

Aijaz Ahmad (1941–2022) in memoriam

Perseverance in the midst of defeat

On Aijaz Ahmad's political writings

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Defeat shapes the subjectivity of the global Left in the contemporary era. The twin collapse of actually existing socialism and revolutionary nationalisms in the late twentieth century deprived the international communist movement of material support as well as ideological anchorage. A reactionary thesis stemming out of this defeat proclaimed the triumphant victory of global capitalism against socialist despotism, with the combination of liberal democracy and the free market punctuating the definitive end of the tumultuous sequence of revolutionary upheavals that marked modernity, from the French Revolution to the Bolshevik revolution to anticolonial struggles.

This triumphalism was paralleled by what Domenico Losurdo has called the 'self-flagellation of the vanquished', a subjectivity that feels ashamed of its own past.¹ The latter is evident in the form of erstwhile radical political parties that abandoned the idea of a structural transformation of the world in favour of issue-based movements, inadvertently facilitating their integration into the dominant order. At the ideological level, a wide gamut of left-wing, postmodern and postcolonial theorists converged in their criticism of actually existing socialisms, dismissal of Marxism as 'class reductionism' and displacement of materialist analysis by a cultural critique of imperialism.

These transformations were part of an intellectual atmosphere that made the Communist Movement of the twentieth century, with its gigantic achievements and obvious shortcomings, illegible to a range of political act-

ivists in the contemporary era. Aijaz Ahmad, as inheritor of this complex legacy, became one of its most eloquent defenders against reactionary attacks and its obfuscation by what he termed the 'Post-condition'.² By discussing his work on the rise of the far-right in South Asia, I argue that Ahmad can be read as a theorist of defeat – a disposition that allowed him to explain the counterrevolutions that he witnessed through the historical transformations of our era without abandoning the principles of class struggle and its theoretical correlate, historical materialism, as key weapons in the fight against reactionary forces.

Experiencing defeat

Some of Ahmad's harshest criticisms were reserved for what he termed the 'ironic, detached critic' based in Western academia – someone whose intellectual production was geared towards the academic publishing industry rather than stemming out of any concrete political struggles.³ Ahmad embedded his own theoretical work within the unfolding struggles in the Global South in which he was an enthusiastic participant. Born and brought up in India, Ahmad moved to Pakistan in his late teens, before returning to India in the 1980s while also living and working in Canada and the US. He belonged to the last generation of individuals in the subcontinent who could claim both India and Pakistan as their homelands. In his career as a militant, he experienced the defeats of the Left in both countries. Here, I want to discuss his work on the coming to power of a right-wing

military dictatorship in Pakistan and the rise of Hindu fundamentalism in India. I suggest that many of Ahmad's later criticisms against postmodernism were rooted in his early political writings, where he confronted the simultaneous decline of the Left and the rise of a parochial and punishing form of cultural nationalism.

During the 1970s, Aijaz Ahmad was a member of the Mazdoor Kisan Party (Workers and Peasants Party) in Pakistan and worked actively to organise the party across the country. One of Ahmad's most underrated and magisterial essays, 'Democracy and Dictatorship in Pakistan', was written while he was active in the Pakistani Left.⁴ The essay includes his analysis of the rise of the left-wing populist Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1966 to 1970), his stint in power (1971 to 1977) and his government's overthrow by the right-wing dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977). Written in 1978, one year after the coup d'état and one year before Bhutto was hanged by the military junta, the essay excavated the myriad contradictions that underpin postcolonial society, offering a Marxist account of the limits of bourgeois radicalism and the dangers of right-wing reaction.

Ahmad pointed out that Bhutto's populist government was ridden with ideological and social contradictions as it tried to manoeuvre between its working class support base and the interests of the entrenched ruling elites. Bhutto nationalised major industries, initiated land reforms, increased rural credit and moved towards an independent foreign policy. At the same time, he handed over control of industries to bureaucratic elites, failed to implement land reforms, and accepted harsh austerity measures from the IMF. More crucially, Bhutto relied on the Pakistan military, which had gained global notoriety for conducting a brutal military operation in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1971, to crush his left-wing political opponents. In an ironic twist, the same military overthrew Bhutto's government in a coup d'état on the 5th of July, 1977.

Ahmad was quick to note that Bhutto had done enough to terrify the ruling elites but without substantially undermining their power. The July coup was their reaction against the mildly pro-labour policies of the Bhutto government, a reaction that deployed the veneer of religion. Instead of signalling an 'authentic' awakening, Islam was used by the reactionary elites to displace the language of socialism and class struggle in their quest

to eliminate threats to their property and privilege. As the Zia regime turned the repressive apparatus into the primary vehicle for politics, it used the intertwining discourses of religion and national security to imprison and torture political opponents, introduced public floggings, disbanded trade unions and students unions, and turned Pakistan into a frontline state in a US-sponsored 'Jihad' against the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan, a situation that led many – including Ahmad – to flee into exile.

In the 1980s, Ahmad arrived in India, where he worked closely with social movements and remained close to the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, India witnessed the abrupt liberalisation of the economy as well as the meteoric rise of the Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Writing in the aftermath of the destruction of the Babri mosque by Hindu fanatics in 1992, Ahmad traced the growing strength of reactionary forces in his essay 'Right-wing Politics and the Cultures of Cruelty', which has become a classic for understanding the rise of religious nationalism in India.⁵

Ahmad argued that India's incorporation into the free market system had created immense social tensions, leading to a decline in support for the traditional secular parties, especially the Congress. Sensing a weak centre, a 'counter-revolutionary elite' stunned the country by mobilising the masses in a series of communal riots and 'revivalist terror', strategically using electoral calculus, implicit state support and political violence in a coordinated 'hurricane from below' to propel the BJP to power. The ideological war waged by the Hindu Right included a set of presumptions that would come to dominate the thinking of reactionary movements, including an 'anti-liberal conception of nationalism, anti-rationalist critique of Modernity, anti-humanist assaults on the politics of liberation, in a rhetoric of "blood and belonging", and in the name of a glorious past that never was.'⁶

The End of History, manifested in the form of the Hindu Right, produced an insular and punishing politics that targeted minorities in pursuit of a homogenous identity and celebrated the most retrogressive elements from India's past. Today, with the continued dominance of Narendra Modi's BJP in India and the Pakistani military's tightening grip over the country's politics, Ahmad's

words of caution on the rise of regressive, illiberal identitarian politics appear prophetic.

Defending the revolutionary tradition

Ahmad's later criticism of postcolonial theorists who celebrated 'alterity' and cultural nationalism stemmed from his intimate experience with authoritarianism in the Global South. Rather than taking comfort in cultural explanations, Ahmad characterised the rise of religious nationalisms in South Asia as a violent response to labour militancy and democratic aspirations of marginalised communities, linking their emergence to objective conditions such as the dislocations caused by neoliberalism and the geostrategic imperatives of US imperialism in the region.

The 1980s and 1990s experienced far-right offensives on a planetary scale, from the Iranian Revolution to the fall of the Socialist bloc and its replacement by oligarchs. This political defeat was matched by an ideological retreat in academia that discarded Marxism as yet another metanarrative of colonial modernity and sought to replace it with micro struggles around identity and cultural difference. By contrast, experience had taught Ahmad the disastrous consequences of abandoning grand projects of emancipation. His criticism of Lyotard and other postmodern thinkers for their celebration of the end of metanarratives stemmed from the recognition that in the midst of violent communal passions, unbridled neoliberalism, pervasive militarism and grand millenarian fantasies of resurrecting an imagined past, the only universalism that was obliterated from popular (and academic) discourses was the egalitarian promise of emancipation.⁷ The end of the universalism of the Left manifested itself in the rise of universal horror.

Walter Benjamin famously stated that 'even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins'.⁸ The defeats of the Left have resulted in a concerted assault on the memory of revolutionary movements, including their stigmatisation by conservative and postcolonial thinkers, albeit for different reasons. Ahmad's theoretical work, including his polemics with the giants of literary theory, is an attempt to come to terms with these failures without abandoning the democratic impulse inherent in them.

His belated defence of the Soviet Union, which he considered an essential pillar of support to anti-imperialist struggles in the Global South, was part of his attempt to salvage the genuine solidarities and internationalisms produced by socialist states at a time when the academic world had confined them to the dustbins of history.⁹

Ahmad's insistence on holding onto the memory of revolutionary pasts despite experiencing catastrophic defeats showed that he believed that the human adventure is not finished, that there could still be an alternative trajectory for humanity different from the mediocrity of the contemporary moment. In this regard, Ahmad's legacy is one of hope in dark times and the courage to sustain it in the face of repeated defeat and pervasive ideological disorientation. It is a provocation to the Left to shake off the paralysing subjectivity of shame, resume the difficult task of creatively rethinking Marxism grounded in the accumulated experience of revolutionary movements and link theoretical texts to existing political struggles in order to rebuild global solidarities – a task in which nothing less than the future of humanity is at stake.

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Notes

1. Domenico Losurdo, 'Flight from History? The Communist Movement between Self-Criticism and Self-Contempt', *Nature, Society, and Thought* 13:3 (2000), 457–514.
2. Aijaz Ahmad, 'Post Colonial Theory and the "Post-" Condition', *Socialist Register* 33 (1997), 353–381.
3. Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Nations, Classes, Literatures* (London: Verso: 2008).
4. Aijaz Ahmad, 'Democracy and Dictatorship in Pakistan', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 1:5 (1978), 477–512.
5. Aijaz Ahmad, 'Right-wing Politics and the Cultures of Cruelty', *Social Scientist* 26:10 (1998), 3–25.
6. Ahmad, 'Right-wing Politics', 4.
7. See Ahmad, 'Post Colonial Theory and the 'Post'-Condition'.
8. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1949*, ed. Michael Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 389–400.
9. Aijaz Ahmad, 'Originality of the October Revolution', *Marxist* 33:1-2 (2017), 1–18.