

# Some Scattered Thoughts on the Russian Revolution

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It seems our era has just stumbled upon its second major crisis—one brought about by fascism. The rise of xenophobic racism, religious fanaticism, blatant sexism and paranoid nationalism may seem like an anomaly in our neoliberal era, but if we look into the phenomenon closely we will understand that the rise of fascism in recent history is a cognate as well as a reflection of a neoliberal worldview itself. It all began in the name of freedom but the path that neoliberalism is taking us to is anything but freedom. What we have witnessed in the last thirty years is the gradual withdrawal of the state from the public services; a process that has made some individuals immensely rich but ordinary people powerless. The irony though is that this when big corporations tumbled one by one after the 2008 economic crisis, they did not follow their own mantra of state neutrality. Powerful businesses took the public money to stay afloat, while people suffered, and families struggled. This led towards spontaneous popular uprisings around the world; big businesses had to leave a hostile lot, something not in evidence since the fall of the socialist states in Europe and elsewhere. The rise of global fascism is, in fact, the corporate world's revenge against what it perceives to be distrustful and disobedient people.

Neoliberalism's recipe for global destruction does not end with the systemic production of wars and famines; decades of careless pollution and industrialization have brought about catastrophic changes in the

climate of the planet. Many natural scientists now agree that human beings have entered the first stage of their extinction. They have also come up with a name of this era of human extinction: the Anthropocene.

At the beginning of this year, globally renowned historian Dipesh Chakrabarty came to Dhaka to deliver two lectures—one at Dhaka University and the other at a program arranged by the Center for Bangladesh Studies. In both lectures Professor Chakrabarty warned us about the global ecological crisis, explaining how we must change our ways in order to survive longer. Chakrabarty's friend, the celebrated writer Amitav Ghosh, published a book this year titled *The Great Derangement* which postulates similar arguments. When people look back at our era, he writes, they will identify it as the era of great derangement because instead of saving ourselves from collective extinction, we have allowed ourselves to be swallowed up by relentless consumption. Yet, both Chakrabarty and Ghosh are happy putting the blame on the species as a whole, if everyone played a part in this. In this regard, the era of capitalism,趁着 its long history of greed and pollution and its reluctance to take into consideration sustainability. Dumb as it may sound, if capitalism had to choose between profit and extinction, it would probably choose profit!

As we look back at the October Revolution from this historical moment of dual crises of global fascism and extinction,

what lesson, what inspiration do we draw from it? It is true that the Revolution of 1917 was not a one-dimensional story of proletarian victory; it claimed many lives and was marked by both intrigue and tragedy. As we look back at it now, we notice how it let itself be seduced by Stalinism—the ruthless dictatorship that sucked the soul out of the people's revolution. The Soviet drive for industrialization and its inability to tap into the alternative philosophies about the relation between human beings and nature also register moments of compelling failure. Still, if one is to take proper account of the failures of the Russian Revolution one needs to notice how such failures emerged more out of naïveté than out of the evil intention of ripping profit by sinking the whole planet. True revolutionaries are driven by the purpose of radical equality among beings, not its opposite. The most enduring thing about the October Revolution was that it sought to establish a classless society. Not only did it dream about it, it also acted upon its idealist desire.

Alain Badiou, one of the most important philosophers of our time, has mentioned in one of his essays that the October Revolution marks the beginning of the second phase of the communist hypothesis. The first phase, which covers the period between 1792 (the French Revolution) and 1871 (the Paris Commune), is the time in which revolutionaries labored to create "the community of equals." This was also the period in which Marx and Engels provided a

solid philosophical foundation for revolutionary thought. Although workers' rebellions were violently suppressed everywhere, for the first time in history workers took over states and ruled them. None of these workers' states survived for more than a year and the governance of the workers, students, artists, vagabonds and towns folks was eventually surmounted by the ruling class.

The second phase of the materialization of the dream of a classless society, Badiou tells us, began with the October Revolution and came to an end in 1976 with the falling apart of Mao's Cultural Revolution. The 1917 revolution, then, marks the beginning of the political victory of the dream of a classless society. Of course, it had its failures, but its successes are innumerable too. Almost all the popular movements, especially the third world anti-colonial independence movements of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, owe their spirit to the October Revolution. As Bangladeshi, we should not forget that it was the post-revolutionary Soviet Union that stood beside us during the Liberation War, not the capitalist US which tried to inflict intimidate us in 1971. Also, what Marx would mean to the world and how he would have been read without the mediation of Lenin and the Russian Revolution is an area of speculation. It is safe to presume that Marxist philosophy without the state-sponsored impetus and political organization would have looked too idealistic, and even devoid of practical use.

As an educator myself, the aspect that I find most fascinating about the Russian Revolution is its strategic use of knowledge as a transformative element. Lenin, with the help of other leading members of the party, was able to inspire farmers and workers, men and women who are deliberately kept away from the orbit of institutional learning, to rise above their intellectual imprisonment and become vagabonds. Lenin's success, among other things, lay in his ability to inspire the farmer, the worker, the vagabond and the lumpen—a large number of whom were women—to read not only political pamphlets but also economic and philosophical texts.

Education for Lenin was a vehicle for transformation. Behind his idea of revolution lay this idealistic vision that if we are able to create a working class that is not only able to read but also able to bring that knowledge to bear upon its existence, it will be able to create a classless society. It is this aspect of Russian Revolution that gives me hope today. In order to tackle the dual aspect of fascism and ecology, the degenerates, we need to go back to the roots of this revolutionary past and learn what made it possible for common people to take control of their own lives. Of course, we must also remain alert that we do not repeat their errors.

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## October (1927): A Historical and Visual Retromania

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Let's imagine some frames from the 80s or 90s - a small group of activists walking a film in semi-darkness. Comrades, party officio, film students viewing a movie projected on their dressing room walls; and a few bibliophiles who had just read John Reed's *Ten Days that Shook the World* eagerly discussing Sergei Eisenstein's trilogy on Russian revolution. Such frames evoke the way people once viewed Sergei Eisenstein and Grigori Aleksandrov's Russian film *October* (1927). On the centenary of Bolshevik Revolution, both the mass movement and the film equally demonstrate retromania for a time when the working class and the peasants of Russia had shaken the world, demonstrating in the process the collective power of the mass.

Commissioned to make a film on the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution (1917), Eisenstein launched his cinematic visual enterprise *October: Ten Days that Shook the World* (1927), which added (after John Reed's book) in epic style, in the path of his cinematic guru D. W. Griffith and his ideological mentor Karl Marx, Eisenstein created a new mode of editing involving the juxtaposition of images and ideas which has subsequently been theorised as montage. Influenced by Marxism, he went into putting side by side pre-revolutionary and revolutionary dialectics through a train of scenes in monochrome. Eisenstein also visually delineated the subtle tension within the revolutionaries—the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks—brilliantly in the process.

Eisenstein, a devoted chronicler of Russian revolution, left his pioneering signature of intellectual montage—a form of film editing where sequenced scenes are presented in quick succession to depict certain ideas—in films like *Strike* (1924), *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *October* (1927), and *Alexander Nevsky* (1938). His innovative technique of visual editing articulated the revolutionary events artistically. *October*, a film with no spoken dialogue, lets spectators experience inner intrigues and the revolution's climax through the sonic complements of Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich.

A retelling of the colossal historical events of the Soviet Bolshevik revolution, *October* spans six crucial months of the post-Febuary Revolution till the October Revolution. Co-directed by Grigori Aleksandrov, this film utilized a huge army of crew and cast members who worked for about six months in Leningrad (previously Petrograd) to shoot this film. Referring to the shooting, as 'life in the fourth dimension', Eisenstein said, 'Sometimes we filmed for six hours without respite... We slept on cannon carriages, on the pedestals of monuments... in the assembly hall at Smolny, by the gates of the Winter Palace, on the steps of the palace's Jordan Staircase, in automobiles (the best sleep!)... The rest of the time we filmed. Altogether, we shot about a thousand scenes.'

Filmed in documentary style, the weaving of the tensions and events of a historical moment has never ceased to awe cineastes and academics. Indeed, the last scene of the storming of the Winter Palace by the

Bolsheviks can easily be viewed as a real-life event by modern audiences. The simultaneous Eisenstein's scenes of thousands of casts in one scene, perhaps one of the most momentous cinematic moments of modern filmmaking, along with the Odessa Steps scene of *Battleship Potemkin*.

Despite its strict state regulation regarding art and culture, the Stalin administration (thankfully!) didn't interfere with Eisenstein's filmmaking, although he was asked to expurgate reference to Trotsky. Eisenstein, though a leftist sympathiser, delineated the revolutionary character of Lenin deftly and contrasted the subtle tension between the Bolsheviks and the representatives of Provisional government followed by dismantling of the Tsar's monument adroitly.

*October*'s treatment of the scenes depicting the social reality of post-Tsarist Russia under the Provincial Governor's results with Eisenstein's Marxist understanding of the unrest during interim government. In

spectacular montage, we view juxtaposition of different religious deities followed by the title-card "...and the country" accompanied by the tilted head of Tsar's statue. Such images reveal the politico-religious exploitation by the old regime and the universality of religious conservatism.

Eisenstein perfected his signature style while working for Proletkult Theatre. His editing style has been dubbed as "a montage of attractions" in which seemingly arbitrarily chosen images are juxtaposed. In reality, though, they have been put in non-chronological order to intensify the psychological impact on the audience. This technique, indeed, pervades his cinematography. His shift to cinema from theatre can be justified by the potential mass impact of the cinema in educating the general people. Such mass-epic depiction of popular movement accompanied by cinematic hermeneutics has made *October* a key-text of Eisenstein Studies, analyses by research groups and study sessions in museums and film schools. His involvement with the Red Army and Popular Theatre and his own individual position as a Jew in Russia made every scene of the post-Revolution period through the film had evoked contradictory responses (no doubt because of its then new techniques of motion and cross cutting). *October* is now considered to be a landmark film of the silent era. Its visualization of the revolution echoed across the globe then and has by now taken the film to mythic-poetic heights. The revolutionary zeal of the film has had universal appeal. *October* voices against all oppressive states and all sorts of exploitation. The message of the film reminds one of the popular ideological slogan of the French Revolution (1789) "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity." Employing their mastery of film making to spectacular effect, Eisenstein and Aleksandrov created a unique grand narrative in film. And the legacy of their work seems to be reverberating "la luta continua"

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## Was Marx Really Right?

Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right*, Yale University Press, ISBN: 9780300169430, 2011

REVIEWED BY FARHAD BANI IDRIS

Readers familiar with Terry Eagleton's work would have no doubts from the title of *Why Marx Was Right* that it would offer a strong defense of all things Marx. After reading it, they will not be disappointed on this count. Eagleton's book has ten chapters in them, the author seeks to prove beyond reservation the relevance of Marx today; he argues that the nineteenth-century political economist and philosopher can be read usefully even now for his insight and wisdom on matters of importance two centuries later. Eagleton's purpose, as he lays it down in the preface, however, is not to prove Marx "perfect" but to make him "palatable."

Each chapter of *Why Marx Was Right* begins with some critical assault on Marxism. With his habitual articulate finesse, Eagleton crafts the chapter-wise spread of the epigraphic statements well. The actual chapters, then, respond to the charges raised skillfully. The wide range of critical opinions against Marxist ideas that the chapters refute are the following: (1) In today's "postindustrial Western societies" that tend to be classless anyway, Marxism has no relevance. (2) A common behavior of a Marxist government is that it routinely engages in tyranny and oppression. (3) Marxism is "deterministic" and robs people of free will. (4) The utopian tendencies of Marxism completely overlook the inherent baseness of human nature keen on acquiring only material goods. (5) Marxism is too reductionist in that it confines all human activities to economics. (6) The materialism of Marxism has no room for the spirit, which accounts for some Marxist leaders' horrendous brutalities such as those perpetrated by Stalin. (7) Marxism is always obsessing with class, especially the working class, which is fast disappearing from the globe. (8) Marxists are hungry for violent political changes and are oblivious to the horrors those revolutionary upheavals can unleash on the people. (9) An inevitable product of Marxism is despotism. And lastly (10), today's "political left"—such as feminism, gay and race activism, and environmentalism—owes little to Marxism; it, in fact, has moved forward on its own to resist globalization and capitalism.

The above list may make some people believe that Eagleton's chapters defending Marx at times deal with overlapping issues. For example, the 2nd and 9 chapters treat Marx's tyranny and Marxist despotism. The epigraphs in these chapters, however, do not reflect the exactness of these charges. The chapter on tyranny, for instance, expatiates Marx's view on individual liberty whereas the one on despotism, though very similar to the one with discussion on tyranny, seeks to disabuse the reader of the myth that the liberal democratic state is in harmony with the people. In it Eagleton quotes Jacques Rancière effectively to remind us that Marx was indeed quite present in noting that a government's primary function is to serve the interest of global capital.

The opinions Eagleton seeks to invalidate in each chapter are of course customary among those who reject Marxism. Whether he will win a new convert in the process though is for the reader to ponder. Writing in his mid-seventies (he was born in 1943), Eagleton is obviously targeting an audience mostly uninitiated in Marxism, that is, "those unfamiliar with... [Marx's] work." It requires no stretch of imagination to guess—accurately enough, one hopes—that he wrote the last chapter for young western readers of the day.

With copious references to Marx as well as other thinkers, Eagleton tries to establish that patriarchy and class form two interlinked histories, thereby thereby that the exploitation of women amounts to none other than class exploitation. If Marx has been "gender blind," as he has been alleged by some, so is capitalism, which is not to say that political inheritors of Marxism were of the same breed. "The Bolsheviks took the so-called women question equally seriously," and it was not fortuitous, according to Eagleton, that "the uprising to topple the Tsar was launched with mass demonstrations on International Women's Day in 1917."

Like women's movements that had received support first from Marxist activists in the early twentieth century, anti-colonial movements in Asia, Africa, and South America obtained a strong impetus from Marxism at the same time and in the following decades. That Marx had a grim view of India and that he seemed to endorse "its subjugation by the British" Eagleton unequivocally acknowledges. However, those that to Marx, this was the only means for a "socialist revolution in the subcontinent." Eagleton wryly observes next, "It is not the kind of talk that would land you an A in postcolonial courses from Canterbury to California". In other words, political correctness is not the way to understand Marxism.

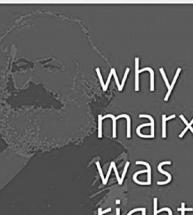
Perhaps not unsurprisingly, Eagleton mentions Edward Said's *Orientalism* in the chapter and proclaims it is "quite anti-Marxist." Next appears typical Eagletonian caricature with typical Eagletonian condemnation: "At its finest... [Orientalism] has produced work of rare insight and originality. At its least creditable, it represents little more than the foreign affairs department of postmodernism." Admirers of Said would find this characterization of his most well-known work quite appalling. Eagleton's ostensible purpose in the chapter, however, is to clarify that Marx's ideas are shaped by his nineteenth-century perspectives, and hence, allowances must be

made to Marx. After all, a certain measure of Eurocentrism was paradigmatic of all thinkers of this time: "He was a middle-class European intellectual."

Eagleton also refers to Ajahz Mahmud in *Why Marx Was Right* for evidence from Marx's own contradiction. Titled "Marx and Said," this section is as follows: "Marx and many of Eagleton's assertions in *Why Marx Was Right* are problematic, as when he describes Said and Mao Zedong as "mass murderers." Nevertheless, the book is an enjoyable read. Eagleton's witty prose, combined with his humorous analogies, make a difficult subject light reading. While advocating the socialist cause that should accept all in its ranks, Eagleton, for instance, suggests why: "There is no ban on Rupert Murdoch and Paris Hilton... Even Martin Amis and Tom Cruise might be granted some sort of junior, strictly temporary membership." On another occasion, Eagleton declares that George Bush "seems to have worked hard to make the capitalist system appear in the worst possible light... which makes one wonder whether he was secretly working for the North Koreans." It is such wit and insights offered so casually and endlessly that make Eagleton's work, here as elsewhere, such enjoyable reading!

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Terry Eagleton



why marx was right