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Imperialism, Marxism, and History: A Critical Analysis of R.P. Dutt's Critique of Imperialism and War

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Colonialism, as we all know, had a deeply corrosive impact on the colonized societies; it radically altered the existing social, political, and economic structures and instituted in their stead those structures that served the interests of imperial powers. Economically, this entailed a significant loss for the indigenous societies. It led to widespread suffering and destitution — often on a scale that defies description. These hardships were further compounded during the World Wars, as the colonial powers escalated the extraction of resources to sustain their war efforts. It is against this backdrop of exploitation and destitution that the text we are examining was written.

The pamphlet ‘The Empire and the War¹’ was originally published by the erstwhile Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in the year 1940. Since Rajani Palme Dutt was the chief theoretician of the party and the writing style also aligns with his other works, Suchintan Das, the person who procured this text from Marx Memorial Library, London, has concluded that the pamphlet, in all likelihood, was authored by Dutt. What is more, Dutt had authored another essay by the same name in 1940, which anticipated in large part much of the theoretical and political content of this pamphlet. R. Palme Dutt was a journalist, theoretician, and, above all, a historian. His classic *India Today* was a trailblazing work in Marxist interpretation of Indian (Modern) history. He was also enormously influential in the then undivided Communist Party

¹ The pamphlet was lying casually tucked away in a corner of Marx Memorial Library, London. It was republished on the occasion of Red Books Day 2023 by the Sankrityayan Kosambi Study Circle. I was a member of this circle, and I transcribed the whole document for the new edition.

of India (CPI), for the Indian communist movement was intellectually derivative², and much of the theoretical fodder of the Indian communists came from either the Soviet Union or the British Marxists like Dutt.

Albeit this pamphlet is not widely known today, when it was originally published, all 10,000 copies of the pamphlet were circulated to counter ‘the lies propagated by the imperialist powers’ — braving censure. When read critically, the pamphlet provides us with interesting insights into the nature of imperialism and the imperialist wars — how the consequences of such wars were borne by the colonized masses. Additionally, it also tells us how Marxist writers of the colonizing countries engaged with the colonial question as well as the broader political reality. It specifically deals with how the woes of colonialism were further aggravated by the Second World War and briefly dwells upon the ‘differential impact’ of wars — how certain sections of the indigenous countries benefitted while the majority suffered terribly. It must be noted that three years after the publication of this pamphlet, the Bengal famine of 1943 took place, the cause of which is attributable to the Second World War.

Needless to say, the text has explicit political overtones and has been written as a typical Marxist polemic. Thus, while analyzing the text, we would be confronted by these elements time and again. In order to make sense of what Dutt is saying, and more importantly, what he is *not* saying, we will have to locate him in a proper context.

The Common Enemy: Unity of Interests

The most central theme in the pamphlet is Dutt’s insistence on there being a fundamental unity of interest³ between the working class of the colonial countries and the colonized masses. The next assertion naturally stemmed from this premise: they had a common enemy — namely British imperialism. The ‘commonality’ in interest here means that the emancipation of both the British working class and the colonized masses was being arrested by British imperialism.

² Although the party CPI was formed in 1925, it did not have a program for transformation till 1951. Even when a program was adopted, it was not on the basis of a concrete study of production relations in India but on the basis of a dialogue between CPI and the Bolshevik Party, comprising of Moltov and Stalin.

³ “There can be no freedom for the British people so long as we allow our ruling class to nourish itself upon the life-blood of the colonies. But now the struggle to end monopoly capitalism is on; the fight will grow sharper and more bitter as the war spreads and the burdens increase. We must seize this opportunity to forge links of practical unity with the subject peoples of the Empire and to afford them practical aid in our common fight. To lose this opportunity would be a crime against the working class.” *One Penny The Empire and the War Silence in the Empire*. Marx Memorial Library, 1940, p. 22.

Indeed, Dutt is correct in his analysis. Although a tiny section of the working class did benefit from imperialism — labour aristocracy, as Lenin called it — the vast majority was pauperized. The wealth amassed from the colonies was used by the imperialist forces to violently suppress the trade union movement which advocated for the rights of the working class and sought to extend them. Thus, there indeed was a unity of interest in the sense that the emancipation of the working class was contingent on the emancipation of the colonized masses. This combined struggle⁴ emphasized the interconnected nature of anti-colonial movements across nations and the need to wage struggle against global systems of exploitation.

War and Its Implications

To arrive at this formulation, Dutt proceeds schematically and elaborates on various facets of colonialism. He demonstrates that with the onset of war, the hardships of the masses have increased tenfold. The peasants and workers who were already impoverished now faced an increase of 30–40% in living costs to fund the war and its profiteers. To report what was happening in the colonies was declared illegal. Censorship laws were so stringent that the news of labour strikes against the war could not be reported at all. Dutt's main thesis is further substantiated by the fact that 'The Defence of India Act' — which included death penalties as well — prohibited the 'promotion of class hatred.' The imperialists were aware of the fact that the war had a differential impact, and its consequences were primarily borne by those who were at the lowest rungs of the colonized society. If 'class hatred' was not suppressed, it would be detrimental for both the indigenous bourgeoisie and the imperial powers. The 'Defence of India Act' — instituted purportedly for the defence of 'India' — was being used for anything but that. It was used not to defend India but British imperialism — against Indians. The ascending tide of working-class agitations led by the communists was being ruthlessly suppressed.

In this section, it can be safely argued that Dutt's analysis is astute by and large, however, the rich rhetorical flourish in the text, apart from embellishing it, imposes a certain uniformity on all the colonized countries without a concrete analysis of the actual conditions. Indeed, there was a great deal of similarity in the colonized, but a sweeping generalization reminds us of how pure 'objectivity' is an elusive category. Works of this kind — and indeed all works — involve

⁴ "We believe that in our struggle to put an end to this system which breeds poverty, unemployment, and war, the working class of the world have the strongest and most powerful allies in the oppressed people of the British Empire." *ibid.*, p. 23.

moralization to create a narrative. To confer a particular meaning, we see how the ‘interpretative’ worms its way into the ‘indicative’: moral phrases such as ‘silence of the prison house’⁵ and ‘misery and starvation of colonial people’ are deployed. Contrary to its purported aims, the polemical nature of the work does not seek to objectively tell the audience what really transpired; rather, it is to exhort the masses into action.

Lenin’s Influence on Dutt’s Analysis

It would perhaps be tautological to claim that Dutt’s analysis derives in large part from Lenin’s *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism*⁶, an extremely popular exposition. Lenin saw imperialism as the monopoly stage of capitalism, which was characterised by the concentration of production and capital into monopolies; the amalgamation of bank capital with industrial capital, and as a result thereof, the creation of finance capital of a ‘financial oligarchy;’ the export of capital; the formation of monopolist capitalist combines; and the attendant territorial division of the world among the capitalist powers. Dutt’s analysis is in perfect alignment with Lenin’s. Although he doesn’t explicitly acknowledge his intellectual debt to Lenin, Lenin’s influence is quite palpable. By emphasizing the interconnectedness of working-class liberation and anti-colonialism, Dutt demonstrates how the extraction of resources from the colonized countries was used to maintain the capitalist system in the core. They both recognize that there indeed was a ‘labour aristocracy’ — a privileged layer amongst the working class which benefited from the colonial accumulation. However, they both agree that it was a tiny fraction — another point of convergence. Dutt provides a cogent explanation regarding the cause of the war. The capitalist conflict had acquired an imperialist nature which was propelled by the desire of the German bourgeoisie to expand its *Lebensraum* (living space) across the whole of Europe. This transmogrification of inter-capitalist rivalry into an inter-imperialist rivalry had pulled in the colonies against the will of their inhabitants.

Silence on the Soviet Union

Throughout the text, Dutt categorically repudiates colonialism. He meticulously brings forth the destructive nature of colonial extraction, however, his analysis is marred because he fails

⁵ *ibid.*, p.7

⁶ Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich. *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. 1917. International Publishers, 1993.

to perform a similar feat when it comes to the Soviet Union. Far from holding the USSR to account, he goes as far as to declare it an ‘ally’ of the colonized countries.⁷

This claim, however, rests on very shaky foundations, and it needs to be thoroughly examined. Many scholars — Marxist or otherwise — refuse to call the Soviet domination over Poland colonialism. Among the many factors put forth by them, the distinction between ‘overland’ and ‘overseas’ domination is assigned a great explanatory weight. Simply put, they argue that overseas conquests were colonial in nature, however, the proximate, overland conquests can’t be bracketed in the same category. The fact that there was no overt physical presence of Soviet dominance in Poland — of the kind exercised by the British in India (a British viceroy, appointed by the sitting British monarch in London) — is used to substantiate this proposition. However, Ewa Thompson draws our attention to Ireland and Scotland, and argues that despite there being geographical proximity between these Celtic countries and England, their domination by the latter is widely considered to be colonial through and through. If overseas domination is a *sine qua non* condition for one to make the case for colonialism, why is English domination over Ireland and Scotland read as colonialism?⁸ Thus, what we see here is that despite their professed disavowal of ‘essentialism,’ many postmodern scholars tend to essentialize colonialism — that it must happen in a particular way.

Dutt’s sympathy with the Soviet Union and his refusal to acknowledge — much less condemn — its expansionist tendencies are attributable mostly to his staunch espousal of Marxism. Whether or not he deliberately glosses over this is unclear; however, it does tell us a lot about how sources, in themselves, do contain the absolute truth. They have to be located in their contexts to make sense, to account for their biases, and to explore the frameworks of thought that influence their interpretations. Dutt’s Marxist proclivities, while enabling him to rigorously lay bare the class character of European colonialism, become a handicap in extending this analysis to the colonial characteristics of Soviet influence. The dialectic between ideological commitment and scholarly analysis need not always be antagonistic. Sometimes, they complement each other, however, one needs to exercise caution and be mindful of the influence exercised by the former over the latter. What is more, when the Soviet Union entered the war

⁷“The Soviet Union neither desired nor needed to exploit colonial peoples; the liberation of the Tsarist colonies, and the rapid strides in prosperity made by them, created a deep and revolutionary impression upon the subject peoples of the Empire” *One Penny The Empire and the War Silence in the Empire*. Marx Memorial Library, 1940, p. 15.

⁸ Thompson, E. (n.d.). It is Colonialism After All: Some Epistemological Remarks. In *Second Texts* (Vol. 5).

in 1941 — a year after this pamphlet was written — members of the Communist Party of Great Britain including Dutt emphasized the need to defeat Hitler even though they still emphasized the inter-imperialist rivalries that underlined the war. What is interesting here is the fact Dutt sardonically criticizes the British for their repetitive invocation of the refrain, ‘we have to defeat hitler,’ which for him was a convenient justification for participating in the war, but a year later Dutt found that reasonable enough for the Soviet Union to participate in the war.

Optimism and Historicism

Dutt is quite optimistic in his assessment of the impact of the war on the colonial condition. He is of the opinion that with the entrenchment of the war, the contradiction between the colonizers and the colonized masses would sharpen and eventually become untenable.⁹ For Dutt, colonialism as a structure is inherently unstable and fraught with conflicts — between the exploitative goals of the colonizers and the resistance of the colonized. This, in his analysis, would provide impetus to decolonization. Dutt’s optimism is buttressed by history, for we know that the Second World War indeed played a crucial role in hastening the process of decolonization. The world war dramatically strained the resources of the colonizing powers, thereby making it difficult for them to maintain control over colonies in an effective manner. On the other hand, the war also went on to lay bare the hypocrisy of countries like Britain: while they pontificated on the ideals of democracy and freedom, simultaneously, they subjugated millions of people during the war. As the war burden increased, so did the resistance of people against colonial forces.

However, one might wonder on what basis Dutt expressed his optimism in such a firm and unequivocal manner. One answer, of course, is that he *wants* the masses to do what he *says* the masses *would* do¹⁰. This is expected, for, as we have already discussed, this is a political

⁹ “But 1940 is not 1914. The use of force against the people cannot today beat back the mighty mass movement that is sweeping forward. Twenty-five years ago, the colonial workers were unorganised and without leadership; the peasantry were politically unconscious; the movements for national liberation were undeveloped and led by reformists who were easily corrupted by minor concessions. Today it is not so. There has developed in each colony, in a lesser or greater degree, a genuine popular movement which for twenty years has been in sharp and continual conflict with imperialism.” *One Penny The Empire and the War Silence in the Empire*. Marx Memorial Library, 1940, p. 18.

¹⁰ “Thus, on September 3rd, with the outbreak of the war, British Imperialism was already facing a situation of growing discontent throughout large sectors of the Empire. The working class in every country has reached a far higher degree of organisation in spite of having to work in conditions of semi-legality or sometimes completely underground; and, because of its greater organisation and its clearer political consciousness, it more and more acts as the driving force and gives a lead to the various national movements.” *ibid.*, pg. 19.

pamphlet, and Dutt is predicting the *inevitability* of decolonization to exhort the masses into action — a great deal of this optimism is *rhetorical*.

Since Dutt is a Marxist, the second reason flows from yet another ‘inevitability’ theory. Marxism has often been associated with historicism — the critics have fiercely argued that Marxism entails a denial of free will, and of the role of ‘accident’ in history. A historicist reading would have us believe that history moves in firm, technical grooves. This can’t be discussed in detail over here owing to a paucity of space, but it does provide us some cues to make sense of Dutt’s optimism. The *inevitability* of socialism in some readings is predicated on the classical Marxist evolutionary schema, which some have castigated as ‘teleological.’ According to this formulation, capitalism would collapse owing to its own inherent *contradictions*. Dutt’s optimism, it seems, emanates from his dialectical reading of the colonial situation, for *teleology* is an important component of dialectics; he seems to believe that colonialism, too, would collapse owing to its *contradictions*.

Narrative and Moralization

For a text to be coherent and to have a distinct ‘meaning,’ narrativization is extremely significant. A work of historical representation, in lack of a narrative, gets reduced to mere chronological depiction of events as they unfolded — a mere catalogue of happenings. Narrative is central to a coherent structuring of the arguments in a manner intelligible across cultures. It is not merely a method of historical representation, much rather, it is how a text is assigned a purpose and direction. Coherence emerges when the disparate events are connected in a logical continuum, thereby offering interpretation beyond facts. Narrative allows the reader to connect and make sense of casualty, context and emphasis. This, as Hayden White would argue¹¹, involves moralization. The work with which we are concerned here is also replete with moralist overtones. Dutt’s is a passionate account where historical events are woven together to make the case for a particular interpretation. His narrative is imbued by firm ideological and political commitments — the emancipation of the colonized countries, and by extension, the liberation of the working class in the colonizing countries. As we have already discussed, for

¹¹ White, Hayden. "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 1, Autumn 1980, pp. 5–27. The University of Chicago Press

Dutt, the liberation of the working class is contingent on the liberation of colonies from the imperialist yoke.

The *teleology* present in the work is also a pointer to the moralist effect. It is not incidental or peripheral, rather, it is absolutely central to his work which leads him to make the case for the inevitability of decolonization. It reflects his moral desire to see the colonial resistance movements triumphant and imperial structures dismantled. By framing decolonization as inevitable, apart from seeing history through a Marxist lens, he is also seeking to inspire hope and action amongst the masses impoverished and exploited due to colonialism. The *teleology* thus serves a dual purpose: it serves to reinforce the coherence of his narrative, it also simultaneously aligns with his vision of justice and liberation, mobilizing the audience towards collective action.

Beyond the Scylla of Positivism and Charybdis of Relativism

While analyzing this scathing critique of imperialism-induced war and its disastrous consequences on the inhabitants of colonies that were unwillingly drawn into the war, one ponders as to how one can use this as a primary source for historical reconstruction. Positivism, with its rigid adherence to absolute objectivity, clearly won't do, as we have been discussing how his ideological commitment inevitably colours his analysis. If a positivistic fetish of the primary sources is inadequate to examine this source, an extremely relativist position, too, can prove to be counterproductive, for notwithstanding these *bavures*, the text still has a lot to offer. It correctly analyzes the nature of the war — who gains from the war and who is left pauperized. He is astutely insistent on the point that the capitalists have burgeoned while the lives of the peasants and the workers have become miserable, with some either dying of starvation or selling themselves in slavery.¹²

Dutt's analysis goes to the root of the problem, he brings forth the underlying class dynamics, thereby exposing the political and economic imperative responsible for colonial subjugation and inter-imperialist rivalry. While his firm adherence to Marxism can be read as a limitation, it can also be a strength. The rigorous materialist analysis that Dutt performs is attributable to his political proclivities. Instead of castigating Dutt's leanings as 'bias,' what needs to be

¹² *One Penny The Empire and the War Silence in the Empire*. Marx Memorial Library, 1940, pg.10.

studied is how this commitment shapes the perspective of the author — how it bestows on the text a distinct ‘meaning.’

Thus, it becomes apparent that it is extremely important to approach the text in a dialectical and holistic manner. This would entail going beyond the categories of positivism and extreme relativism. Even if we are aware of the limitations of teleologism, the disavowal of the same should not — must not — entail jettisoning of hopes and efforts to create a more just and humane world — what Dutt had in mind while writing the text. His analysis is not merely a reflection of his ideological position but an attempt to uncover the mechanisms of global systemic exploitation.

For text of this kind — or perhaps any kind — a more comprehensive solution is proffered by Carlo Ginzburg, who has tried to elaborate on this point using three very vivid metaphors: ‘Positivistic facticity looks upon evidence as an open window, while for relativists it is like a wall: both share the assumption of an unmediated relationship between evidence and reality, in affirmation or in denial. The more appropriate analogy would be a distorted glass: thorough analysis of its patterns of distortions is indispensable, but that itself demands the rejection of a purely internal reading of the evidence, without any reference to its referential dimension.’¹³

Extending this approach to Dutt’s analysis would allow us to better grapple with the ideological elements. If we critically study them, they would allow us to situate the text and understand it in the light of broader socio-political realities — how did those trying to *change* the world *understand* it? It would also lead us to desist from the uncritical acceptance and outright dismissal — towards a comprehensive examination.

Structure and Agency

Dutt’s account is undoubtedly very sympathetic to the ‘workers and peasants’ participating in demonstrations against the war and, by extension, the empire itself. He does indeed want to seem them triumphant. However, like many radical historians’, his account also entails a denial of the consciousness of the ‘workers and peasants’ he mentions. Similarly, the imposition of the *abstraction* of ‘workers and peasants’ reduces those partaking in anti-

¹³ Carlo Ginzburg, ‘Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian,’ *Critical Inquiry*, 1993.

colonial resistance, in the words of Ranajit Guha¹⁴, to ‘an ideal rather than the real historical personality.’

The *teleology* about which we have discussed at length in the preceding sections — the one which seeks to connect disparate events and demonstrations to arrive at decolonization and the subsequent creation of a socialist state — is indeed tantamount to an act of appropriation where those participating in the events are conveniently overlooked and separated as conscious being from their own history. Indeed, there is very little that we can glean about what those ‘workers and peasants’ were thinking. Rather, their actions are construed as a logical, seamless progression towards independence and socialism. The ‘workers and peasants’ are assigned a role that they must fulfill — their own aspirations and motivations are relegated to an ancillary position.

The *abstraction* thus serves to flatten the diversity of the anti-colonial resistance, thereby overlooking the nuanced — and oftentimes contradictory — aspects of the movement. To lend an aura of completeness to his account and to make the anti-colonial fighters palatable, they are reduced to a fixed, immutable category. Their agency is stripped away from them.

In so doing, Dutt’s account exhibits the tensions within Marxist historiography: the debate between *structure* and *agency*. While his framework helps unravel the complexities of colonialism, it does so at a peripolus cost: by ignoring and overshadowing the lived experiences and the motivations that led them to confront the empire.

Conclusion

Thus, we see that Dutt’s narrative provides us with a compelling, empirically grounded critique of imperialism-induced Second World War and emphasizes the interconnectedness of the anti-colonial and working class struggles. However, as we have already discussed at great length, his ideological commitment and rhetorical style necessitate a critical reading of the source. If we situate the text in its proper theoretical and historical context, it certainly provides plenty of food for thought. Reading Dutt critically means acknowledging both the

¹⁴ The Prose of Counter-Insurgency." *Subaltern Studies II: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, edited by Ranajit Guha, Oxford University Press, 1983, pp. 1–42.

strength of his analysis — his sharp dissection of imperialist contradictions and his attention to global structures of domination — and the ways in which his commitments frame, and at times limit, his perspective. Rather than taking his conclusions at face value, we must remain attentive to the tensions, assumptions, and polemical choices that shape his narrative, allowing us to draw richer insights from the text while recognizing its position within broader intellectual and political debates.

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