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Jayatilleka’s Alt-Left Project

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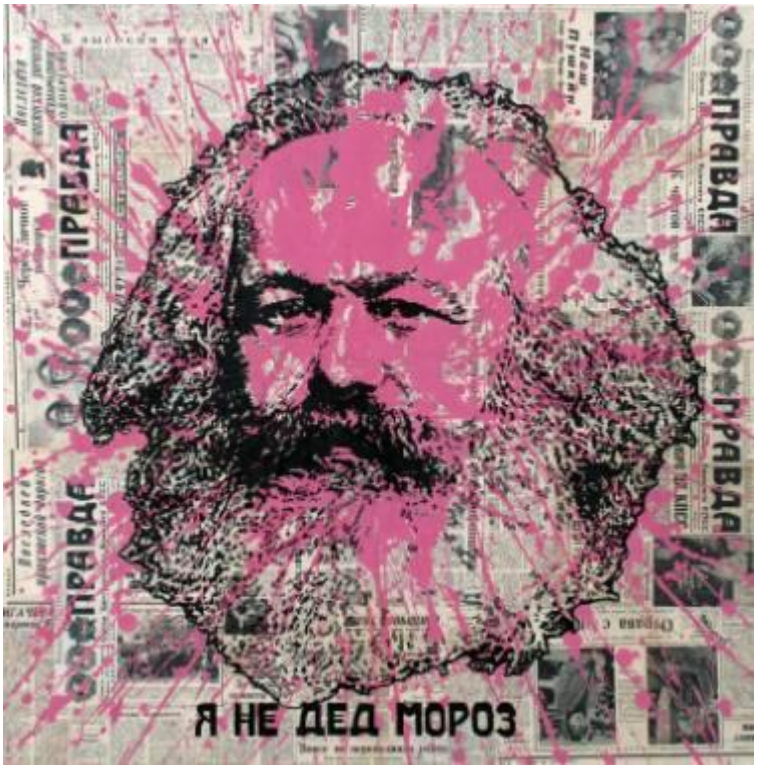
I applaud Dayan Jayatilleka’s plea for an international ‘Alt-Left’ project—a descriptor that seems immediately obvious but nevertheless brilliant. Since the end of the Soviet Union and the ideological triumph of neoliberal thought in the 1980s there has really been no Left left, at least not of any economic variety (though plenty of Leftist cultural warriors, as Jayatilleka notes). But re-establishing a viable economic Left is a hard ask, despite the failure of the neoliberal project whose collapse created the vacuum that various Alt-Right movements have proceeded to fill. To be sure, some Left-liberal fellow-travellers such as Krugman (2012), Stiglitz (2014), even Summers (2016) are now questioning the validity of the neoliberal model of globalization they once advocated. They generally focus on just one of the factors noted by Jayatilleka: the fact that national elites in their rush to globalize forgot to look after their own working classes with the eventual political backlash we are now experiencing. Their principal remedy is better redistributive measures to ensure that the benefits of increased trade are equitably shared.

Fine as far as it goes, but this hardly approaches what Jayatilleka seeks, namely a new ‘global public imagination.’ The latter intends much more, in Jayatilleka’s adumbration, than a Leftish corrective to the Rightward shift of New Labor and New Democrats and their international followers during the post-stagflationary era. It implies a critique of traditional hard-Leftism as much as of a pusillanimous ‘third way’ that was in reality a capitulation to the blandishments of the Right. Any successful new Alt-Left movement must, according to Jayatilleka, establish itself on secure moral-political ground, the ‘moral’ element being crucial. It was in fact always crucial given that traditional Leftism meant a commitment to equality over arbitrary inequality, the dignity of labor over its exploitation, fairness over privilege, and so on. Such moral feelings were central to Leftist motivation but unfortunately difficult to admit within the structures of ‘scientific’ Marxism. According to the hard ‘realism’ of historicist Marxism, morality was suspect as being squeamishly or exploitatively ‘bourgeois’, the values of any period being inevitably the values of its ruling class. Not only that, but moral suasion was necessarily ineffectual against gigantic forces of History driven by crude class interest. ‘Justice’ (and Marx seldom used the term

except in scare quotes) would be taken care of in the long run as class-conflictual History took its inexorable course.



Artist: Stanislav Belovski

This left individual Marxists in a psychological bind, driven by moral feelings their theory proclaimed inadmissible. And the resulting moral ambivalence allowed monstrosities to become, not just conceivable, but actual under the guise of historical necessity (and we should have learnt by now that any claim of ‘necessity’ in political discourse is fallacious). Coleridge (1938), writing of Robespierre, long ago warned that undisciplined benevolence could seduce us into malignity, leading us into “the dangerous and gigantic error of making certain evil the means to contingent good.” Jayatilleka’s long-term project has been to correct this fundamental error of the Left. He is an arch-realist, as anyone familiar with his writings will attest, but for him any realism that omits the moral factor is in fact unrealism.

Any Left movement that forfeits the moral high ground—through lethal internecine conflict, through the suppression of thought and the promulgation of blatant lies, through resort even to mass murder—has already doomed itself to ultimate defeat whatever its short-term political successes. In Jayatilleka’s view, political realism

inevitably requires hard, sometimes brutal choices, but if these are not adequately and believably justified within an authentically moral framework they will prove counterproductive in the long run.

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His other corrective of traditional Leftism is an insistence on retrieving nationalism and patriotism from the grip of the xenophobic Right and from the denigration of liberal cosmopolitans. In this effort he enlists the more subtle and immanent dialecticism of Antonio Gramsci, for whom the ‘self-nationalization’ of the working class—by which he meant its creation of a collective national popular will—constituted a final moment in its ascent to a genuinely expansive and consensual hegemony. Jayatilleka thus assumes that Gramscian theory has continuing relevance even after the destructive attacks of modern Leftist critics, notably Althusser (2006) and Perry Anderson (1976). Stuart Hall (1988) tried to demonstrate this relevance in the age of Thatcher (as mentioned by Jayatilleka). He argued that Gramsci did not give the contemporary Left the tools to solve its puzzles but the means to ask the right kind of questions, which could be done only by directing attention unswervingly to what was specific and different about the present moment.

The world has moved on from the 1980s and ‘90s, never mind the 1930s when Gramsci was writing his prison notebooks. The ‘working class’ of Gramsci’s day, or even of Thatcher’s, is surely not what it was nor ever likely to be reconstituted as such given the fragmental impact of neoliberal policies and the trajectory of global economics. This makes the Gramscian hope of a proletarian moral-political-intellectual hegemony seem quite forlorn.



Stuart Hall - source: Ceasefire Magazine

And yet recent events have shown that class consciousness, and class resentment, still exist. And nationalism, often of the most regressive kind, has once more shown its remarkable resilience. Nationalism was of course the bane of old-fashioned Leftists looking to develop an international class consciousness (if, as Jayatilleka notes, Mao, Ho, Fidel and Cabral fused nationalism securely into their revolutionary projects it must have been through an intuitive grasp of its effectual power rather than any theory they imbibed—I may be wrong, but I'm not aware any of them was familiar with Gramsci). What is less often noted is that nationalism is also a puzzle for liberal and democratic theorists, who seem to depend on it to contain the polity in which their principles may apply yet have no theoretical means of grasping it. Liberals fear cultural nationalism's capacity for excess and would like to tame it if possible, but they flounder with weaker forms based on 'liberal values' (which are shared of course by many nations). I would go so far as to say there are no true, full-blooded modern theorists who defend the concept of nationalism, although there are many who theorize sociologically *about* nationalism. One has to go way back to Montesquieu, Rousseau, Herder and Fichte even to discern elements of a possible defense.

And yet there nationalism still is, in all its potency, promise and threat, from China to India to Russia to the United States (whose ideological heart, like France's, has always been torn between theoretical universalism and de facto cultural nationalism). What has been most revealing and alarming about the economic and financial crisis in Europe is how swiftly the ideal of Europeanization collapsed as mutually antagonistic nationalities reasserted their relevance. Creating and maintaining a nation has always been a stern, extended, often violent political and cultural exercise; creating viable entities larger than a nation obviously presents even greater challenges. So, to take Jayatilleka's Gramscian lesson to heart, we must start with the world as it is, one in which both class and nation remain important elements—along with many others, of course—that any plausible Alt-Left movement must grasp and inform.

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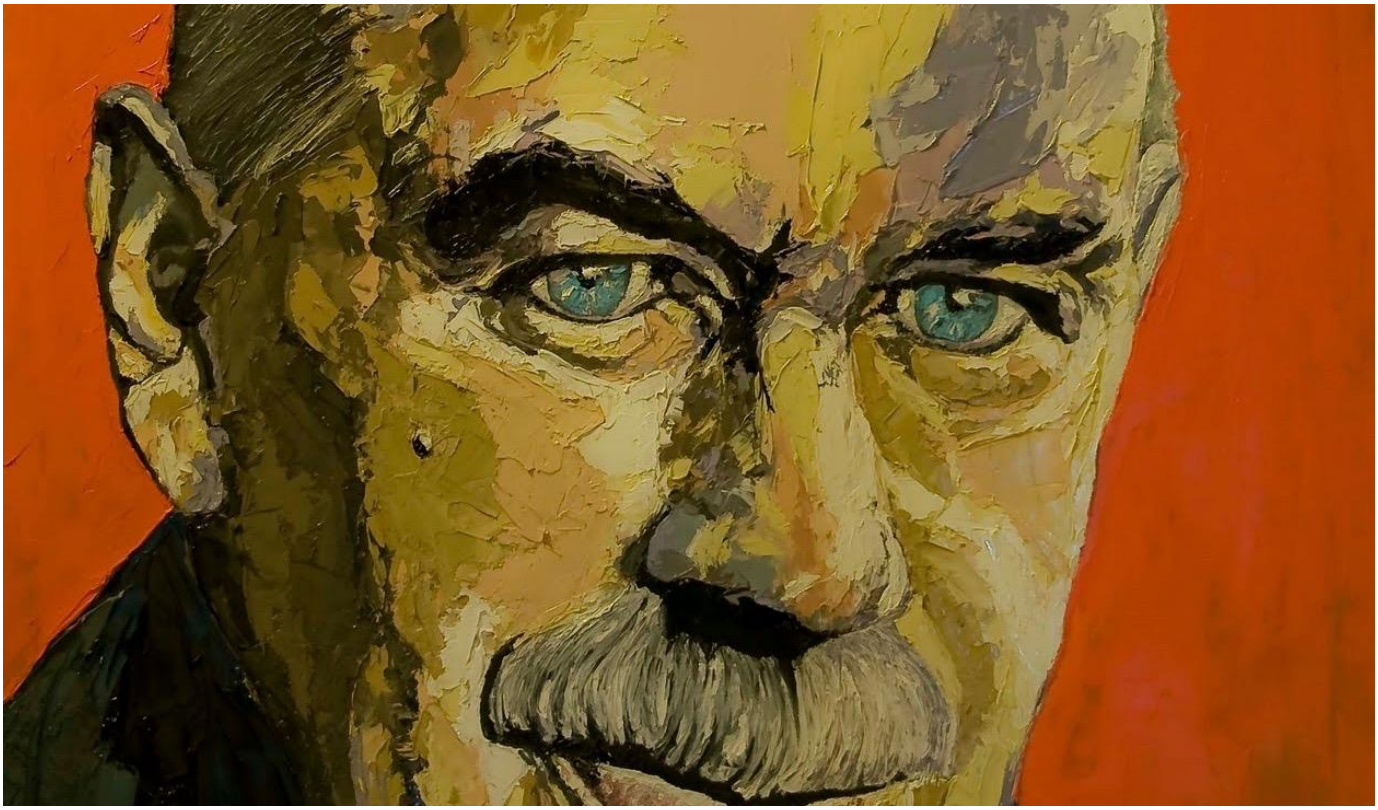
There is some sense of back to the future in all this. The post-WWII Western order implied a social contract that was implicitly international and nationalistic: if the Depression that had led to war was to be avoided in the future, then the worst excesses of capital must be managed and regulated internationally. Regulation of trade and finance plus the Keynesian focus on full employment domestically meant that each nation's working class was protected and assured its (growing) share of national wealth even as that wealth was increased by steadily expanding trade. This was really an historic compromise between capital and labor: the kind that Keynes thought was the only way to avoid the worst extremes of either side.



There remained, of course, difficult problems of East and West, and of North-South disparities, but my point is that if, as Jayatilleka notes, there is now a Third world within the First, that is because politicians revoked the historic compromise when, under stagflationary crisis, they shifted the emphasis on full employment toward the control of inflation through monetary measures. The neoliberal movement that seized this crisis moment was really a counter-revolution against the New Deal—trashing unions and liberalizing trade in a way that empowered international capital and withdrew protections from domestic workers, opening the regulatory door that enabled the destructive financialization of capitalism with all its obscene inequalities. And it extended its reach eventually even to the social market economies of Europe. If Left or Left-of-Center parties got on the bandwagon it was because globalization seemed to deliver materially to citizens, at least for as long as easy credit sustained consumption and thus masked the underlying reality of stagnant wages. The illusion was finally punctured by the financial crisis of 2008 and the ensuing economic crisis. Thus, all the bizarre political events that we are now witnessing must be understood within this long-view context.

Currently, the old model is held together by string and chewing gum (negative interest rates anyone?). Bold rethinking and urgent action seems required, which is what Jayatilleka is demanding from a renascent and re-energized Alt-Left that will of

necessity be both international and national. But a genuine opportunity to reassemble the various pieces into new ‘global public imagination’ may take another, more severe crisis in order to be fully realized. One trembles at the prospect.

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