Africa, study the conditions

in this country and concretise the demands of the toiling masses from first-hand information’.

The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) wrote wryly in *Avanti!* (December 1917) that the revolution in Russia was a revolution against *Capital*, meaning a revolution against the premonitions in Marx’s mature work. But this was not entirely the case. Revolutions in the advanced capitalist states did not occur for a variety of reasons, and the main successful revolutions came in peasant societies – what Lenin called the ‘weakest link’ in the capitalist order. This was itself an elaboration of Marx’s full theory, of the considerations of ideology as much as of structure. The subjective side of the ledge was hindered by a range of processes: the development of the propaganda against socialism, the growth of a repressive apparatus, and the grip of a ‘labour aristocracy’ in the working-class movement. This was despite the fact that the objective conditions for revolution produced cascading crises. That subjective side – the agitation amongst the masses, the existence of a party, the development of a creative Marxism – came about for a host of reasons in the weakest links, from Russia in 1917 to Cuba in 1959.

The revolutionary, Mella wrote, need not repeat Lenin; the revolutionary must follow Lenin’s advice to be creative with Marxism. The revolutionary should not treat Marxism as theology – to follow it to the letter – nor should the revolutionary treat every individual case as exceptional. The point is to understand the nature of capitalist universality alongside the rich history of each country, to develop a dialectical understanding of the universal and the particular, and to understand the generality of capitalist social relations alongside how

these emerged in each location. That is what Lenin did, which contributed to the unfolding of the revolution in Russia.

Peasant societies such as Mexico and India, China and southern Africa, grasped Lenin's translation of Marxism from the context of the factory into the fields. Lenin worked out the contradictions of capitalism in Russia, which allowed him to understand how some sections of the peasantry in the sprawling Tsarist Empire had a proletarian character as landless agricultural labourers. Based on this understanding, Lenin argued for a worker-peasant alliance against Tsarism and the capitalists. Lenin understood from his engagement with mass struggle and theoretical reading that the social democrats – as the most liberal section of the bourgeoisie and the aristocrats – were not capable of driving a bourgeois revolution, let alone the movement that would lead to the emancipation of the peasantry and the workers. This work was done in *Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution* (1905). *Two Tactics* is perhaps the first major Marxist treatise that demonstrated the necessity for a socialist revolution, even in a 'backward' country, where the workers and the peasants would need to ally to break the institutions of bondage. This text shows Lenin avoiding the views that the Russian Revolution could leapfrog capitalist development (as the populists, the *narodniki*, suggested) or that it had to go through capitalism (as the liberal democrats argued). Neither path was possible nor necessary. Capitalism of a limited kind had already entered Russia – a fact that the populists did not acknowledge – and it could be overcome by a worker-peasant revolution – a fact that the liberal democrats disputed. However, capitalism would not advance the productive forces, which was a task

that would inevitably fall to the socialists. The 1917 Revolution and the Soviet experiment proved Lenin's point.

Having established that the liberal elites in the poorer nations would not be able to lead a worker-peasant revolution, or even a bourgeois revolution, Lenin turned his attention to the international situation. Sitting in exile in Switzerland, Lenin watched as the social democrats capitulated to warmongering in 1914 and delivered the working class to the world war. Frustrated by the betrayal of the social democrats, Lenin wrote *Imperialism* in early 1916, in which he developed a clear-headed understanding of the growth of finance capital and monopoly firms as well as inter-capitalist and inter-imperialist conflict. It was in this text that Lenin explored the limitations of the socialist movements in the West – where the labour aristocracy provided a barrier to socialist militancy – and the potential for revolution in the East – where the ‘weakest link’ in the imperialist chain might be found. Such a lucid assessment of imperialism of this type ensured that Lenin developed a strong position on the rights of nations to self-determination, whether these nations were within the Tsarist Empire or indeed any other European empire. Here, we find the kernel of the anti-colonialism of the USSR, which developed further in the Communist International (Comintern) from 1919 to 1943. It is what drew in anti-colonial militants from the Dutch East Indies to the Andes.



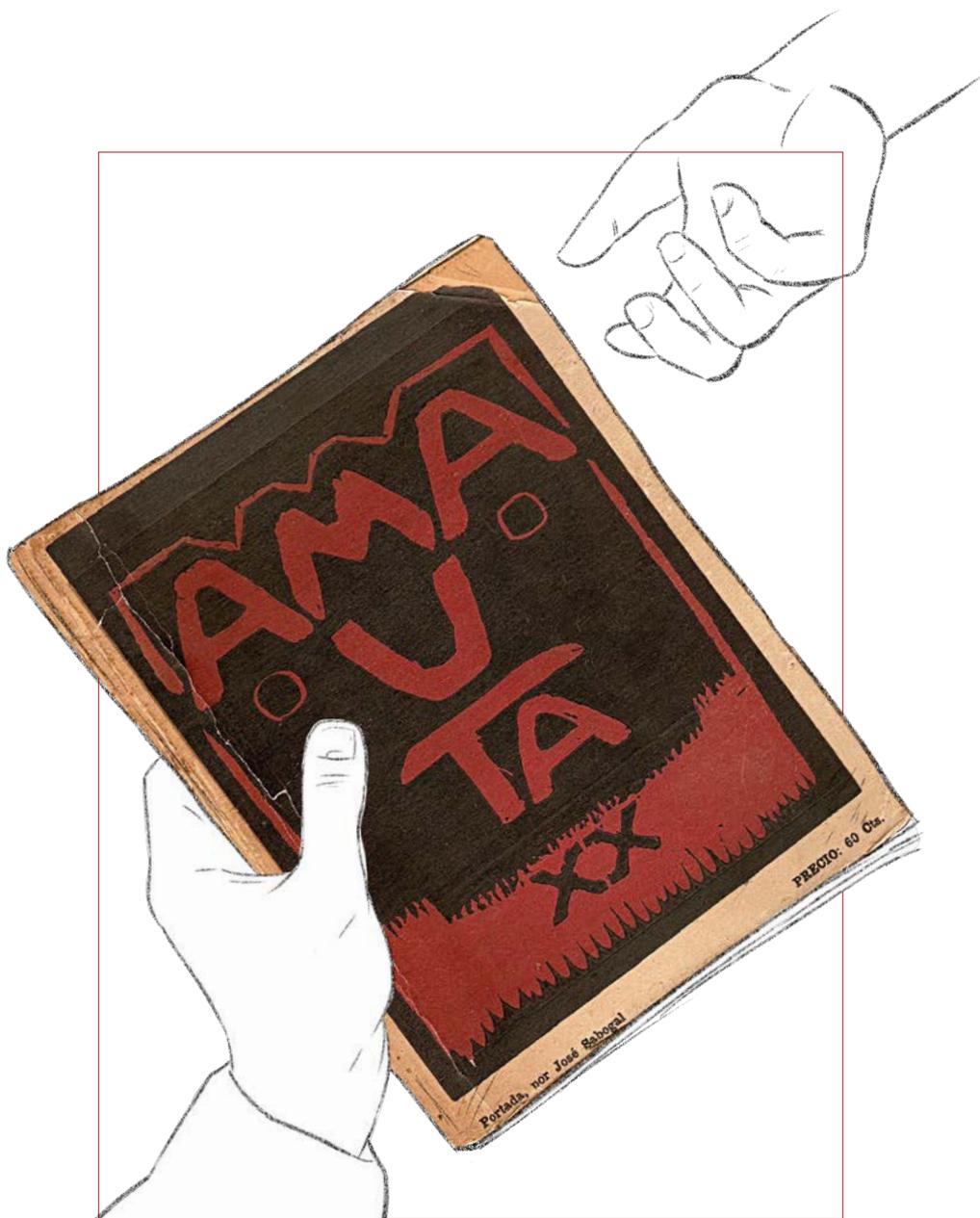
## *A Heroic Creation*

In the Andes, José Carlos Mariátegui (1894-1930) wrote in 'Anniversary and Balance Sheet' (*Amauta*, 1928) 'We certainly do not want socialism in Latin America to be a copy or imitation. It should be a heroic creation. We have to give life to Indo-American socialism with our own reality, in our own language'. What did Mariátegui do? He read his Marx and his Lenin and he studied deeply the social reality of the Andean region. Lenin's theory of the worker-peasant alliance provided a fundamental addition to Mariátegui's Marxism. A socialist revolution in an agrarian society would not be possible without a peasant upsurge against the grip of landlordism. In the case of Peru, that peasant revolt drew from older ideas of community (the *ayllu*) in which the Indians refused individualism; as Mariátegui wrote in *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality* (1928), 'communism has continued to be the Indian's only defence'. The agent of change in Peru amongst the producing classes had to include the predominantly indigenous rural communities. To seek the insurgents amongst the minuscule industrial sector of Lima alone would be to go into battle with capital with one hand tied behind their back. This is an echo of Lenin's call for worker-peasant unity, but with indigenous communities now in the framework.

Were indigenous rural communities capable of a socialist movement? In the 1920s, when Mariátegui was developing his thinking, the prevailing intellectual fashion with regard to the rural communities was *indigenismo*, or Indianness, meaning a cultural movement that

revived and celebrated Amerindian cultural forms but did not seek to explore their transformative potential. *Indigenismo* defanged the Amerindians and romantically saw them as producers of culture but not of history. Mariátegui reinterpreted this history in a more vibrant way, both looking back at Inca forms of common ownership and common production and looking at the current struggles against the *latifundistas* as resources for social transformation. ‘When a people are traditionally communist’, Mariátegui wrote in reference to Inca socialism, to dissolve their community systems does not turn them into small landowners but delivers their land to the large landowners. ‘A society cannot be transformed artificially, still less a peasant society deeply attached to its traditions and its legal institutions’, he wrote in *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality*. ‘It must be formed through a more complicated and spontaneous process’ in which the older traditions are brought alive in a democratic system.

Mariátegui’s Andean socialism was never a restoration of the past, of a pre-modern communism of an ancient Inca world: ‘It is clear that we are concerned less with what is dead than with what has survived of the Inca civilisation’, he wrote in 1928. ‘Peru’s past interests us to the extent it can explain Peru’s present. Constructive generations think of the past as an origin, never as a program’. In other words, the past is a resource, not a destination – it reminds us of what is possible, and its traces show us that elements of that old communitarianism can be harnessed in the fight against colonial private property relations in the present. When Marxism came to the Third World, it had to be supple and precise: to learn from its context and understand the ways that capitalism morphs into new venues and explores the ways for social transformation to drive history.



Marxism would have died an early death in places like the Andes if it had not taken seriously the concrete conditions of the workers and other oppressed people, as well as the social aspirations of national self-determination. The tentacles of imperialism gathered firmly around the sovereignty of countries like Peru, suffocating them with credit and warships, forcing the people into lives of great indignity. To improve the conditions of work and life, and to be part of the anti-colonial movement in countries like Peru, meant that Marxist-inspired movements had to merge the struggle of national liberation with that of socialism. It had to urge on the movements that remained within the horizon of capitalism – those that sought to improve the conditions of life – as well as the movements for more representation in government – those that sought to enter systems that remained under imperial control. It was these emancipatory demands – drawing on old messianic ideas as well as revolutionary trade unionism, anarchism, and Marxism – that would bring together the currents of anti-colonial nationalism and socialism in the colonies and semi-colonies into what we are calling national liberation Marxism.

It is important to pause here and digest a fact that is often not considered when one is looking at the world of Marxism. Many of those who became Marxists in the colonial world had never read Marx. They had read about Marx in various cheap pamphlets and had encountered Lenin in this form as well. In Cuba, for instance, workers such as Carlos Baliño (1848-1926), introduced Marx to their comrades. Books were too expensive, and they were often difficult to get, a reality in which the role of censorship was a central component. People like Baliño, China's Li Dazhao (1888-1927), South Africa's Josie Palmer (1903-1979), India's Muzaffar Ahmed (1889-1973),

Iraq's Yusuf Salman Yusuf or Fahd (1901-1949), and Ecuador's Dolores Cacuango (1881-1971) came from humble backgrounds with little access to the intellectual traditions out of which Marx's critique emerged. But they knew its essence. They learned it in bits and pieces, often from agents of the Communist International (Fahd derived his Marxist education from the Comintern's Piotr Vasili) or from sojourns at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East in the USSR. They did not come from bourgeois families or earn stipends from their parents, nor did they get the opportunity to study the width of Marxism and find their way through scholarship. They came to Marxism from the factory floor and the agriculturalist's field, from the prisons of the colonial rulers and the nationalist organisations to which they flocked. They drew from what they learned and developed their theories both about imperialism and capitalism from that reading and from their experience. They read what they could find and drew from it what would help them to develop a theory and praxis adequate to their social reality. Mao Zedong reflected this attitude in 'Rectify the Party's Style of Work' (1942): 'Our comrades in the Party School should not regard Marxist theory as lifeless dogma. It is necessary to master Marxist theory and apply it, master it for the sole purpose of applying it'.

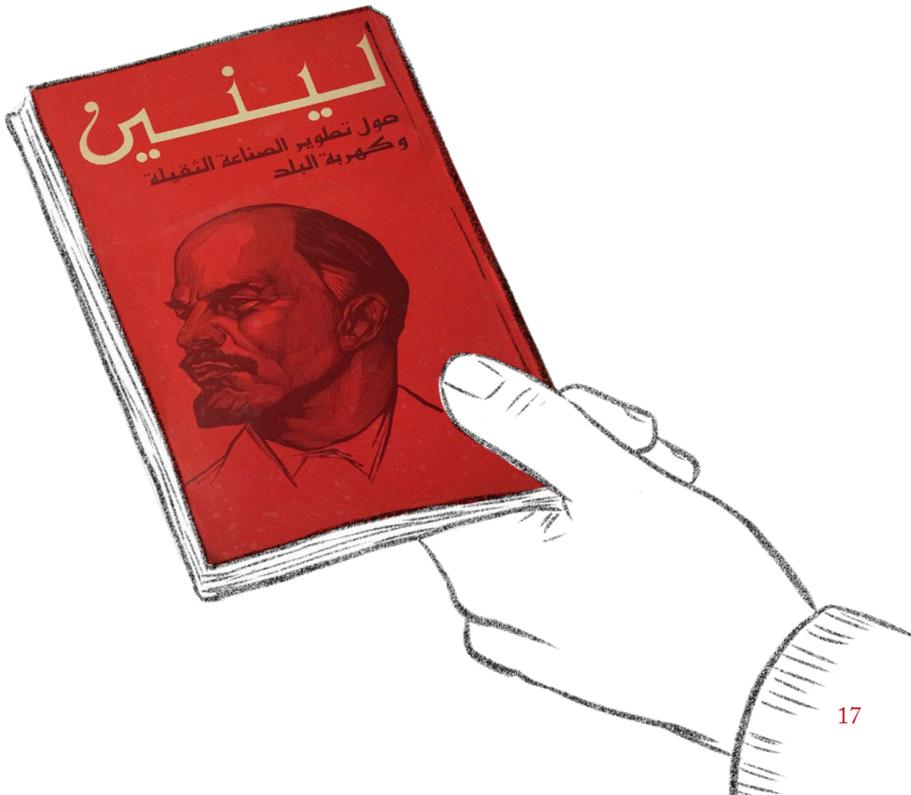
These were men and women who came to radicalism through their affection for the people, understanding that anti-colonialism had to be part of their framework but so too did the social revolution. It would not be enough to eject the coloniser and elect the bourgeoisie to take the coloniser's place. Both had to go. This is why many of these radicals formed parties to the left of the bourgeois nationalists, but not so far to their left that they did not participate together

in anti-colonial actions. Baliño and Mella formed the Communist Party of Cuba in 1925; drawing from the work of José Martí (1853-1895), Baliño and Mella fused anti-colonialism nationalism with their own understanding of and aspiration for socialism. This was a view shared across the colonised world. Most Marxist movements in the colonised world struggled with the question of the national bourgeoisie – whether to see it as even partially progressive or to see it as inherently reactionary once in power. Parties split on these lines, and the Comintern argued till dawn along them.

The Comintern tried to be supple, but its limited knowledge of the world in its early years meant that it ended up being far too dogmatic to always be useful. By the late 1920s, the Comintern proposed the creation of a Black Belt Republic in the southern region of the United States, a Native Republic in South Africa, and an Indian Republic along the Andean region of South America. From Moscow, it appeared as if the nationalities theory could be easily transported to these distant lands. For South America, the theory was debated at the first Latin American Communist Conference, held in Buenos Aires in June 1929. Fierce debate broke out here, with the Comintern's preferred position being opposed by Mariátegui and his associates. 'The construction of an autonomous state from the Indian race', Mariátegui wrote in 'The Problem of Race in Latin America', a text he prepared for the 1929 conference, 'would not lead to the dictatorship of the Indian proletariat, nor much less the formation of an Indian State without classes'. What would be created is an 'Indian bourgeois State with all of the internal and external contradictions of other bourgeois states'. The preferred option would be for the 'revolutionary class movement of the exploited indigenous masses', which

was the only way for them to ‘open a path to the true liberation of their race’. The debate on goals and strategy became so fierce that this was the only Latin American Communist Conference to be held. ‘The Indian proletariat awaits its Lenin’, Mariátegui quoted Luis Valcárel in the prologue to *Tempest in the Andes* (1927). Neither Valcárel nor Mariátegui meant a Lenin as such, but a theory that could emerge from the movements to lead them against the rigid structures of the past and present.

This was not always the lesson that was learned. But it is our lesson now.



## *How to Advance Social Development?*

Revolutionaries in the colonies and the semi-colonies had to confront the problem of a lack of development of the productive forces. Few saw the intervention of the colonial powers as progressive for their social development, since these European colonial powers typically collaborated with the worst elements in colonial societies to maintain power: the aristocracy, the landlords, the clergy, and the traditional intellectuals. Colonial policy frequently laid a heavy hand on social development, freezing old forms of hierarchy and creating new ones in the name of tradition. Simultaneously, colonial policy impoverished society; plundered social wealth and directed it towards the North Atlantic states; and created social deserts in areas that once had rich cultural dynamics and the potential for social development.

Bourgeois nationalists confronted this by denying it and by glorifying traditions, whether precolonial forms or forms fabricated during colonialism. This kind of revivalism only deepened the morass, stifling the development of the colonised economy and its society. Peasant and worker revolts pushed the bourgeois nationalists to understand that, while the task of political independence had to be seen as central, it could not be isolated from the social revolution and the revolution against the economic and cultural conditions that had been put in place by the colonial powers. These powers worked intimately with the landed aristocracy and the bourgeoisie to suffocate society.

The Egyptian socialist Salama Musa (1887-1958) is emblematic of early revolutionary consciousness in the colonies. Musa was struck by the hierarchies of his society and by the apparent futility of his times. It was in socialism – a word he took into Arabic as *ishtrakia* – that he found the answer to his times. For Musa, there were two obstacles to progress: the colonial powers (mainly Britain) and traditionalism. Both prevented Egyptian society from developing out of its impasse, with education systems atrophied, hunger widespread, and religious thought masquerading as authentic Egyptian ideology. Musa was not convinced that the *Nahda*, the enlightenment of the Arabs, would be sufficient since it did not seem to be able to break away from traditionalism and the heavy weight of colonialism. What did Musa mean when he wrote in *Al-yawm wa al-ghad* (1928), ‘Although the sun rises in the East, the light comes from the West’? Did he mean that the West was the wellspring of reason? It was not that reason came from the West, but that the West – with its theft of resources and its ability therefore to develop socially – had produced developments in thought (Marxism, Fabian socialism) that should be engaged with in places such as Egypt. It was necessary not to dig oneself into a hole of nativism nor to adopt the ideology of the colonial masters. The point was to find frameworks and concepts from the best of reason to develop a critique of one’s society. This was what Musa attempted in *Our Duties and the Tasks of Foreign Countries* (1930) as well as in *Gandhi and the Indian Revolution* (1934) and *Egypt: A Place where Civilisation Began* (1935).

The idea of ‘backwardness’ (*takballuf*) is not easily dismissed. To critique Western thought for its disdain for the colonies was insufficient for revolutionaries; their task was to develop a theory and a praxis for how to exit from the harsh reality of the colonial situation. Hassan Hamdan (1936-1987), widely known as Mahdi Amel, directly tackled this problem. In ‘Colonialism and Backwardness’, published in the Lebanese Communist Party’s newspaper *al-Tariq* in 1968, Mahdi Amel wrote: ‘If you really want our own true Marxist thought to see the light, and to be capable to see reality from a scientific perspective, we should not start with Marxist thought itself and apply it to our own reality, but rather start from our reality as a foundational movement’. If one starts one’s analysis with the historical development of society and its own cultural resources, ‘only then can our thought truly become Marxist’. The reality of the colonial condition had to be explored and Marxism had to be elaborated to take that situation into account.

Arabs bore the stigma of being ‘backward’, Mahdi Amel wrote. It was as if they were not capable of anything but failure. But the ruin of Arabs was not because of any essential aspect of their culture but because of what had befallen them. A hundred years of colonial rule had altered the structure of politics and economics as well as society. Old Arab notables were side-lined or absorbed into a new world where they were merely the representatives of forces that lived elsewhere. The new elites that emerged represented external forces, not their own populations. When Paris sneezed, they caught a cold. The United States’ ambassador became more important than elected

officials. The experience of what was termed 'backwardness' was not the fault of Arabs, Mahdi Amel suggested; it was the way in which their lives had been structured. He argued that Marxism had to take this idea seriously.

Amílcar Cabral of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC) understood the interconnected forms of political, economic, and cultural resistance. 'We have to remember that it's not enough to produce, to have a full stomach, to practice sound politics, and to make war', he told a seminar of cadres of the PAIGC in 1969. On cultural resistance, he outlined the following task: 'while we liquidate the colonial culture and the negative aspects of our own culture in our spirit, in our midst, we have to create a new culture, also based on our traditions, but respecting everything that the world has won today for serving the people'. As part of this project of creating a new culture out of the vestiges of colonialism, diverse and rich experiences were developed in the national liberation Marxist tradition. The organisation of culture from Cuba to Indonesia – both key to the construction of national liberation Marxism – helped clarify and construct a path forward from colonial and imperialist domination.

At around this time, the Pakistani scholar Hamza Alavi (1921-2003) offered his theory of the colonial mode of production; the Egyptian Marxist Samir Amin (1931-2018) produced work on the tributary mode of production; and in India there was a debate over the modes of production. The basic understanding shared by these intellectuals was that the imperialist system would not allow for the development

of the productive forces in the colonies. Mahdi Amel saw backwardness not in cultural terms, but in terms of the way the global order had been structured: the South would provide raw materials and markets, while the North would produce the finished goods and earn the bulk of the social wealth. The feeling of 'backwardness' reflected this order. The political mess in the South was also related to this economic subordination. All these thinkers – with greater or lesser success – tried to provide a theory of how this is so. It was not sufficient to focus on cultural subordination; one had to produce a theory and praxis that advanced political, economic, social, and cultural transformation.





## *Tricontinental Marxism*

In 1948, the United Nations founded a special agency for Latin America, the Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL), whose work over the course of the next two decades inaugurated the ‘dependency school’ of unequal development. *Cepalismo*, the approach of CEPAL, pointed towards the structural obstacles for the development of Latin America. Raúl Prebisch, CEPAL’s founding director, argued that the countries of Latin America were trapped in a cycle of dependency to the old colonial powers. As producers of primary goods and borrowers of capital, Latin American states were caught in a subordinate position. The terms of trade between the Latin American states and the old colonial powers advantaged the latter, since the prices of primary goods – such as barely processed food – peaked faster than the prices of manufactured goods and services. Neither Prebisch nor most of his team were Marxists, but there was no question that the dependency tradition influenced a generation of Marxists and left nationalists across Latin America. Two decades after Prebisch’s important 1948 CEPAL manifesto, a younger generation of Marxists, including Ruy Mauro Marini, Theôtonio dos Santos, and Andre Gunder Frank, developed dependency theory, a key arena for the growth of national liberation Marxism.

These theorists argued against the older position that Latin America wallowed in feudalism or semi-feudalism – and thus needed a capitalist jolt to move towards modernity. The *dependencia* (dependency)

school, drawing from *cepalismo*, was of the view that the world capitalist system had absorbed Latin America into its orbit in a subordinate position not in the twentieth century, but from the start of the period of colonisation. Alongside the dependency school was the work of people such as Samir Amin, who argued that capitalism created a polarity in the world between the old colonial centres and the old colonised periphery. Amin argued in 1956 that the process of the accumulation of capital on a world scale had shaped the agenda of the periphery and had forced the peripheral countries to adapt to the needs and interests of the centre. This is what Amin called ‘unilateral adjustment’. It meant that the policy framework for the newly independent states had already been constrained to dependency on capitalist globalisation. The possibility of an exit from capitalist globalisation and from the illusion of development seemed remote without a full break from the tentacles of unilateral adjustment, a break that Amin called ‘delinking’.

It was this trend – from *cepalismo* to Amin’s theory of delinking – that provided the theory for national liberation struggles from Cuba (1959) to Burkina Faso (1983) and for the revolutionary processes underway in our time in countries such as Bolivia and Venezuela. In 1966, the Cuban government hosted a range of revolutionary states and national liberation movements for the Tricontinental Conference. Conversations at the conference remained mainly at the political level; speeches ranged from the defence of the armed conflicts of national liberation forces from Vietnam to Guinea Bissau to the denunciation of the reproduction of poverty by US-led imperialism. There was little discussion of Marxist theory or of the world economic order. That

was taken for granted. It was clear to the national liberation forces that Marxism was their touchstone and that variants of dependency theory were their shared framework. Fidel Castro's speeches of the 1960s reveal his reliance upon the range of thought from *cepalismo* to delinking, from dependency theory to breaking unilateral adjustment. This broad understanding of the development of underdevelopment anchored the institutions and platforms such as the Non-Aligned Movement (1961) amongst states that had different class configurations. This unity of vision is evident in the UN General Assembly resolution of 1974 on the New International Economic Order, which pledged to reshape world relations outside unequal exchange in trade, development, and finance.

It was central to this Marxist vision of the world to break the imperialism of finance, such as debt. The debt crisis of the early 1980s crushed the ability of newly independent states to drive their own agendas. Castro would often say, as he did in 1985 when he inaugurated a world movement against global debt, that a new international economic order must be founded in order to 'eliminate the unequal relations between rich and poor countries and to ensure the Third World its inalienable right to choose its destiny, free of imperialist intervention and of exploitative measures in international trade'.

Castro, like the other national liberation Marxists, had no illusions about the bourgeoisie and oligarchy in the South – people who had a class alignment with imperialism rather than against it. Theirs was not a national liberation that would hand over power to the bourgeoisie and oligarchy, but one that would accelerate revolutionary forces

beyond the bourgeois state. Given that the most revolutionary classes in the periphery were often the most excluded, it would be a betrayal of history to send them back to the fields and factories after they had provided the political basis for a reconstruction of social relations.



## *Against the Past, Towards the Future*

Debates around dependency theory and unequal exchange went from Santiago (Chile) to New Delhi (India). It was important for Marxists in this part of the world – the periphery, according to the geography of dependency theory – to study closely the process of accumulation on a world scale (as Amin's book title put it), but also the class relations inside their countries that refracted international power relations. Creative Marxism was the need of the hour, but so too was suspicion of the national bourgeoisie, which would often use its peripheral status to exploit its own workers against the metropolitan bourgeoisie. Disagreements in international communism between the USSR, the People's Republic of China, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and the People's Socialist Republic of Albania took place with these issues on the table; they had a deep impact on left movements across the South.

In India, for instance, the debate within the communist movement that ran from 1951 to 1964 was sharp and learned. One section (the minority) argued that the Indian bourgeoisie could be an ally of the Indian working class and peasantry at that time because of its peripheral status, and that the USSR was the centre of the world revolution. Another section (the majority of the communist movement) was of the view that the Indian bourgeoisie was not an ally of the workers and peasants, and that the USSR was a fraternal country but not the wellspring of revolutionary theory and praxis. This debate led to a split in the Indian communist movement in 1964 that produced the

Communist Party of India (CPI), which represented the minority position, and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI(M), which represented the majority.

One of the main theoreticians of the CPI(M) was EMS Namboodiripad (1909-1998). EMS, as he was known, was a radical in the Indian freedom struggle and one of the leaders of the Congress Socialist Party, a socialist component of the anti-colonial freedom platform the Congress Party. Born in what would become the state of Kerala, EMS and the other members of the state's Congress Socialist Party joined the Communist Party of India. In 1957, EMS led the Communist Party of India to victory in the state elections in Kerala. Deep structural changes were put in place in Kerala; this earned the ire of the bourgeoisie, whose main political party, the Congress – in collusion with the CIA – overthrew the EMS ministry in 1959. The innovative and hard work of the communists returned them to office in Kerala from 1967 to 1969, with EMS as Chief Minister. EMS led the CPI(M) for fourteen years as the party's general secretary from 1978 to 1992. During this period, he studied and wrote original work on Indian history and politics. He would make the argument that it was necessary to engage India's theoretical traditions and history from a Marxist perspective in order to draw out concepts and dynamics that were essential to the Indian revolution. In other words, historical materialism and dialectical materialism should not be adopted from the European tradition without serious reconstruction.

From his 1939 minute of dissent to the report of the Malabar Tenancy Enquiry Committee to his 1970s essays on caste and class, EMS explored the Marxist method to interpret the history and society of

India. For historical materialism, the historical narrative laid out by Marx, society moved through two stages: from slavery to feudalism, and then from feudalism to capitalism. This was in anticipation of a future stage from capitalism to socialism. Nothing like this happened in India. As EMS wrote in *The Indian National Question*:

As opposed to this two-stage transformation – slave to feudal and feudal to capitalist, India remained tied to the same old order under which the overwhelming majority of the people belonged to the oppressed and backward castes. This is the essence of what Marx called India's 'unchanging' society where the village was not touched by the wars and upheavals at the higher levels.

Caste society and the hegemony of Brahmanism had a most pernicious impact on Indian society. The caste system not only kept the oppressed masses in thrall; the ideological hegemony of Brahmanism resulted in a sustained stagnation of science and technology and therefore ultimately of the productive forces as well. This process weakened India, leaving the door wide open for European colonialism. As EMS put it in 1989, 'the defeat of the oppressed castes at the hands of the Brahmanic overlordship, of materialism by idealism, constituted the beginning of the fall of India's civilization and culture which in the end led to the loss of national independence'.

The stagnation of Indian history from the time of Adi Shankara in the eighth century was encapsulated in the caste-based feudal society. This caste order, with its religious justifications, was able to contain its contradictions. This meant that, while challenges to the caste order

by rebellion did occur across Indian history, none of these rebellions were able to frontally assault caste and break its hierarchy in any substantive way.

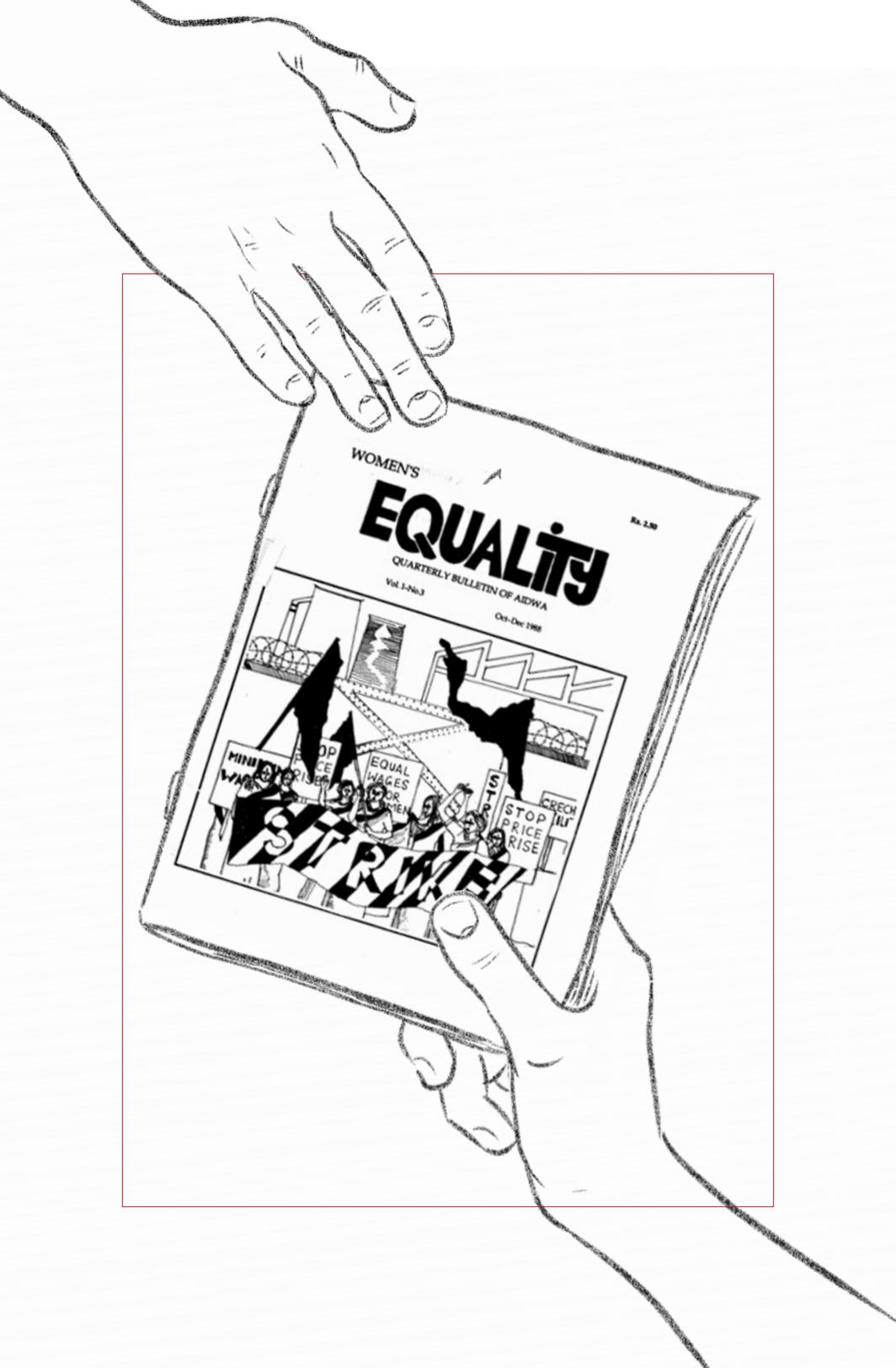
Neither British colonialism nor the Indian bourgeoisie in the post-colonial state had any real appetite to smash caste. The conversion of feudal landlords into capitalist landlords and the conversion of tenant serfs into the agrarian proletariat did not break the back of feudalism. The transformations merely superimposed capitalist social relations upon the caste-based feudal order. 'In India', EMS wrote, 'many of the forms of exploitation of the pre-capitalist system are continuing, some in the original and some in changed forms. There exists along with these a new system of exploitation as a result of capitalist development'. The agrarian proletariat experienced harsh pauperisation because of the old feudal relations: the poor in the fields got poorer as old feudal customs allowed landlords to transfer all the burdens of agriculture onto their workers while reaping all the profits. Little of it was re-invested to modernise agriculture in any way.

Pre-capitalist social formations cultivated by colonialism and by the national bourgeoisie had to be systematically undermined by the people's movements of independent India. EMS traced the potentialities within Indian society, finding opportunities for social progress and brakes against it. Cognisant of the special oppression of caste and of religious majoritarianism in Indian society, EMS fought against organising people based on these very lines. One cannot fight caste oppression along caste lines; instead, caste oppression had to be fought by organising people into unified class organisations that understood

and emphasised the special role of caste in Indian society. As he put it in his essay 'Once Again on Castes and Classes' (1981):

We had then and still have to fight a two-front battle. Ranged against us on the one hand are those who denounce us for our alleged 'departure from the principles of nationalism and socialism', since we are championing 'sectarian' causes like those of the oppressed castes and religious minorities. On the other hand, are those who, in the name of defending the oppressed caste masses, in fact, isolate them from the mainstream of the united struggle of the working people irrespective of caste, community and so on.

But the tonic of unity was not meant to dissolve questions of social indignity experienced by oppressed castes, women, *adivasis* (tribal communities), or those who experienced the violence of class hierarchy alongside the violence of other hierarchies. These questions had to be at the table. It took the communist movement in India many decades to wrestle with the precise balance between the need for unity of all exploited people and for special emphasis on certain kinds of oppressions along the lines of social division. The initial organisational route proposed by Indian communism was to use the platform of class organisations openly to attack caste oppression, religious majoritarianism, and feudal male chauvinism. But it soon became clear that this was insufficient.



WOMEN'S

# EQUALITY

QUARTERLY BULLETIN OF AFDWA  
Vol. I-No.3  
Oct-Dec 1968

No. 2.50



## *The Knot*

The working class is not made up of unmarked bodies of workers. It is made up of people with experiences of social hierarchies and indignity who require particular emphasis to fight those hierarchies. This is why Indian communism would eventually develop organisational platforms from the early 1980s onwards, such as the All-India Women's Democratic Association (AIDWA) and the Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front, that would concentrate attention on the specific hierarchies that needed to be combatted alongside the class demands of the Left. The point is made clearly by Brinda Karat, a leader of the CPI(M) and a former president of AIDWA:

A mechanical understanding of class is often problematic. When Marx said workers of the world unite, he was not speaking of male workers. We are unable to integrate the multiple forms of the double burden that working women face as an integral part of our struggle. All successful revolutions have shown the critical role of working women in the revolution. We know the February Revolution in Russia was started by the huge street demonstrations of women workers.

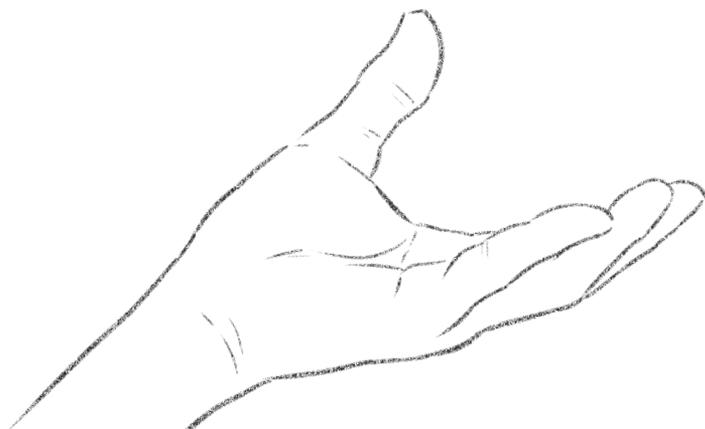
Apart from gender, in our experience in India, within the working classes, there are sections which face added oppression and discrimination on the basis of caste, with a large section of the so-called untouchables, the Dalits, relegated to the lowest rungs of the social ladder. Caste acts as an

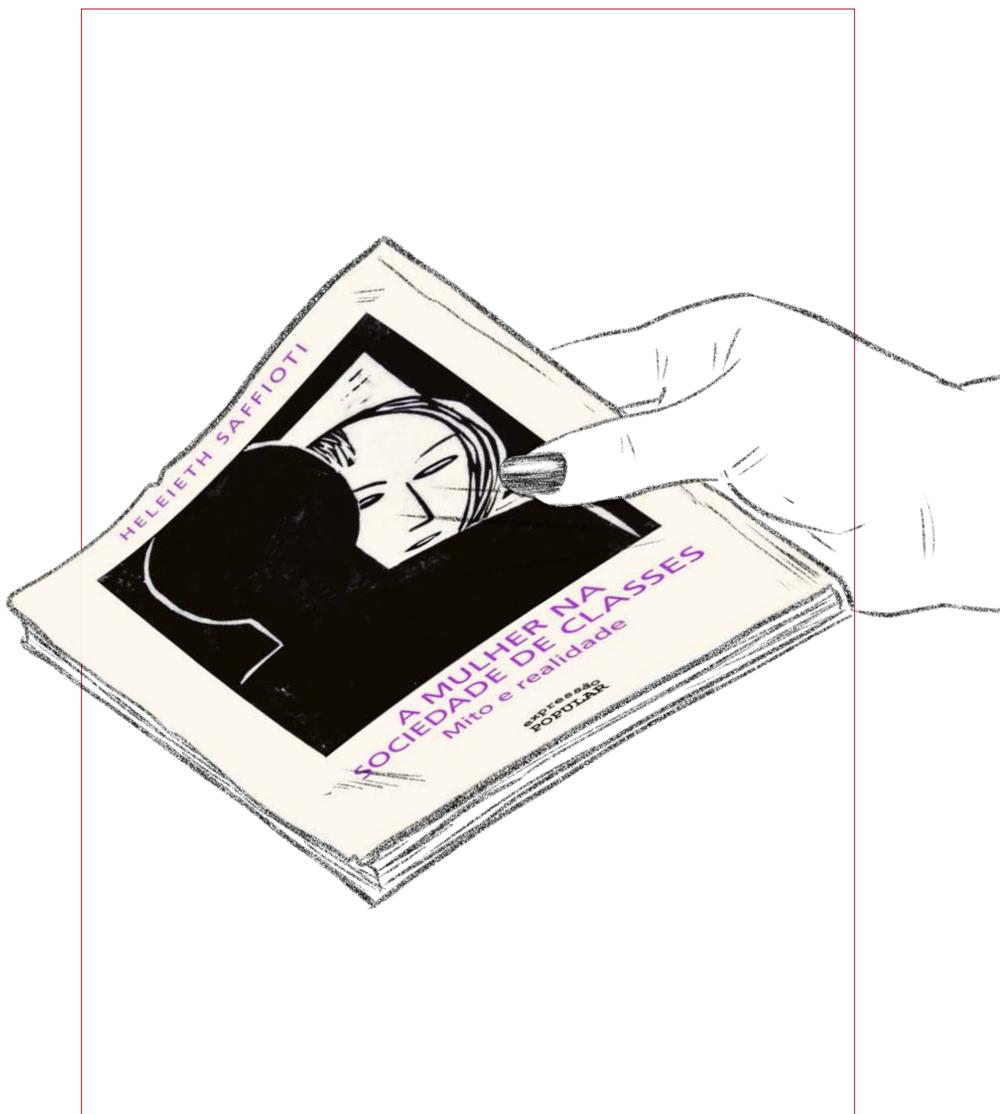
instrument for the intensification of the extraction of surplus value of the Dalits. Somewhat similar is the assault on the rights of *Adivasi* communities (tribal communities) with the corporate grab of land, forests, destruction of histories, cultures, languages, and ways of life. No class struggle in India can succeed without at the same time challenging the birth-based hierarchical caste system against Dalits or the specific issues that *Adivasi* workers face. I think this would be equally relevant on the question of race, religious-based discrimination or even against immigrants in other countries.

These aspects have grown in the last century and working-class struggles which ignore these aspects damage and weaken themselves, laying themselves open to legitimate charges of being racist or casteist. Thus, class-consciousness must necessarily include the consciousness of the specific exploitation that workers may face because of their caste or racial origins or because of their gender.

While the struggles in India confronted their own complexity, in Brazil, Heleith Saffioti (1934–2010) dug deep into the wells of the movements for freedom during the period of the long dictatorship (1964–1985) to understand what she referred to as the ‘knot’. The threads of capitalism, racism, and patriarchy, she explained, wind together into a tight ‘knot’ that weighs heavily on the capacity of social forces to advance an agenda for emancipation. As a consequence of imperialism, parts of the world – largely the continents of Africa, Asia, and Latin America – were held in a permanent situation of wage deflation. Workers in these areas of the world were

prevented from raising their wage levels and their standard of living to an acceptable level. This general wage deflation made the question of social reproduction virtually impossible, with the social cost of the reproduction of the working class and peasantry – even then largely precarious and informal – borne more and more by women. Saffioti, in her classic work *Women and Class Society* (1976), argued that women in advanced capitalist countries could not be emancipated, since capitalism, even in those countries, relied on the family structure – which meant on women – to bear the costs of social reproduction. If this was the case in those countries, the pressure on women in the South was much heavier. Class society, Saffioti wrote, is founded on the social hierarchies of gender, race and ethnicity, and access to resources. The belief that there is no socialism without feminism was the guiding force in Saffioti’s work. Nor can be there a socialism without combatting racism and religious intolerance. The ‘knot’ had to be directly confronted by this Marxist tradition.



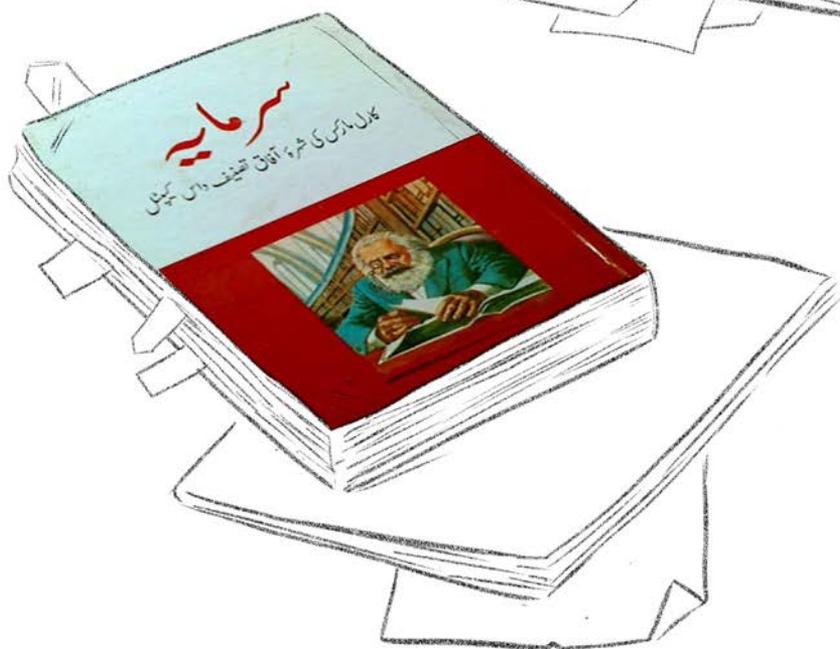


## *Reading National Liberation Marxism*

One of the limitations of the dominant understanding of Marxism is the assumption that ‘theory’ is produced in Europe and in North America, while ‘practice’ takes place in the Global South. Revolutionaries in the South are assumed to write tracts and manuals, fleeting notes on their movements, but not to contribute to Marxism in a substantial way. The question is often posed, what did Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, and Che Guevara write of real importance? Manuals of revolutionary wars are useful, this perspective alleges, but they are not decisive towards an understanding of the mutations of capitalism and imperialism. Part of this is arrogance. The other part is a lack of understanding of the tempo of work that our movements demand of our intellectuals and leaders.

Perry Anderson wrote decades ago that ‘[t]he hidden hallmark of Western Marxism as a whole is ... that it is a product of *defeat*’. But Marxism in the South was not categorically defeated as a political movement. It continues to struggle forward, its leadership rooted in these struggles, not yet banished from the frontlines. Their texts are not always elaborated in a high theoretical manner, written as they are by candlelight as the sound of protest cascades around them. The work has to be taken seriously and studied for its form and its content, for the innovations embedded in these texts that carry forward revolutionary thought in a creative manner.





## *Bibliography*

Alavi, Hamza. *Capitalism and Colonial Production*. London: Croom Helm, 1982.

Amel, Mahdi. *Arab Marxism and National Liberation: Selected Writings*. Edited by Hicham Safieddine. New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2021.

Amin, Samir. *Accumulation on a World Scale. A Critique of the Theory of Underdevelopment*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974.

Anderson, Perry. *Considerations on Western Marxism*. London: New Left Books, 1976.

Bunting, Brian. *Moses Kotane. South African Revolutionary*. London: Inkululeko, 1975.

Cabral, Amilcar. *Resistance and Decolonization*. Edited and translated by Dan Wood. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

Castro, Fidel. *The Gigantic Casino: Reflections on the World Financial Crisis*. New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2009.

*Congress of the Peoples of the East: Baku, September 1920, stenographic report*. Translated and annotated by Brian Pearce. London: New Park, 1977.

Dubois, W.E.B. *Black Reconstruction. An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935.

Fidel, Castro. 'Discurso pronunciado en la sesión de clausura del encuentro sobre la deuda externa de América Latina y el Caribe' [Speech at the closing session of the meeting on external debt in Latin America and the Caribbean]. *Fidel Soldado de ideas*, 3 March 1985. <http://www.fidelcastro.cu/en/node/1644>

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1967.

Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Political Writings, 1910-1920*. Edited by Quintin Hoare, translated by John Mathews. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977.

Ibrahim, Ibrahim A. 'Salama Musa: An Essay on Cultural Alienation'. *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3 (October 1979).

Karat, Brinda. 'The Russian Revolution Is Still Relevant Today'. *LeftWord Books blog*, 2017.

Katz, Claudio. *Teoría de la Dependencia, cincuenta años después* [Dependency Theory Fifty Years Later]. Batalla de Ideas, 2018.

Kotane, Moses. 'For Africanisation of the Party', Letter to the Johannesburg District Party Committee, 23 February 1934. <https://www.newframe.com/from-the-archive-for-africanisation-of-the-party/>

Lenin, V. I. *Lenin Selected Writings*. Edited by Vijay Prashad. New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2018.

Mariátegui, José Carlos. *José Carlos Mariátegui: An Anthology*. Edited and translated by Vanden, Harry E. and Marc Becker. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011.

Mariátegui, José Carlos. *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality*. Translated by Marjory Urquidi. Austin: University of Texas, 1990.

Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. *Marx & Engels Collected Works. Volume 46. Letters 1880-83*. Lawrence Wishart, 2010, Ebook. <http://www.hekmatist.com>

Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. *On the National and Colonial Question*. Edited by Aijaz Ahmad. New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2001.

Mella, Julio Antonio. *Documentos y artículos* [Documents and Articles]. Havana: Instituto Cubano del Libro, 1975.

Monal, Isabel. 'Cuban Foundational Marxist Thought'. *International Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 34, no. 4, Winter 2004-05: 11-23.

Namboodiripad, E.M.S. 2010. *History, Society and Land Relations: Selected Essays*. New Delhi: LeftWord Books.

Prashad, Vijay. *Red Star Over the Third World*. New Delhi: LeftWord, 2017.

Prashad, Vijay. *The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South*. New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2013.

Riddell, John, Vijay Prashad and Nazeef Mollah, eds. *Liberate the Colonies: Communism and Colonial Freedom, 1917-1924*. New Delhi: LeftWord, 2019.

Saffioti, Heleith. *Women and Class Society*. Translated by Michael Vale. New York: Monthly Review, 1978.

Tse-Tung, Mao. *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965.



The illustrations in this dossier feature visual adaptations of book and journal covers including:

- *Amauta*, no. 20 (January 1929, Peru)
- Du Bois, W.E.B. *Black Reconstruction in America*. Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1968.
- Lenin, V. I. *Dos Tácticas De La Socialdemocracia En La Revolución Democrática* [Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution]. Buenos Aires: Anteo, 1968.
- Lenin, V. I. साम्राज्यवाद, पूंजीवाद की चरम अवस्था [Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism]. New Delhi: Peoples Publishing House, 2011.
- Lenin, V. I. *Lenin on the Development of Heavy Industry and Electrification*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital*. Lahore: Dar-ush-Shuoor, 2004.
- Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto* (various editions and languages).
- *New Youth Magazine* 9, no. 1 (1922, China).
- Saffioti, Heleieth. *A mulher na sociedade de classes* [Women in Class Society]. São Paulo: Expressão Popular, 2013.
- *Women's Equality: Quarterly Bulletin of AIDWA* 1, no. 3 (October–December 1988, New Delhi)







Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research  
*is an international, movement-driven institution  
focused on stimulating intellectual debate that serves  
people's aspirations.*

[www.thetricontinental.org](http://www.thetricontinental.org)

Instituto Tricontinental de Investigación Social  
*es una institución promovida por los movimientos,  
dedicada a estimular el debate intelectual al servicio  
de las aspiraciones del pueblo.*

[www.eltricontinental.org](http://www.eltricontinental.org)

Instituto Tricontinental de Pesquisa Social  
*é uma instituição internacional, organizada  
por movimentos, com foco em estimular o debate  
intelectual para o serviço das aspirações do povo.*

[www.otricontinental.org](http://www.otricontinental.org)