

Foreword

M. V. Nadkarni

Professor Ananta Kumar Giri has brought together a collection of very thought-provoking, scholarly, and lucidly written essays in this unique volume. They have been contributed by eminent scholars from across the world. Their essays remind me of a poem on flowers by D. R. Bendre (1896–1981), a celebrated lyrical poet in Kannada, a verse from which I am roughly translating:

Each unlike another, each one free of blemish,
The beauty of each has its own flourish!

Professor Giri, the editor of this volume, is no narrow social scientist. The sociologist, political scientist, economist, social psychologist, ethicist, philosopher, and poet—they are all combined and integrated into his intellectual identity. And that is what has enabled him to inspire these essays, making them into a book which is an enlightening guide to understand the deepening crisis through which our world is presently going. The book can be said to be in the tradition of critical theory, which deals with the totality of the society in its historical context, not with its individual parts in isolation from each other in terms of the economy, polity, and society separated from the former two. One can understand our crisis-ridden world only terms of such a holistic perspective. We cannot also find solutions to the crisis unless we first understand its causes. Moreover, we can understand better only if we theorize from the relevant empirical facts. Only a theoretical understanding can enable us to find solutions. Empirical facts make no sense in the absence of a theoretical perspective. When theories conflict with each other, we have to find out which theory explains the facts more satisfactorily and suggests convincing solutions. The essays in this volume meet this requirement well.

Another important feature characterizes all these essays—they have a pronounced moral perspective. Karl Marx (1818–1883), who presented the first and most comprehensive critique of political economy, also had such a perspective. Without an ethical perspective in terms of human values, there cannot be any meaningful assessment of social phenomena and policies. I am using the word “social” here in an inclusive sense—inclusive of economic and the political aspects too. Marx’s critique covered not only the then prevailing economic system or the mode of production but also classical economics itself. He not only exposed how the economic system intrinsically involved rampant exploitation of labour in which

the mass of humanity is involved but also the hollowness of a discipline which separated economics from ethics and isolated itself from any historical context as if the then prevailing mode of production was *natural* and eternal. Marx was not alone in doing this even at that time. His contemporary in England, John Ruskin (1819–1900), famous for his work—*Unto This Last* (1877), criticized the then prevailing political economy, especially its concept of “Economic Man” divorced from ethics—a concept which has enjoyed a long reign. M. K. Gandhi (1869–1948) was influenced by Ruskin and denounced separating economics from ethics. Amartya Sen also did it later, in a theoretically more rigorous and convincing manner. The essays here present contemporary critiques of political economy, made mostly after the end of the Second World War.

The first chapter in the book is actually the editor’s introduction to all other chapters together and discusses the major concepts in the new critiques of political economy. Some of these concepts are moral economy, political economy linked with psychology, anthropology, and art, respectively, limitation of pricing as an instrument of evaluation, moral sociology, social and spiritual ecology, and international political economy. I will not go into introducing these individual essays since it is done already by the editor admirably. I will confine myself to the challenges that have occasioned all the essays on contemporary critiques of political economy here and see how we can try to overcome them. We need to go ahead in the light of theoretical perspectives provided by the essays, keeping in mind Marx’s well-known adage that philosophers have interpreted the world but the task is to change it. What for is a critique of political economy of the world, unless it helps in changing it?

The most conspicuous of the developments in economics is the rise in the ideology of neoliberalism, which has also influenced the functioning of the actual economies of the world, and facilitated the dominance of multinational corporations in the world economy. Among the ideals of the French Revolution, liberty was most emphasized, pushing aside the other two equally or even more important ideals of equality and fraternity. What is more, the ideal of liberty was applied much more in the economic sphere than in the political, almost excluding the other two no less relevant ideals, resulting in the advocacy of free markets and relative withdrawal of the state from the economy. The concept of liberty was twisted to mean the freedom of markets, more than freedom from hunger and ill health. It was freedom for the rich to acquire unlimited wealth. Inequality in the distribution of wealth and incomes reached unprecedented heights as a result in most of the countries, except perhaps in the countries with a strong tradition of democratic socialism where the state took care of providing free education, healthcare, and social security. Paradoxically, even countries which practised such a democratic socialism within their boundaries, practised the philosophy of free markets through their multinational corporations outside. State interventions under the influence of Keynesianism had helped several countries from crises, but neoliberalism looked upon state intervention as an undemocratic evil going against the principle of liberty. There is a tradition of anti-statism in political philosophy, and even Mahatma Gandhi himself did not like any dominance of a centralized state and had advocated

both a decentralized state and decentralized economy through local governments tied together in a loose federation without a vertical hierarchy. Understandably, the essays in this volume deplore both extremes—neoliberalism and statism, and advocate a solution avoiding both. But there is need for a greater clarity about what the institutional alternative would have to be.

In addition to decentralizing the state through more empowered local village and city governments or municipal bodies, the state itself at all levels has to be wedded to the concept of democratic socialism or social democracy. We cannot do away with the markets, as they perform essential allocative functions more efficiently than any state bureaucracy, but a social democracy can tame them so that they do not deviate from the social objectives. Even private enterprise can be allowed and make profits, but excess profits can be taxed to finance the provision of basic needs of all—free education up to 12th standard or grade, inexpensive or subsidized higher education, free healthcare, food security for the poor, and social security for all. Social democracy cannot wipe out inequality, since some functional inequality will be inevitable as long as talents are not equally distributed and incentive to achieve excellence will have to be maintained. But a social democracy should ensure that all children have equal opportunities irrespective of differences in the social and economic background of their parents.

A social democratic state will also have to encourage and promote some alternatives in addition to allowing private enterprise. This could be in the form of cooperative institutions. Though they have already shown their rich potential in India, their role is often not recognized well enough. Housing cooperatives played a major role in a few Indian cities like Mumbai even before Independence in solving the problem of housing shortage for the lower middle class. The success story of Amul in the field of dairy economy is known worldwide. Cooperative credit has played an important role in providing cheaper credit to farmers in India. Quite a few cooperative sugar mills have succeeded in giving a better price to cane growers and more promptly too than private mills. Cooperative institutions still have an unrealized potential.¹ In addition to them, NGOs have an important role in democracies which supplement the role of the state in many social activities, especially in cities. All these institutions have been playing a valuable role in democracies like India and the USA and have diluted the dominance of the central state as well as private enterprise.

Trade unions are another important institution, which can constitute a “countervailing power” (Galbraith 1952) to private enterprise which may otherwise turn to be exploitative. Unfortunately, their power has declined both in India and the USA, partly due to policies of the state itself which are not favourable to trade unions becoming powerful. This is due to the fear of the unions becoming irresponsible and often disturbing industrial peace, which can discourage investment and enterprise. This fear is exaggerated, because labour also suffers gravely when strikes are declared, and they cannot afford to be whimsical. Trade unions have declined also because work is often outsourced to informal institutions where trade unions do not exist. Even colleges and universities in India are relying more on casual teachers than regular ones, which is a deplorable tendency. It is as if the whole economy

is conspiring to deny what is due to labour. A democracy worth its name cannot ignore this issue because it is the bulk of humans who are denied the benefits of economic growth thereby. Anti-labour prejudices have to be removed from the laws and policies of the state, even if these prejudices are hidden.

A strong, well-developed, and cultured civil society can be an effective deterrent to dominating state power and even to capital. In his *Prison Note Books*, Gramsci had observed that it makes the difference between an advanced capitalist country and other countries. “(W)hen the state trembled [in advanced countries], a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed” (Gramsci 1971: 238). When the state commits serious mistakes, a developed civil society can resist and even correct them. It can address poverty and inequality too, even if with mixed success.

Apart from sharply increasing inequality in the distribution of income and wealth referred above, there are two more crises, which will adversely affect all people of the Globe—both the rich and the poor, pushing humankind to the brink. They are so serious as to make the survival of humans beyond the end of this millennium itself doubtful, unless we wake up and act. The first of these is the environmental crisis in the form of climate change, and accumulation of plastic and such other waste both in the oceans and on land on a massive scale which the natural environment cannot absorb. Cyclones and floods have become more frequent, and the sea level rise has become imminent leading to submergence of many islands and coastal areas. International migrations of the displaced are likely on an unprecedented scale, to which the world is not yet prepared, and no contingency plans are ready. This crisis can be directly attributed to our craze for free economic growth inspired by neoliberalism, which cares little for environmental consequences. The papers here attribute the environmental crisis to the human greed for *having*, instead of *being*; to preference for *commodities* instead of *capabilities* as Amartya Sen put it. Gandhi had a prescient awareness of the environmental crisis. He had warned against excessive consumerism and suggested producing durable goods in place of use-and-throw goods, using labour-intensive technologies wherever possible, producing more for the local markets than for the world markets, and using more local materials. His suggestions would reduce the need for transport which can be significantly energy-saving. Above all, he denounced the craze for constantly improving the standard of living on the part of the rich both in developing and developed countries. He wrote:

“God forbid that India should ever take to industrialisation after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom [England] is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million [the population of India then] took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.”

—M. K. Gandhi (*Young India*, December 20, 1928).

We have to realize that there cannot be a limitless growth for the world, and a few papers in the volume here discuss the need for degrowth. However, it is mainly economic growth which made it possible to significantly reduce poverty in the world

from the high level of above 50 per cent in the middle of the 20th century to only about 10 per cent by 2011, the decline accounted largely by China. Unfortunately, poverty in India declined more slowly in comparison, since it was still at about 22 per cent in 2011. Economic growth is still needed in most of the developing countries to wipe out remaining poverty. It is in the developed countries that degrowth is urgently needed. Even in developing countries, growth is needed in the incomes of the poor, and not the rich. It has to be a pro-poor growth, not pro-rich growth. Gandhi suggested how to achieve this, on the lines indicated above.²

The second crises into which the world has plunged is nuclear brinkmanship. Several countries today have nuclear weapons. There is even a grave risk that they may fall into the hands of irresponsible terrorists. Let alone terrorists, even legitimate governments can threaten to use them in serious conflicts going beyond their control. The recent alleged threats by Russia to use them against an unyielding and defiant Ukraine have shocked many countries. Unintended nuclear accidents also have a great potential for damage to human life and environment. The extreme events may have less statistical probability, but when they do occur, their impact can be intolerably high, as argued by Taleb (2010). Taleb calls them as Black Swan events. They may be rare but are unpredictable, as he says. Wisdom lies in preventing them even if less likely, and being prepared for them with plans when they do take place. A basic problem between countries is that mutual trust is lacking, and there is too much emphasis on narrow national interests. There is a saying in Sanskrit—*Ati sarvatra varjayet* (always avoid anything which is too much), and this applies to nationalism too. Ultimately, the world is our home, which we have to protect by all means—against too much greed, too much selfishness, and too much nationalism. The feeling that we are citizens of the world too, and that we have to coexist and cooperate with others so that all of us can survive and even thrive as humanity, has to dominate over narrow loyalties and identities. As our Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared recently (November 2022) at Bali during the G-20 Meeting, the time is not for war; it is no longer to be considered as an option now to solve mutual problems.

Marxists think that proclivity to war is a symptom of the imperialism of Capitalist countries. Imperialism is supposed to be an advanced stage of capitalism. The motive behind imperialism is supposed to be basically economic—finding markets abroad and getting cheap raw materials. Ironically, even supposedly communist countries also tend to behave in an imperialist fashion because they too adopt capitalism though under the auspices of the state. Besides, the ancient motive for war—one of extending one's power and territory, is still very relevant. Imperialism, however, need not always take the form of undertaking aggressive military ventures and setting up military bases abroad by luring weak countries and their leaders into giving a consent for them. It can also take the form of extending credit and increasing the debt burden of weaker countries. To meet the excessive debt burden, the indebted countries are persuaded to cede control of strategic ports and the like to creditor countries. This is simply imperialism even if practised non-violently under the garb of international economic aid. International cooperation is of course welcome in improving infrastructure and strengthening the economic

base of poor countries. But when Indebtedness increases too much, the indebted countries become subservient to the creditor countries and lose their political independence. We cannot attribute this all to neoliberalism alone. It is preferable if the large credit is extended only by international creditors like the World Bank under the auspices of UNO, instead of directly by individual countries. In turn, all the countries will have to contribute a certain percentage of their national income to the UNO, the percentage being higher in the case of rich countries. It is not only the national governments but also multinational corporations that will have to contribute in a similar way. Though the establishment of the UNO has been a significant landmark in the history of the world, it has not been effective enough in controlling the bullying by the big powers and their economic imperialism. This is because the UNO is itself dominated by big powers who often act in their own narrow interests rather than the interests of the world peace and welfare. There is need for a structural reform in the UNO, particularly for doing away with the notion of permanent membership of the big powers in its Security Council. To make it possible, it is necessary for other countries to join together and bring pressure for democratic reform of the UNO and its agencies like the World Bank. Total nuclear disarmament is one of the most urgent tasks that the UNO has to achieve. The second task is to take steps with international cooperation to end extreme disparities between countries in the fulfilment of basic needs. Humanity is one, and its care concerns all—people as well as governments.

I conclude my Foreword by quoting a verse from my *Mānava-Dharma-Shatakam*:

भित्तिकाः यैः जनाः देशाः परस्परविभाजिताः ।
नरधर्मेण सर्वास्ताः नाशितव्याः जगद्हिते ॥११३॥

*Bhittikāḥ yaiḥ janāḥ deśāḥ parasparavibhājitāḥ,
naradharmeṇa sarvāstāḥ nāśitavyāḥ jagad-hite. (113)*

(The walls by which people and nations stand separate, they should all be demolished by the religion of humanity for the world's welfare.)

(Nadkarni 2022: 262).

I wish this volume great success which it richly deserves.

Notes

- 1 See Naiknavare (2022) and Shylendra (2022) for a discussion of the role played by cooperatives in India and their future potential.
- 2 I have elsewhere presented in more detail the civilizational alternative proposed by Gandhi (Nadkarni 2015).

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