

ISSUES BEYOND THE THEORY OF THE CLASS STRUGGLES

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It is now six years since Issa Shivji published his controversial essay "The Silent Class Struggle". It attracted well-deserved attention because of striking, in the prevailing atmosphere of "Tanzaphilia", a different note altogether. Shivji's point was that newly begun process of transition to socialism could not be sustained by celebrative support alone. The process of reversing the neo-colonial trend in Tanzania needed deeper explanation than that offered by those who had come out to praise the Tanzanian "experiment". Nationalisations notwithstanding, remained caught in the neo-colonial web. The rapidly growing state bureaucracy was becoming the basis for a new class stratification. Therefore, the uniqueness of the Tanzanian situation should, according to Shivji, not be overdramatized. It was still a neo-colonial society (although not like Kenya, par excellence). It remained a class society.

The facts on which Shivji based his analysis were no doubt known to Tanzanian government leaders and other observers alike. Therefore, it was not as if the essay delivered any shock revelations. Its significance stems from Shivji's ability to see earlier than anybody else the political implications of a state of affairs which to most observers looked radically different from anything previous but which to him more resembled that of the "Emperor's new clothes". Being the first critical account of Tanzania written by a Tanzanian added to the significance of the publication. In the fast expanding literature on Tanzania "The Silent Class Struggle" to me stands out as one of the most important intellectual landmarks.

The essay may in many respects have been incomplete and unpolished. To take care of this problem a group of senior Marxists on "the Hill" were invited to comment on the validity of the assumptions underlying Shivji's work (published together with the original essay by Tanzania Publishing House 1973). In the light of these comments Shivji has since returned to his den in order to review his position and update his factual account. The book now available, Class Struggles in Tanzania, is the product of this exercise.

Unlike its predecessor, the new book does not stir the mind. The message is fundamentally the same. It is not political history with passion but a cold and detached explanation of how we ought to understand Tanzania's past in order to promote its socialist future. As the author himself puts it: it is an attempt to indicate the course of class struggles in Tanzania with the hope

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that others will fill in the gaps that can be found in the book. One way of looking at the book is to treat it as a principal testimony of a school of thought that has developed at the University of Dar es Salaam in the wake of the "Silent Class Struggle" and with Shivji as one of its main spokesmen.

Their message is essentially that all history is one of class struggles. The real history is never what appears on the stage, i.e. what a people think of themselves, what a leader says he is, etc. History moves, regardless of subjective perception, in a dialectical manner, in line with the material contradictions that manifest themselves, in class struggles. The purpose of philosophy is to make man conscious of his position in this process. This is how he can discover his true nature. To Shivji and his comrades this postulate is not only a hypothesis; it is a universal law. In fact, it is the only scientific approach to the study of history. Therefore, they have no sympathy to spare for those who borrow from Marxist methodology; nor for those who only offer "occasional criticisms" of the process of history. The latter can only be understood through consistent application of the Marxist method.

Shivji's preoccupation with the proper application of the right method makes him uninterested in alternative paths of socialist development. TANU without a proletarian ideology and organization can bring about nothing but "petty-bourgeois" socialism. That alternative does not attract him. Shivji also refutes the significance of such "practical" problems as how to improve management in the public institutions. These problems stem from the class nature of society and will be solved when the major contradiction stemming from neo-colonial dependence have been resolved.

Many observers, who themselves are involved in the day-to-day management of development in Tanzania, would no doubt wish that their problems could be solved through one such major stroke of history. But they are too close to reality to accept the validity of such a point. Whether one accepts their more sceptical position or not, it is clear that one criticism that can be levelled against Shivji's is that he fails to see the number of questions that he leaves unanswered by the wayside as he goes on applying his scientific method. His conviction about the scientific nature of his work makes him insensitive to the fundamental subjectivity and fallibility of his own position. I will devote the rest of my review to that problem.

One thing that Shivji wants his readers to note is that the class struggle in Tanzania is no longer a social phenomenon that can be described in singular form; nor can it be labelled "silent". This is not only a gesture to the fact that workers in the wake of Mwengozo began to "unfold" the class struggle in Tanzania. It goes deeper than that. It indicates a revision of the author's theoretical position as stated in the original essay of 1970.

Shivji chooses to interpret Marx's definition of "ownership" as being meant to convey the idea of not only the relationship of man to object but also the relationship of man to man. It is ownership as a relation to the means of production that enables the appropriation of surplus. It is the form and manner by which the appropriate surplus is disposed rather than juridical ownership that is according to Shivji's interpretation of Marx constitute the essentials of an economic system. State or public ownership of the means of production, therefore, is not in itself sufficient a measure to remove the class nature of society. Shivji also reminds his readers that no motion of development can be explained but in terms of opposites:

"A Class Society therefore by definition includes struggle of the opposites in whatever forms and however impure this may be. Built in to the concept of class is the inseparable idea of the political struggle of classes". (p. 7)

One can raise several questions relating to both Shivji's definition and his application of the concept of class struggle. If no motion of development can be explained except in terms of contradiction between opposites one wonders if the notion of classless society has any validity at all. If it has, what will produce development in such a society.

The form and manner of disposal of the surplus appropriated on the market is bound to take multiple expression in a capitalist or neo-colonial society. This is also recognized by Shivji who uses this as a main criteria for distinguishing between different strata within the bourgeoisie and the petty-bourgeoisie. The "commercial" bourgeoisie, in this perspective, becomes a class of its own. So does the "bureaucratic" bourgeoisie. Even other sectors of the petty-bourgeoisie in Tanzania are treated as social forces in their own right. From this elaborate analytical division of groups in society it follows that the class struggle must take on plural nature. The drama is not only the struggle between the workers and the bourgeoisie. Of equal significance is the contradiction between the "commercial" and the "bureaucratic" bourgeoisie, etc.

The manner in which Shivji uses the concepts of class and class struggle would not necessarily meet with Marx's full approval. It seems that Shivji unwittingly comes to adopt a position very close to that of Max Weber, who argued:

"The term "class" refers to any group of people... (who have the same) typical chance for a supply of goods, external living conditions, and personal life experiences, in so far as this chance is determined by the... power... to dispose of goods or skills for the sake of income in a given economic order..." (From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, edited by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, New York: Oxford University Press, 1958, pp. 181-82).

In Shivji's as well as Weber's sense the "class situation" is ultimately the "market situation", in which society is analytically divided into small groups, all referred to as classes. Marx expressed reservations against this approach to social realities (Das Kapital, pp. 1031-32). Since this was in his unfinished manuscript on social class one can only speculate about the reasons

for this. One plausible reason why he rejected an inflated use of the concepts of "class" and "class struggle" was that it would reduce the significance of the struggle between classes as a principal determinant of change from one historical epoch to another.

I do not wish to castigate Shivji for having adopted a position of this substantive issue which is close to that of the "father" of bourgeois social science. My purpose of pointing to this similarity between Shivji and Weber is to illustrate the delusion inherent in the position that you can erect walls around your philosophical position so that nobody can accuse you of contamination by the ideas of your enemy. Philosophy is in the permanent process of becoming, i.e. whether we admit it or not, philosophy is always controversial in that it can only offer perspectivistic, not absolute truths. There is little point, therefore, in treating one's own philosophy as a closed system possessing a universally and eternally valid methodology. What Shivji fails (or prefers not) to recognize in his book is the obvious: that philosophy is the creation of man and as such reflects both his limitations and his shortcomings. In however absolute and universal a form man may ask his question about his role in society and how it can be perfected, the answer he is liable to produce through systematic exploration and methodological constitution of the material is always perspectivistic and controversial. Any philosophical position is always in a critical position in that it calls into question other philosophical perspectives and is in turn being called into question itself. The question of man and his development in society is a total question to which, however, man is only able to give partial answers.

If it were otherwise, i.e. if we were able to produce answers of universal validity, philosophy would abolish itself. All problems and conflicts could be solved and all further thinking about man's development in society would be superfluous. At this stage, nothing would happen any more because the continuous controversy about the true nature of man's needs in society that goes on between man and his fellow-man would be over. The process of history itself would come to a standstill.

Given that we can only produce partial answers to the most fundamental questions affecting our own progress it follows that the crisis of human truth is something inherent in human nature itself. To try to overcome this crisis by developing a world-view claiming absolute validity is futile. It is more reasonable, at least as far as I am concerned, to accept this crisis as the ground of human progress and thus of history. If now, Marxists like Shivji claim that they are in possession of a philosophical method which once and for all can solve the problem about the true nature of man (if only everybody realizes it) there is something essentially wrong. What they have done is to solve this

problem in their own imagination, i.e. in theory, by the methodological constitution of a historical logos which they regard as absolute and in terms of which man is supposed to rediscover his true nature. In reality, however, a person taking this position is led away from his actual experience and secludes himself in the cycle of his own self. This happens because the constitution of an absolute logos of whatever kind, from whatever premise, is nothing but a theoretical conception of an immanent truth which is systematically and methodologically developed. The dangers inherent in the belief that one is in possession of the truth are obvious: dogmatism, fanaticism and intolerance. Shivji tries to guard against these tendencies, but one still does not escape the impression that he is chasing a phantom that constantly slips away from him. He is to a large extent a prisoner of the truth that he is so diligently constructing for himself. He never really breaks through the cycle of his own self and turn from the theoretical to the practical. This is so because the fundamental assumption underlying his approach is that he is in possession of a definite method.

The end result is that Shivji's book is really history written from above rather than from within. There is no empathy, i.e. desire to see the problem from the point of view of individual actors, be they leaders or not. Everybody's behaviour is explained in terms of his class position. One may wish that history could be explained only in such terms. But that is really a form of escapism, an unwillingness to face a range of other issues related to underdevelopment. Principal of these is the conflict stemming from our claim to know the solution to the problems of the poor, while at the same time failing to know the minds of those whom we are expected to help.

Those of us who write about underdevelopment have never been exposed to what it really means. We have never experienced the shock of underdevelopment. We have read about it, theorized about it. This is the fragile basis for our claim to expertise. In this perspective, our claim, whether in books or in classrooms, that we possess the key to overcoming underdevelopment can only sound hollow.

We cannot claim to have gained entry into the inner sanctums of emotions and feelings of the peasants and workers in Tanzania. Still, as the experience, e.g. of the late Amilcar Cabral or Mwalimu Nyerere suggests, such entry is probably a prerequisite for the successful application of a given ideology. To be comprehended requires a willingness to comprehend those whom one wishes to change. It requires getting "inside the skin" of these people.

The experience of leaders like Cabral and Nyerere further suggests not only that a revolutionary theory is necessary for revolutionary practice but also something that we, academics in particular, tend to forget; that the emotional premises of the development scholar, the technical expert or the

politician are fundamentally different from those of the peasants and the workers, the real victims of underdevelopment. They are fragile: we are strong. We have knowledge: they are ignorant. We know how decisions are made: they suffer the consequences of decisions made by others. In short, they are vulnerable, something that we in our mood of rationalist self-sufficiency are unable to experience. The lesson is simple: emotions which are real to those who experience them are not real to those who observe them. What is a "problem" to us, is often a "mystery" to the majority of workers and peasants in Tanzania. We can treat a problem as a difficulty encountered along the way. We can step back from it, measure it and devise solutions, may even overcome it. In mystery however it is impossible to situate oneself outside the dilemma; a problematic element is present but the viewer is himself part of the problem. Indeed, what we need to realize is that we, as "developed" viewers, are part of the problem of underdevelopment. When we define a problem as extrinsic to ourselves we are condemned to misunderstand it. We will not solve it. We need to be shocked into discovering the falsity of the certitudes we bring to any "problem arena". We must make the discovery that there exists an inherent structural paternalism in the very relationship between us and those whom we claim are beneficiaries of our efforts.

Emancipation from underdevelopment is such a complex challenge that it cannot be treated in the framework of a theory of class struggles alone. Thus, while admitting that Shivji's book raises many fundamental issues (although virtually all of them can be found in "The Silent Class Struggle"), the pretensions of the theoretical framework used in the analysis are delusive. Philosophy is not only a guiding star. The other side of it is a mirror which reflects man's true nature, i.e. his limitation, his historicity and his temporality. When reading through Shivji's book I had to look into that mirror several times in order not to forget who we, the academics, are.