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Introduction

There is no human activity from which every form of intellectual participation can be excluded: homo faber cannot be separated from homo sapiens. Each man carries on some form of intellectual activity, that is, he is a philosopher, an artist, a man of taste, he participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought.¹

Antonio Gramsci (1971: 9)

Pakistan is one of the most written about, yet least understood countries in the world. It is often reduced to a series of categories that obfuscate more than they illuminate. Both in journalistic and scholarly accounts, the imperative of comprehending complex political, economic and cultural dynamics is thwarted by the predominance of monolithic narrative tropes such as ‘Islamic’ and ‘terrorism’.

The events of 9/11 and subsequent developments explain much of the security-oriented literature that has proliferated in recent years. This recent trend aside, most scholarly works on Pakistan’s state and society have never strayed very far from descriptive macro-level accounts which detail, in chronological fashion, the continuities and changes associated with different political regimes.

These mainstream accounts are premised, overtly or otherwise, on static readings of state and society; the former often depicted as an island of modernity struggling to impose itself on a society whose cultural moorings are incompatible with the imperatives of socio-economic change and progressive politics.²

In fact, the relationship between state and society is far more complex than most academic treatments of Pakistan have generally acknowledged. Only by constructing a thoroughly historicized narrative in which the interplay between myriad economic, political and cultural moments is clearly enunciated can one make sense of the contemporary social order in Pakistan.

In contravention to both ‘security studies’ and mainstream political histories, a grounded brand of scholarship has emerged in recent years featuring both substantial empirical insights about state and society and novel theoretical approaches. This book is a modest attempt to add to this growing archive. In it, I chart how a particular conception of navigating the everyday – what I call the politics of common sense – has become hegemonic across the length and breadth of Pakistan’s society over the past three decades.

In sum, I present a historical materialist analysis of the patronage-based structure of power in Pakistan, and particularly how it has changed since the late 1960s. In constructing this narrative, I employ the theoretical architecture of the revolutionary Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci, and also engage with classical and contemporary literature on post-colonial state and society.

The politics of common sense is essentially a strategy of accommodation, whereby the lower orders of society accede to a patronage-dominated political field. I argue this phase of accommodation can be traced back to the dictatorship of General Zia ul Haq (1977–88), during which the structure of power was rehabilitated following a decade of intense political upheaval (1967–77) when an anti-systemic politics of the left raged across the country.

The emergence of the politics of common sense in Pakistan in many ways mirrors global trends. The era of post-WWII radicalism, which arguably culminated in the early 1970s, was followed by what has been called the ‘restoration of class power’ in many parts of the world.³ This restoration was in part due to the liberal deployment of coercive force by states, propertied classes and imperialist powers. In Pakistan’s case at least the decline of an anti-systemic, left politics can also be attributed to concrete and sophisticated strategies of cooptation adopted by the Zia regime in accordance with rapidly changing economic and cultural conditions.

These strategies of consent-production have been consolidated in the subsequent three decades, while structural change has proceeded apace. The ‘success’ of the patronage machine that was fashioned during the Zia period is most evident in the agency of the subordinate classes and other exploited segments of Pakistan’s society, but its significance is precisely in the fact that it is operative across the class (and ethnic) divide, and hence, hegemonic.

Accordingly, while I develop analytical insights about the political alignments of the subordinate classes, the book is also about dominant social forces, including the civil bureaucracy, landlords, industrialists and the military. These institutions and classes have been major players in Pakistan’s political economy since the inception of the state (and often long before).

Other contenders for power have emerged in the period under study, namely the urbanized, commercial classes and religio-political forces. Aside from detailing their sociological evolution and relationships to one another, I show how this combination of the old guard and *nouveau riche* has – or not, as the case may be – secured consent from the subordinate classes.

In outlining this evolution of the political field, I demonstrate not only how class and social structures have changed over time, but also how the composition and institutional logic of the Pakistan state have undergone transformation. I argue, à la Gramsci, that the structure of power is a dialectical unity whereby state and society constitute two mutually reinforcing sides of the same coin.

The narrative is ordered by three crucial junctures which have shaped the contemporary social order. First, there is the colonial encounter. I will revisit a familiar theme – the colonial state's reification of parochial identities and dynamic responses of working people – so as to outline how a particular logic of practice evolved in society during British rule. This patronage-based political order was, I think, the most lasting of colonial legacies.

Second, I will highlight the widespread social changes and politicization that took place across the length and breadth of Pakistan's society in the 1960s which greatly impacted the social and political landscape for at least a decade afterwards. On the one hand, this great wave of radical politics was global in scope, ranging from the African decolonization movements and national liberation struggles in East Asia to popular upheavals in the capitalist west and revolutionary experiments in Latin America. On the other hand, there were major socio-economic and ideational changes taking place within Pakistan's society which explain the dramatic emergence of an indigenous radical politics of the left.

Third, I will discuss the period starting with the military coup of 1977 which featured the constitution of a regenerated ruling clique and the beginnings of a 'politics of common sense' that, though periodically challenged, has prevailed through to the present conjuncture.

The story that I will tell in the following pages about an exclusionary political-economic order inherited from colonialism, emergent challenges to this order from a cross-section of the popular classes, and finally the reassertion of a hegemonic politics of patronage from the late 1970s onwards, resonates to a degree with the narrative presented by Saadia Toor about culture and politics in Pakistan during the Cold War.⁴ This book augments Toor's argument about the demonization of leftist political forces by emphasizing how the state and

propertied classes devised new strategies of political control in the midst of rapid social change.

While I cannot claim that my observations are representative beyond Pakistan – it is a challenge to even represent the diversity of the Pakistan experience – I will refer occasionally to scholarship about other parts of the post-colonial world, and especially neighbouring India. This reflects the many shared continuities (and breaks) in post-colonial countries with the period of European rule, and particularly the structures of economic and political power inherited from colonialism. India offers the most obvious comparative insights for the Pakistani case, notwithstanding the considerably different trajectories of both countries since partition.

Comparative studies on the two successor states of the British Raj have long tried to explain why India became a relatively stable democracy while Pakistan repeatedly experienced authoritarian rule, a concern that continues to animate scholars to this day.⁵ However, academic works on Indian politics, culture and economy have diversified greatly, both theoretically and empirically. The bird's-eye macro-level analyses of the state that preoccupied a previous generation have given way too much more nuanced and localized studies of how the state operates at an everyday level. There has also developed a substantial literature on informality and emergent classes in an increasingly urbanized society. All in all, the scope and breadth of social science and humanities literature on India is impressive.⁶

Such work is relatively sparse in Pakistan, and throughout the manuscript I draw upon what has come to the fore in recent times. I also refer to more dated literature, and particularly the work of Hamza Alavi on the state and political economy. This serves both as a point of departure and as a call to transcend increasingly obsolete frameworks and learn from developments in scholarship on state and society across other parts of the post-colonial world.

In line with such developments, I present here a historical analysis of Pakistan's political economy that is not focused exclusively on the machinations of 'big men', which has been a preoccupation of both mainstream approaches and even non-traditional ones such as that proffered by Alavi. My particular contribution is to embed a political economy framework for understanding Pakistan within its specific historical context.⁷

I must confess, however, that there is one major aspect of the story that remains untold in this book. Pakistan is amongst the most patriarchal societies in the world today, and the public sphere is exceedingly male-dominated.

I cannot therefore venture that what I call the politics of common sense accurately depicts the everyday reality of the mass of Pakistan's women. While, in later chapters, I provide details of popular political strategies which have been adopted by both men and women, mine is not a gendered analysis of the structure of power in Pakistan, a shortcoming that desperately needs to be addressed.

I should also note at the outset that Pakistan's state and society have been greatly influenced by imperialist powers, both during and after the Cold War. I do not want to understate the significance of this international dimension, and the dialectic between global/regional geo-politics and domestic developments.⁸ However, I have chosen not to engage in a detailed analysis of what Alavi called the 'metropolitan bourgeoisie' and its sway over state and society, partly due to constraints of time and space, and also because I want to call attention to historically under-specified areas in the literature.

My attempt to chart the underlying logic of Pakistan's political order needs to be augmented in many other ways, but given the paucity of innovative theoretical approaches to understanding Pakistan's state and society in the literature, I am hopeful that this particular Gramsci-inspired effort will open up new avenues for future research.

Gramscian Building Blocks

As is now common knowledge, Gramsci offered a corrective to what was an emaciated understanding of popular culture in materialist canon. He argued that matters of consciousness and political action had to be grounded in an understanding of existing social forms rather than assuming that the trajectory of culture and politics would conform to scientifically calculable 'laws of development'. Gramsci was more concerned than most in the materialist tradition with understanding the terrain of social life on which class struggle actually played out. In other words, his focus was on the political and cultural fields and the manner in which objective class interests were culturally perceived and subjectively articulated.

For Gramsci, 'common sense' means the incoherent set of generally held assumptions and beliefs common to any given society'.⁹ The ruling class in a society seeks to mould common sense – the taken-for-granted way of doing things – such that those they govern acquiesce to the rules of the existing social order. This does not mean that the latter are deluded about the actions

of those who dominate them. In other words, they are not victims of ‘false consciousness’, but, for myriad reasons, the unequal and unjust system of domination is resilient and common sense requires subordinates to negotiate their way through the system rather than defy it:

...Subalterns come to see the hierarchies of the world they inhabit as inevitable and inescapable. They may not like their subordination, but they cannot see how things could possibly be other than as they are.¹⁰

With the rise to prominence of post-structuralist schools of thought over the past few decades, ‘recovering’ the voice of the subaltern has become an almost ontological quest. While this book is not concerned with the post-modern turn *per se*, I want to assert at the outset that common sense cannot be understood exclusively as a system of signs, representation or cultural symbols. It is a worldview that is embedded in the historically constituted structures of capitalist modernity, and a politics which ebbs and flows in accordance with structural shifts. Through the course of the book I will repeatedly call attention to two foundational structures; the post-colonial state and capitalist exchange and productive relations. Only by uncovering these structural underpinnings of everyday life can one develop an understanding of contemporary social and political practice.

Intuition suggests that common sense today was not necessarily common sense yesterday, and will not necessarily be common sense tomorrow. Quite simply, Gramsci was restating what all of us already know. More often than not, however, our efforts to theorize the real world ignore – at our peril – the most obvious of details. And it is the obviousness of our lived culture – and the embeddedness of political action within it – that Gramsci sought to foreground.

In recent times, the much celebrated ‘cultural turn’ in social theory has been extended to the study of post-colonial states.¹¹ At a fundamental level this is a welcome development given that most received theories about the state have been plagued by implicit ethnocentric bias or, as Sudipta Kaviraj puts it, the fact that the established conceptual apparatus is burdened with the baggage of specific historical embeddedness.¹² The recognition that there is a need to make both the terms we use and the ideas that inform them more contextually relevant (without digressing into relativism or abandoning praxis) is welcome.

Anthropologists have of course been striving for more than a century to understand the inner workings of (post) colonial societies. The colonial

obsession for identifying exactly what was different about the ‘natives’ (for the purposes of administering them better) has given way to a sometimes torturous struggle to establish exactly how to conceptualize ‘culture’ and where to locate it on the larger map of post-colonial societies. For a significant part of the post-war period scholars of ‘culture’ were unable to recognize that ‘politics’ in the post-colony was not ‘acultural’ and needed to be conceptualized in dynamic rather than teleological ways. Post-structuralist conceptions of ‘power’ may have opened up remarkable new intellectual trajectories, but have not necessarily succeeded in theorizing culture, politics and economics in holistic terms.¹³

Notwithstanding the significance of the post-modern turn – inasmuch as this refers to the privileging of the everyday and discursive realms – there is a marked tendency within much contemporary scholarship to abstract from the real political and economic structures that shape working people’s lives. In my understanding it is important to be cognizant of the specificity of all social life – a simple fact often overlooked by general, or structuralist, perspectives – as well as to supra-local political economy realities.¹⁴

To draw upon and then go beyond the insights that have been garnered by cultural theorists – that is, to understand the manner in which culture, politics and economics come together to explain the structures that exist and the agents that emerge from, reproduce, and sometimes challenge these structures – it is necessary to take seriously the study of history. I believe that satisfactory conceptualizations of social and political forms in the post-colony have remained elusive precisely because the tendency has been towards ahistorical analyses, in that culture has either been posited as unchanging and fixed, or completely invented.

A handful of contemporary scholars writing about Pakistan have made efforts to break the mould by bringing to the fore previously under-studied aspects of political economy, cultural history and statecraft. Matthew Hull’s work on Islamabad’s Capital Development Authority (CDA) highlights how the everyday state operates, and how it is thwarted by the wilful actions of the ordinary people who learn how to manipulate its formal modalities.¹⁵ Naveeda Khan’s work, based in Lahore, links sectarian contestations over ‘proper’ Islamic practice with the politics of mosque-building, again challenging monolithic conceptions of the conduct of both the state and ordinary Pakistanis.¹⁶ Outside of major urban areas, Nosheen Ali has developed a body of work on the so-called Northern Areas,¹⁷ focusing on cultural production – and particularly poetry – as a form of nationalist imagining.¹⁸ I

will invoke other such scholarship in due course to underline the possibilities of linking macro political economy concerns with more grounded questions of political subjectivity, in the process transgressing disciplinary boundaries and ‘established’ theoretical orthodoxies.

In building my case for a holistic understanding of the political, economic and cultural moments, I start with a brief history of the colonial period. While this book is primarily about processes of social change and evolving political forms since the 1970s, it is only possible to understand what has changed by first outlining the structural context inherited from colonialism.

The Colonial Rhythm

Kaviraj emphasizes that in pre-British India, the state was an ‘alien’ entity that did not command a presence beyond a symbolic or grand aura. In fact, it ‘was traditionally seen as a necessarily limited and distinctly unpleasant part of the basic furniture of society’.¹⁹ This suggests that the political field of most Indians was effectively autonomous of the state itself. In this respect alone, the colonial impact utterly changed the conception of the public and political and therefore social and political practice.

In the pre-British period, politics was ‘self-contained’ in that relationships of power were largely confined within the ‘community’ and only to a limited extent, between communities.²⁰ The breadth of the political field was dramatically enhanced under British rule. For example, disputes over land or other forms of social property – including women – were frequently mediated by the state, whether the police, courts or the administrative apparatus more generally. Even in cases where ‘traditional’ dispute resolution mechanisms such as local *panchayats* represented the primary means of resolving conflicts, it was often the case that the state in one or more of its forms was also invoked.²¹

The advent of British rule was thus a watershed in social and political practice in the subcontinent, with the state’s enhanced interventions in social life. However, there was another major contributing factor to the dramatically increased complexity and scope of the political field: the logic of capital. As a direct corollary to the Indian social formation’s exposure to and insertion into a burgeoning imperial economy evolved a multitude of power relationships that extended far beyond the realm of politics that had existed until that point.

Quite simply, the logic of capital became constitutive of the dynamics of power soon after the consolidation of British rule. The roles of existing social players on the Indian socio-economic stage were altered immensely; for

instance, the increasing importance of usury in the Indian agrarian economy greatly enhanced the political and economic power of the *bania*.²² The *landlord* who was transformed into *landowner* by fiat also experienced changes in status and functions.

The importance of the state grew manifold in the emergent dispensation. The landlord was transformed into landowner *by the state*, and not through a long-run process of organic economic change.²³ In no uncertain terms, the state first introduced private property in the formal, legal sense into the Indian social formation, and then directly facilitated many processes of class formation of a peculiarly colonial variety.

Colonial administrators often remained at pains to understand why *landowners* continued to function more like *landlords*. For Indians, economic efficiency and profitability was less important than sustaining political dependents. The ‘meaning’ of land in colonial India, encapsulated in the notion of ‘land-to-rule’, as opposed to the notion of ‘land-to-own’, persisted well into the post-colonial period.²⁴

For the most part the colonial state acted in harmony with the larger imperial economy of which it was a part. Yet there remained throughout the colonial encounter a dialectical contradiction between ‘order’ and ‘change’, a feature of the post-colonial political order as well. At one level the British may have wanted to make the logic of capital dominant in the Indian social formation, but the imperative of stability – particularly after the Great Revolt in 1857 – sometimes overrode this principle. The colonial state directly facilitated the consolidation of a landed class endowed with formal property rights in Punjab and Sindh and instituted a legal framework through which land could be treated as private property in the classical, liberal guise. Yet, the same colonial state actively helped this landed class in circumventing the adverse effects of structural change through legislation such as the Punjab Alienation of Land Act 1901 and Sindh Encumbered Estates Act 1878, primarily because it feared for its own stability if its most prized allies were disenfranchised.²⁵

The fact that the state had to ensure the political compliance of willing intermediaries meant that in many cases the British were impeding the same processes of social change that facilitated the consolidation of capitalism in Britain.²⁶

In sum, the state and the logic of capital were both critical nodes of the ‘new’ political field. As a general rule, the state’s power to promote or impede any particular social process was much more tangible than the ‘invisible hand’ of capital, although it is often difficult to separate the operation of either. In any case, the evolving configuration of social power was produced by of a

unique combination of political-economic impulses deriving from the larger dynamics of a burgeoning capitalist world system and the governing impulses of the colonial state.

However, alongside the state's expanded reach and ability to foment social change, and even with the 'forcible integration of the segmentary productive regimes of rural India into an integrated economy', the internal logic of practice of Indian society was an autonomous factor in explaining the evolution of social forms and the nature of the political field.²⁷ The local unit of analysis in India, whether called the village or the community, featured established notions of common sense – most notably dyadic patron-client relations – which were conditioned by and conditioned the wider economic and political fields. The common sense of patron-client relations did not simply vanish following the establishment of British rule, but neither did it remain frozen in time.

I will show later in this chapter, and indeed the rest of the book, how common sense evolved over time. At this point I wish only to flag the need to pay constant attention to the conditioning role of the state and capital. Mapping the trajectory of what I call the politics of common sense is impossible without an appreciation of the dialectical relationship between accumulation of capital and accumulation of power, while recognizing that these processes of accumulation are embedded in particular cultural logics.

This analytical separation of three separate determinants of social power as it evolved beginning with the colonial period, i.e. India being inserted into the capitalist world economy; the substantially enhanced penetration of the state into social life; and political-cultural dynamics at the local level should not lend the impression that there is a simple determinism in any particular direction or that these are separate 'structures' as it were. Instead, evolving social forms and modes of politics in British India were, as they continued to be after the end of the Raj, subject to the structural constraints imposed by all three of these elements operating as a holistic and dialectical unity.²⁸

The Historical Bloc

The form that this structure of power took in the post-colonial epoch is best captured by the Gramscian concept of the 'historical bloc'²⁹ – while Gramsci employed the term in the *Prison Notebooks* to refer to the prospective counter-hegemonic critical mass that could overturn the established structure of power, I adopt a more general reading. A historical bloc is a specific constellation of forces that has established hegemonic control at a particular conjuncture. The