

Truth by Resolutions

Ashok Rudra

India: Economic Freedoms versus Imperialism by V I Pavlov; Peoples Publishing House; 247 pp; Rs 15,

ONE of the pre-requisites of reviewing a book is that it has to be read; and that is what makes it so difficult to review a book that is unreadable. If all the same I have laboured through this particular unreadable book and have even sat down to review it, that is because I choose to treat it not as a book written by just another research worker, but as a specimen of the type of research that is carried out in the Soviet Union on subjects of political economy. The particular problem treated in this book makes it all the more interesting from the above point of view. The book is an apologia for the Soviet international policy with respect to underdeveloped countries in general and India in particular, formulated and put into practice by Khrushchev and carried on by his successors. The book deals extensively with two concepts that underlie this policy, namely "the non-capitalist path" and "national democracy".

Typical of Soviet Research

One is, of course, familiar with the particulars of the policy and the broad lines of the understanding of the world situation, and the political economic conditions in the underdeveloped countries that underlies the policy. However, most of the time one comes across only statements of the understanding as part of official pronouncements of leading personalities and organisations in the Communist world. One hardly ever comes across any material purporting to be analysis of facts and figures that might have led to the understanding or that might establish the reasonableness of the policies based on the understanding. It is from this angle that I have scrutinised the book. Does it represent a part, however small, of the research on which, one may presume, the understanding of the world situation by the Soviet policy makers is based? It is not necessary to read much of the book to find out that it is not a piece of research at all; it is a rehash and a purely verbal paraphrase of the statements found in official resolutions and pronouncements.

I submit that this book is a topical example, not an exception. I do not

think that there are a great many books on the subject which are very much better than the present example. Considering the conditions under which books are published and published books are translated in the Soviet Union, it is to be presumed that the Soviet academic world will not have any objection to my treating the book as a representative sample of their research products.

Conclusions Come First

It is neither the volume nor even the quality of the research which I find most disturbing but something much more fundamental, namely the relation between research and the conclusions embodied in the official resolutions and pronouncements. One might have expected that the resolutions and pronouncements are based on appreciation of the results of voluminous and painstaking empirical research that is carried out by a whole army of competent research workers. The situation, however, seems to be the reverse. Whatever research is carried out seems to have the purpose not of helping the formation of judgment by the policy makers; instead it takes from the policy makers ready-made formulas and seeks illustrative evidence. (It is to be remembered that the correct scientific procedure is not to seek corroboration for hypotheses but to seek their contradiction: for an incorrect hypothesis may be corroborated by an indefinitely large body of empirical data, whereas a correct hypothesis will not be contradicted by any data whatsoever.)

If this indeed be the case then what is the basis on which hypotheses are formulated in the first instance? If it is not empirical research that gives rise to the understanding of the policy makers, then what does? The answer one receives from those who know is, the collective experience and wisdom of the leaders of the Communist movement. In practice it means that periodical gatherings of such leaders take place in which resolutions are put to the vote and passed and the contents of the resolutions so passed acquire the status, in the eyes of those subscribing to this particular epistemology, of Truth. It is, however, only a

tentative Truth, or an approximation to the Truth, for the same problems are periodically reposed in similar gatherings where the experience of acting according to the earlier understanding is used as a criterion for re-examination and revision and thus arrive at a second approximation to the Truth.

Reliance on 'Collective Experience'

This method of approaching the Truth may be illustrated by considering a hypothetical application to the problem of deciding what is the result of adding 2 and 2. An opinion poll would be taken among the delegates to a congress and if the average of what the delegates think 2 plus 2 should work out to 41 then a resolution would be passed declaring 41 to be sum of 2 and 2. If an arithmetic system wherein 2 plus 2 makes 41 is found unsatisfactory to work with, another congress would be called to reconsider the problem and this time the collective wisdom may settle upon the figure of 3 and arithmetic books would be revised accordingly. The assumption underlying this approach is that only "2 plus 2 equals 4" would be found satisfactory in practice and that, therefore, resolutions of the successive congresses would ultimately converge on this Truth.

The arithmetic example is provided for the purpose of elucidation; but it makes the method appear more ridiculous than it really is when applied to a field like political economy. The axiomatic approach is obviously inapplicable to the latter which calls for purely empirical research, and the experience of political activists is far from being insignificant as data to be taken into account. My objection is not to the use of this so called collective experience but to its *exclusive* use. Political economy is not a subject that does not lend itself to the scientific method.

Karl Marx was himself a passionate political activist, but he did not find his and others' political experience sufficient for his understanding of capitalism. He found it necessary to spend a large part of his life in the

British Museum, studying history, philosophy and political economy, and analysing facts according to the strictest academic standards of rigour of scientific objectivity. The analytical tools he developed may appear crude by present day standards, but represented great advances over the tools used by his contemporaries.

Decline of Empirical Research

The poverty of present day Marxism results largely from the fact that this tradition of empirical research has not been kept up, so that from a method of analysis Marxism has been steadily declining into a body of dogmas. Of course, one can find a very good excuse for the relative sterility of latter day Marxism in the capitalist countries: empirical research calls for official patronage which was and still is denied to workers professing a Marxian orientation of outlook. If despite all this Marxian political economists proved to be more successful in explaining certain phenomenon than their "bourgeois" contemporaries, that is because the latter persisted in refusing to take into account certain variables and certain relations between variables for extra-academic reasons.

What excuse can be thought of, however, for the poor research output of the political economists in the Soviet Union? A country that has reached the highest standard of scientific work in both theoretical and applied fields, as exemplified by the first rate contributions to mathematics on the one hand and to space navigation on the other, is lacking in neither talent nor resources available for research. I believe that a Marxist explanation is possible for this poor performance of Marxism in that country, but that would take us further afield.

I shall now substantiate the broadly generalised criticism hitherto made by emphasising two aspects of the grossly unscientific character of the book under review. Firstly, we shall look at the type of information made use of in the book. Not only is there no putting together of fresh statistical material or any original statistical analysis of existing data, the author has not even taken the trouble to get to the primary sources of statistics or find out who the economists of any

standing in this country are. The argument is presented not in terms of any analysis of facts but mainly in terms of statements by various supposed authorities, who are quite often such entities as "the Indian Economist Ktshori Lai". The most quoted sources are journals like the *AICC Economic Review* and the *New Age*. References to other monthly, weekly and daily journals abound, and most of the statistical tables are also taken from articles published in these rather than from their original sources. It is not sufficient to condemn the particular author as a journalist rather than a research worker: it is to be remembered that academic authorities in the Soviet Union judged the book worthy of publication and also of international circulation through translations!

What Do These Words Mean ?

The second aspect is the utter lack of concern for *meaning* with which a large number of undefined or badly defined categories are introduced and made use of. The treatment of the problem is descriptive, the language style chosen literary and most of the sentences have as subjects such categories as "imperialism", "monopolists", "national bourgeoisie", "patriotic forces", "masses", "main ruling class", etc. I know that some of my Marxist friends will throw up their arms at my illiteracy with respect to marxist literature and refer me to various authorities who have already defined these terms. But I submit, firstly, that even if such definitions exist somewhere or other, it is the duty of a research worker to restate them with specific reference to the context of his field of work. I also submit that many of the authoritative definitions are much too vague and ambiguous and are unsuited for analytical purposes without considerable refinement. Thus, even though the phenomenon of "imperialism" was indeed defined and explained by Lenin, what should one understand when one reads such a sentence as "It is known that... imperialism employing the services of the local feudal and comprador elements attempted to impose on these states an outwardly independent but essentially semi-colonial state." (p 19) Known by whom? How? Is this imperialism "the last stage of capitalism" as understood by

Lenin? How does a *stage* impose anything on anything else? Is one talking about a certain category of capitalists? How is that category defined and who are its members? How can we identify the "feudal and comprador elements?" Again, what are we to make of expression "(India's) main ruling class — the national bourgeoisie" (p 16). Now what is a ruling class? What is a main ruling class? Do we have a definition of "national bourgeoisie" such that given a capitalist individual or group we can uniquely decide whether it belongs to the above category or not? One often gets the impression that one ascribes two characteristics to the national bourgeoisie, namely it is non-monopoly capitalist and it is "nationalist" or "patriotic". But what basis have we got to assume that the two necessarily go together? Is it not possible to have an Indian monopoly group that would be "national" in the sense of being in competition with international monopoly groups? On the other hand, are we not having a large number of small firms that are under "imperialist" control in the sense of collaborating with foreign monopoly firms?

Brittle Edifices

It is not merely from an itch for semantic purity that I have raised the above objections. I have got the suspicion that many of the ideological edifices that have been built by contemporary Marxist theoreticians would collapse like houses of cards once one introduces precise, unambiguous, rigorous, definitions. I submit that once such an effort is undertaken, such statements as "National democracy is a form of Government in which the unification of all the sound forces of a nation can be most successfully achieved" (p 236), "an indispensable requisite for the formation of a national democracy is the leadership of the working class in the patriotic bloc" (p 276) "the non-capitalist road of development is ensured by the strength of the working class and the masses of the people" (p 235) will turn out to be completely vacuous depending as they do on such empty phrases as "sound forces" "leadership in the patriotic bloc" and "masses of people".