



The IP College Protests: an Insider's Diagnosis Failure, Consumerism and A Counter Strategy

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Without the clause of class-consciousness that makes the connection between career and exploitation plain resistance becomes a perverse (the usual) form of consumerism, the commodity bought and consumed is "peace of mind" and the cost is a few days out in the sun.

The Protest in Perspective

Almost all theorists of our times have spoken of the trespass of consumerism in all spheres of modern existence; some may seem to like it while others may seem to dislike it, some may like it while others may dislike it, but they do not deny it. Instead of locating signs of this trespass on television or in the mall, which are typical instances used for the criticism of consumerist culture, one needs to spare a glance for what seems to lie at the opposite end of the line. Instead of regurgitating what we as part of this resistance have swallowed from books and essays, we must try something different; we have been walking on feet for too long, it is time to walk on our hands (as some like Slavoj Žižek have tried to do). The observer needs to observe and understand how resistance to consumerism changes into consumerism of resistance—like in all times one must not underestimate the stubbornness of capital, a system that has been able to survive for decades apparently in a moribund state surely has great capacity to integrate all resistance into its folds.

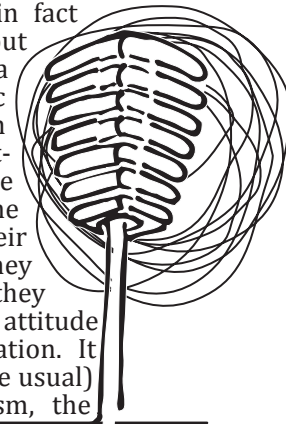
The following paragraph is a somewhat passionate report a propos the recent protests that followed an

incident of sexual molestation of girls from Delhi University, published in a hypothetical daily.

'A Sunday morning saw the future law keepers of the country participate in a private pogrom. A group of men who had come to that area to attend a police examination decided that they deserved to celebrate the end of exam by molesting a few hundred girls. Such 'celebrations' made the students angry and their souls rose against such injustice. The result was discerned in the series of protests in and around the university. A memorandum was brought that asked for the exam to be annulled. Various other demands were also on the list. Delegates visited the vice-chancellor, the commissioner of police, the NCW, the Home Ministry and even Arjun Singh. What went wrong then? If such was the anger in their hearts then why did it stop? And what came out of it? At least we tried—somebody replies; our hearts can be easier.'

It would be stupid to explain the short-lived-ness of this agitation purely with reference to conditions specific to it. So before going into a discussion of those specificities I will try to locate the failure of this movement into what has become a tradition of

failed protests—the easy acceptance of the failure of agitations that seem astonishingly effervescent to begin with is not uncommon these days. Did the massive anti-war demonstrations in New York and London stop the war in Iraq? An acquaintance of mine who returned from the US recently had me understand that many protests in the US take place on Sundays for matters of convenience. It is strange because these demonstrations supposedly signify a motion against the establishment and yet clearly the principal interests of both the establishment and resistance coincide—workdays and workday traffic cannot be interrupted. In this light the demonstrations were not failures at all, in fact both sides came out of it satisfied—it is a "strange symbiotic relationship between power and resistance" [Žižek], to use Žižek's words. "The protestors saved their beautiful souls"—they made it clear that they did not accept such attitude from the administration. It is a perverse (and the usual) form of consumerism, the





commodity bought and consumed is “peace of mind” and the cost is a few days out in the sun. Such battles are fought not to change the world, but achieve a sense of satisfaction that I have done my part—and now that my conscience is at ease the world can go to hell. Every advertisement on television tells me that I am not a perfect person unless I consume that product; similarly “resistance” becomes a product advertised in politically correct classrooms.

In the last analysis the interests of the agitators and the administration were the same. During the IP College protests this fact came out in the open most blatantly when on one of the days of demonstrations the students from IP College became rather disconcerted on hearing a rumour that the college would be sealed if the protest continued. It might have been due to the highly institutionalised setup of that college that kept the students in a convent like state of innocent ignorance that they were unable to see through the joke. They were unable to realise that the fight was not between the college and the university; it was hard for them to perceive that the smaller as well as the larger entity were seats of the same central power that the students needed to fight. But more importantly, it became clear that the prospect of really shaking things up had never occurred to them.

At no point are such protests directed at the base of power; rather the people in power are accused of betraying their own professed principles. The protests in this case were directed against the “unsympathetic attitude of our vice-chancellor and our police”; as if the entire episode was an aberration and not the rule. A strange but expected conjecture entirely in observance of the customary practice of complaining about the ever-increasing number of “injustices” and not questioning the status quo. The “solution” that was proposed by the students—nullification of the exam—was more a form of appeasement than anything else. What if this demand had been met? Would that have led anywhere? It is a strange situation—if a movement like this fails in achieving the goals it sets then it gets buried, since all that could have been done is done and nothing came out of it. In future agitations of the

sort, those who participated this time would opt out since they know that it would not work. If the demands are by any chance met, even then it gets buried. Mission accomplished. Either way the eventual result had to be the same, so in a fashion logical enough, the easier way was taken. It cannot be denied that each battle has its particular aims and large distant goals alone cannot keep things going, but the strange part is that since this battle was fought only to wear the armour and get a photo clicked, warriors returned home after the horn was sounded. Because of the lack of a larger anti-establishment perspective the demands became ends-in-themselves, incidental to the desire of putting up a show and effectively inconsequential to the agitators; the administration knew that they did not need to satisfy the former. The demands need not be met for in the act of putting forth demands the demanders had been satisfied.

That under all circumstances we stay a part of this system remains the single most important idea that governs our actions. It defines our interactions with the system, whether the interactions are friendly or antagonistic. What we observed above was that even those interactions, which are apparently antagonistic, are often undercut by “faithfulness” to the system. However the dialectical contrary of this understanding, which is that even when our interactions are on surface friendly, underlying it is a deep antagonism, escapes us. I will come to the nature of this antagonism at the end of the essay. Meanwhile I will move on to an analysis of the specificities of the protest that made it so short-lived.

A Digression and a Return

Jean-Paul Sartre differentiates between two modes of existence for an individual as a part of society. In one case persons perform roles that can be describe as being those of “we-subjects” while the in other case they can be described as “we-objects”. The role of persons as “we-subjects” corresponds to a way of associating with other people that Sartre calls “seriality”. Sartre uses the concept of seriality to describe circumstances in which a person’s relation to others is limited to a uniformity of behaviour and isolation otherwise [Jameson 238]. Each

person models her/his mode of being after what s/he thinks is the mode of being of the Other; or individuals inhabiting society at large, but any real association with them is lacking as the others don’t really exist, except as a “vast optical illusion, a kind of collective hallucination projected out of individual solitude onto an imaginary being thought of as” public opinion” or simply “they”” [Jameson 239]—such a relation has no real meaning for individuals. For instance when one is in a theatre one feels a part of some sort of community (of viewers); however this feeling of community has no consequence for anyone, self or the other. The situation of those involved in the protest that is being analysed remained by and large a serial situation—being part of the demonstrations had no real consequence for an overwhelming majority of the people that included most of those who stood at the forefront. The aspect of conscience easing is included in this concept; for in this case too the person in question enters the demonstration to fulfil what s/he thinks is the duty of every responsible person—an idea that is defined once again by the clause of public-opinion. Here too then genuine association with others that is required for continued participation is lacking.

The second mode of existence, that as “we-objects” depends upon the formation of genuine groups to get over the helplessness of a serial situation. Such a group is formed only when “I feel myself become an object along with someone else under the look of such a “third” that I experience my being as a “we-object”; for then, in our mutual interdependency, in our shame and rage, our beings are somehow mingled in the yes of the onlooker, for whom we are somehow “the same”...” [Jameson]. How a group maintains its authentic existence (an existence of this mode i.e.) is not our concern here—but it comes into existence against some common enemy and is defined by the vision of the Other. On this occasion the common opponent eludes all concrete formulations and the concept stays limited to a faceless crowd. If this protest had been connected to a larger anti-establishment perspective it would have been easier to sustain, and the demands might have been formulated in a more fruitful



manner. It is not strange to find that it was because of a few individuals who formed such a group that held such an anti-establishment that the movement survived for whatever length of time it survived.

The larger question at stake in this entire episode was that of sexual harassment and gender and the shared identity that had to be interpreted in a manner to allow for the construction of an authentic group – that of students. This article is an attempt at analysing this protest and the reason behind its short-lived-ness. So the larger question of gender would be a pointless digression; it might also prove a question too large to cope with in an essay like this. When I call it a digression I refer to the fact that in this essay my attempt is to analyse the construction of authentic student groups. The fight against sexual harassment can also allow for the construction of such groups. Further on I will attempt to locate the identity of being anti-sexual harassment fighters in the scheme of things, but I feel the need to warn the reader that this attempt might seem half-hearted owing to its contingency as far as this article is concerned.

For now however this leaves us with the identity of being students. Many locate this identity in a vague notion of a shared journey through the realm of knowledge. Another popular perspective would place the experience of being students in the set of consumer experiences that constitutes modern existence; education being the commodity consumed. Both these notions and most others still remain stuck in definitions of persons as “we-subjects” and a genuine group identity (defined in opposition to something) is denied. I shall proceed to propose one possible definition of a student that could allow for the formation for a genuine group (this would take us to the idea that was left undeveloped at the end of the first section).

We as students are workers-in-making. This statement needs to be qualified for the understanding of who is a “worker” might be different for the reader and the writer of this article. “Worker” here refers to every person whose participation in production is as a wage earner. A worker is a person who owns no “means-of-production” and depends upon his “labour power”

to earn his livelihood; in this sense a worker could be a factory “hand” earning a few hundreds a week or a CEO earning in millions or for that matter a college professor earning a few thousand. If this is the definition of a worker most students are workers-in-making. This agreed upon, it is not hard to see that the basis of an authentic student identity that will allow for the formation of genuine groups, genuine students’ organisations that is, will have to depend upon an understanding of the fact that our current relationship with the system remains one defined by class struggle; the aspect of our existence in the eye of the system that we oppose will be our existence as workers-to-be.

Another digression would allow us to look at the role of groups formed against sexual harassment or for that matter all sexuality/gender related questions. Duncan Foley says somewhere that there is never a “democracy of determinants”. In a capitalist society the system of class and the process of class struggle are the determinants that sit on top of the hierarchy of determinants. All other determinants (or structures of exploitation—for all societies till now have structured themselves so as to base themselves on exploitation) form the guard that surrounds this determinant. Race, gender, and caste—all of these are systems that capitalism uses to run its show. However it is important to note that capitalism does not depend upon these structures to reproduce itself. As a result whenever a stage is reached where these structures become hindrances to capitalism, they are questioned—which is not to say that feminist struggles are an offshoot of this tendency, but merely to suggest that the development of capitalism in its industrialized form facilitated, or made it relatively (when compared to earlier modes of production) easier for these struggles to be waged with great success.

All movements and all groups need a degree of self-reflexivity to maintain their revolutionary potential. At this point in history feminist movements need to understand the manner in which capitalism has been able to bottle the revolutionary potential of feminism in revolutionary moments that are past. To free this potential of

the chains it has been bound by the fight against patriarchy and harassment made possible by the system of patriarchy needs to be combined with struggle against capitalism. If the power equation in society is decided on the ownership of means of production then the social location of the proletariat provides the proletarian identity a revolutionary potential that is unique among all identities. Our fight against sexual harassment and gender discrimination will become all the more potent if combined with our struggles as workers-to-be and subsequently workers.

In all circumstances a student, consciously or unconsciously understands this relation in whom s/he is bound to the system, what is lacking is the clause of class-consciousness that would make the connection between career and exploitation plain. In the above case, as in most cases this connection is not perceived and the result is submissiveness that exists under the facade of resistance. If and only if this submission is transformed into struggle, would any agitation succeed for the success of all agitations would lie in the manner in which they fit into the battle against the system. Until a vision of this larger battle informs our actions our attempts would be directed towards reform, and the discourse of reform is pointless in a system that cannot exist without inequity. The pointlessness of the demand of increasing police security in the campus, when the people who committed the crime were aspiring policemen is a remarkable instance of the uselessness of reform unconnected from a larger logic of struggle. A system that is defined on the leitmotif of profit cannot be reformed into being a “considerate” system—it can of course sell “consideration” in the market.

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