The Struggle for Hegemony in Pakistan

‘A major analysis of our world’s political crisis and a brilliant critique of the ideology of middle-class aspiration.’
—Professor Joel Wainwright, Ohio State University

‘Shows how an aspirational idea of the middle class reinforces the subordination of dispossessed labour, ethnic minorities in peripheral territories, terrorists and deviant dissenters. This wide-ranging book is sure to stimulate critical scholarship and organic intellectual activism both inside and outside South Asia.’
—Barbara Harriss-White, Emeritus Professor and Fellow, Wolfson College, University of Oxford

‘Akhtar powerfully channels the spirit of Gramsci and Fanon to critique neoliberal hegemony in Pakistan – and to diagnose the next great battlefield for the Afro-Asian Left: the values, aspirations, and solidarities of the digitised youth across core and periphery.’
—Majed Akhter, Senior Lecturer, Department of Geography, King’s College London

‘Drawing with insight on Gramsci, and located in the Global South, this accomplished book is an important contribution to the search for progressive, anti-colonial, and humanist revolutionary politics in Pakistan and beyond.’
—Professor John Chalcraft, London School of Economics and Political Science

‘What is the “political” in Pakistan, and how does this help update our theories on democratic backsliding and contemporary authoritarianism? Why do we want to think of the middle class at the centre of it all again? Read this book to find out.’
—Shandana Mohmand, Research Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex
The Struggle for Hegemony in Pakistan

Fear, Desire and Revolutionary Horizons

Aasim Sajjad Akhtar
## Contents

*Preface and acknowledgements*  
vi

Introduction: Middle-class hegemonies in theory and history  
1  The Integral State  
2  Fear and desire  
3  The digital lifeworld  
4  The classless subject  

**Epilogue**  
132

**Notes**  
138

**Index**  
173
Introduction

Middle-class hegemonies in theory and history

The emergence of the novel coronavirus and subsequent shutdown of organised economic life in 2020 was described as a ‘once-in-a-generation’ emergency. In truth, the COVID-19 pandemic simply magnified the scale of the interlocking political, economic, cultural and environmental crises that afflict humankind and nature. Popular movements like Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring triggered by the global financial crash of 2006–2008 gestured towards an alternative hegemony to contest the rule of capital. A decade on, the pandemic served as a sober reminder of the untrammelled power of military–industrial–media establishments and political demagogues around the world, exacerbating the contradictions of contemporary capitalism without care of consequence.

Donald Trump’s defeat in the US presidential election of November 2020 was hailed by mainstream pundits as a respite for the institutions of liberal democracy in both western countries and the rest of the world. That Trump’s successor in the White House, Joe Biden, epitomised the return to ‘normalcy’ betrays the fact that it was, in fact, the neoliberal normal that produced ‘Trump-Bannonism’ in the first place.¹

In August 2021, the Biden administration handed Afghanistan back to the Taliban after 20 years of imperialist bloodletting. The shambolic scenes in Kabul and the rest of the country at the conclusion of the longest war in US history brought into focus how a declining American Empire continues to champion violence and unbridled profiteering to sustain political-economic projects of domination around the globe.

Recall that only three decades ago proclamations of peace and prosperity for all humankind reverberated across the length and breadth of the planet. The epochal victory of the capitalist west
in the 20th century’s defining political drama, culminating in the spectacular collapse of the USSR in 1992, precipitated the establishment of a truly global regime of capital accumulation that approximated the imaginaries proffered by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* to a greater extent than at any other time since they penned their famous political call to arms some 150 years prior.

Within a few years of what establishment pundits incredibly termed ‘The End of History’, virtually all of the world’s territorially bounded nation-states had acceded to the emergent international system, the political-economic order which would become known as neoliberal globalisation. The fetters imposed on capital through the Cold War by organised labour and welfarism in the capitalist west, Third World nationalism in former European colonies, and actually existing socialism in the Soviet bloc were spectacularly and rapidly swept away by a combination of US-led ‘humanitarian’ military expeditions, coloured ‘revolutions’, off-shoring and outsourcing, regional free trade agreements, and structural adjustment policies championed by the international financial institutions (IFIs).

Capital’s liberation marked the crystallisation of a ‘network society’, in which ostensibly ubiquitous digital technology structured new modes of human life. Within a generation, what became known as the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) revolution had engendered entirely new experiences of time, space and selfhood alongside, accompanied by notions that all humankind shared membership of the global ‘village’.

Dizzying shifts in the global political economy were both the cause and consequence of an ideological offensive to reinscribe modernity at large. A history indelibly shaped by epic challenges to capitalism, colonialism and patriarchal social institutions across the globe was fantastically reduced to the ostensibly conjoined twins of ‘democratic’ liberalism and the ‘free’ market. A universal human ‘rationality’ to match the prophecies of early modern Europe’s bourgeois idealists was thus finally realised. Henceforth, *homo politicus* was to be the mirror of *homo economicus*, the ‘invisible’ hand of the self-correcting market and the rational subject of history flourishing together in a seamless march to neo-
For the first time, a hegemonic politics to match the universal logic of capital appeared uncontested on a world scale.

The universal claims of bourgeois ‘civilisation’ have a long genealogy in the non-western world. For more than 400 years, European colonisers across the globe ruled over territories inhabited by ‘backward’ peoples under the guise of improving and ultimately elevating them to the plane of cultural, economic and political modernity. The end of the Cold War sealed the long maturation of the hitherto primitive colonial subject into a ‘free’ individual engaging as the purported equal of former master and peer slave alike, in a truly global marketplace. Thirty years later, sloganeering about free markets and individuals alike rings hollow. The historic peripheries of the capitalist world-system are beset by more repression, violence, exploitation and dispossession than ever before.

In this book I elucidate the social-structural underpinnings of ‘the political’ in Pakistan at the current conjuncture, while making a modest addition to political theory in postcolonial South Asia and Sub Saharan Africa more generally. Capital’s crisis-ridden march to a universal throne reveals the theoretical and practical terrain upon which revolutionary political action must be devised and enacted in times to come. A grounded theory of politics for the regions home to most of the world’s population – formerly colonised South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa – is necessary for the promise of universal emancipation to be realised. As Ranabir Sammadar suggests, ‘[t]he postcolonial condition makes Marx once again relevant’.

If the idealised subject of capitalist modernity during the period of its consolidation in Europe was the bourgeoisie, then today this critical subject position in the non-western world is occupied by the so-called ‘new middle class’, depicted both as the motor of economic liberalisation and its primary beneficiary. This ‘middle-class’ subject has acquired an almost mythical status in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, not to mention China, despite the depredations that neoliberalism has wrought. In short, a hegemonic middle-class ideology shapes politics and popular culture in much of the world. The hegemonic order thrives on the acute fallouts generated by the ‘madness of economic reason’ in postcolonial conditions, including but not limited to imperial-
The spread of the novel coronavirus from China across the world in December 2019 briefly forced a reckoning with the brutalising realities of the global regime of capital accumulation, but the intellectual and political mainstream quickly moved on from nascent critique of the crisis-ridden system’s urgent discontents. The pandemic has brought to light many glaring facts about the historically imperialised zones of the capitalist world-system, including deepening class conflict, rapacious pillage of natural resources, and majoritarian violence against oppressed castes, genders, ethnic nations and religious communities. Yet, an ideology of middle-class aspiration remains hegemonic.

This despite the fact that pandemic-induced shocks to the global accumulation regime forced many of those often clumsily described as ‘middle class’ back down into virtual pauperism overnight. Insofar as non-western ‘emerging markets’ have been the motor force of neoliberal globalisation, the pandemic illustrated that even slight disruption of capital and labour flows throughout the world dramatically impact the very existence of the so-called ‘global middle class’.

Consider India: an estimated 230 million people fell into poverty in the year after the pandemic began. During intense and often brutally enforced lockdowns, countless Indian migrant workers were captured flooding out of metropolitan areas on foot, forced to walk thousands of kilometres to their ancestral villages. The circulation of such images online was a global event that hastened the rapid ascent of digitalised lifeworlds across the planet, a theme to which I will return throughout the course of the book. For the mythical ‘global middle class’ is at one and the same time produced by digitalisation and also its major protagonist.

In practice, digital spaces reflect profoundly uneven and exclusionary logics across different geographies and historical social formations of the world-system. At the height of the pandemic, these spaces nevertheless generated a visceral, collective experience of crisis far more pronounced than even a decade earlier when the political-economic fallouts triggered by the financial crash unfolded. The exponential growth of digital spaces in the months and years ahead – particularly in postcolonial countries
like Pakistan – will grant them even more importance in the struggle for hegemony.

WHY MIDDLE-CLASS ASPIRATION?

The interlocking crises that afflict humanity and nature are multi-scalar, from the planetary down to the molecular level. Yet critical scholarship on the left remains skewed towards the Euro-American heartlands of capitalism. This book draws attention to the challenge of forging an alternative hegemonic conception in the historically imperialised zones of the world-system.

Rather than uncritically deploying the term ‘new/global middle class’ – a concept that I find misleading on several accounts – I will instead refer variously to specific social groups, e.g. ‘state functionaries’, ‘urban consumers’, ‘contractors’, and the like. It is only at this level of analysis that concepts hold weight to describe grounded realities of social class. I will reserve use of ‘middle class’ strictly to describe an ideological category, which is one of fundamental importance for understanding our world. I take the aspiration to be middle class in the non-western world as a central object of analysis.

Paradoxically, this aspiration has become even more widespread in non-western countries during an interregnum (2006–) that coincides with the implosion of middle-class hegemony in western societies. Though real wages in the western world have been stagnating and inequality on the march for decades, the political-economic upheavals triggered by the financial crisis of 2006–2008 rendered the contradictory political logics of neoliberalism’s ‘extreme centre’ irreconcilable. The illusions of ‘progressive neoliberalism’ – namely a politics of recognition consistent with ‘middle-class’ majoritarianism – were hence decisively shattered.

The crisis of ‘the political’ that subsequently unfolded in western polities was embodied by self-proclaimed ‘anti-establishment’ politicians peddling racist, sexist and nationalist ideologies. The spectacle of Donald Trump and Boris Johnson being elected to power in the belly of the beast – alongside Le Pen, Salvini and many others that dramatically altered electoral calculus in the western political mainstream – was both cause and consequence.
of an ever more fetishistic and mediatised field of politics as financialisation and digitalisation proceeded apace.

[C]ommercialised, entertainment-oriented media from the communicative content of a broader social environment, in which phenomena such as Donald Trump flourish. There are many causes of right-wing authoritarianism, and a fragmented, colonized, commercialized, commodified, accelerated public sphere is … one of the influencing factors.\textsuperscript{12}

A rich wave of critical theory has attempted to make sense of the far-right coming to power in Europe and North America, and elucidate emergent subjectivities in the wake of collapsing neoliberal hegemony.\textsuperscript{13} More generally, theorising on matters as diverse as the ecological crisis and eco-socialism; automation and post-work society; ‘digital’ capitalism; and the commons/commoners have proliferated in the post-2008 period.\textsuperscript{14}

Yet, for all its depth, most theorisations of contemporary capitalism and potentialities of its transcendence neither veer into the historically imperialised zones of the world-system nor raise the important question of the relationship between the floundering of neoliberal hegemony and the decline of the US Empire. The individual persons of Bolsonaro, Modi, Duterte, Imran Khan and others have garnered some attention, but, in general, the social-structural roots of contemporary authoritarianism in post-colonial contexts have generated very limited \textit{theoretical} interest. Again, it is as if political and economic struggles in the postcolony have little purchase on the world.\textsuperscript{15}

In this book I take a contrary view, arguing that we cannot understand the global crisis without centring attention on non-western, postcolonial regions, particularly Asia and Africa. In short, ‘the so-called “global south” affords privileged insight into the workings of the world at large’ for three interrelated reasons.\textsuperscript{16}

First, the vast majority of the world’s people live in postcolonial countries, with exponentially growing urban populations in South Asia and Sub-Saharan African especially prominent.\textsuperscript{17} Second, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa are experiencing massive youth bulges; this segment of humanity is increasingly connected – both across physical space and via digital platforms
– to other regions and people within nation-state boundaries and beyond. This youthful demographic will greatly condition ‘the political’ in decades to come. Third, the worst fallouts of global warming/climate change, are, according to most scientific forecasts, expected to play out ‘mainly in East and South Asia, between Pakistan and North Korea’, where a significant majority of the world’s youthful population resides.¹⁸ The objective conditions facing this youthful mass in the next few decades can either precipitate more war/violence, inequality, authoritarianism and ecological destruction, or stimulate a new communist horizon.¹⁹

Asia was, of course, the critical frontier of neoliberalism in the aftermath of the Cold War, with Sub-Saharan Africa following close behind. India epitomised the neoliberal success story most of all, its celebrated middling strata confirming the ‘miracle’ of globalisation. Hundreds of millions of Indians, it has been widely and repeatedly asserted, were extricated from poverty to take their place in what has routinely been described as a ‘global middle class’. Pakistan too boasts one of the biggest and fastest-growing middle strata in the world, estimated at over one-third of a total population of 230 million.²⁰

A recent manuscript on the ubiquity of capitalism places upwardly mobile Indians, Chinese and other Asians at the centre of a global story:

The uncontested dominion of the capitalist mode of production has its counterpart in the similarly uncontested ideological view that moneymaking not only is respectable but is the most important objective in people’s lives, an incentive understood by people from all parts of the world. The fact that (to use Marxist terms) the infrastructure (the economic base) and superstructure (political and judicial institutions) are so well aligned in today’s world not only helps global capitalism maintain its dominion but also makes people’s objectives more compatible and their communication clearer and easier, since they all know what the other side is after. We live in a world where everybody follows the same rules and understands the same language of profit-making.²¹
Through the course of this book, I interrogate this claim, and particularly the ‘middle-class’ subject that is purportedly the embodiment of capitalist ideology; it is far from obvious that the middle class in much of the world is expanding seamlessly alongside a global ‘language of profit-making’, as the above account suggests. Whether non-western middling strata are performing, and will continue to perform, historical roles as the primary protagonist of global capitalism also merits interrogation.

This book does not present an authoritative account of the non-western middle class *per se*. I neither undertake a quantitative assessment of the middle class nor detail the various professional occupations/livelihood strategies of those who fall into the middle-class bracket. Detailed and exhaustive recent studies have already accomplished much in this regard. Also notable is a burgeoning literature on what can broadly be termed the cultural mores of the emergent middle classes.

I engage with the above literature (among others) to argue against the hegemonic conception in Pakistan, which, to reiterate, is founded upon *middle-class aspiration*. In deploying the term *aspiration*, I operate from the premise that the ‘middle class’ exists in ‘grey areas, ambiguously located in the social structure, inhabited by individuals whose trajectories are extremely scattered’. To be sure, ‘middle class’ is an extremely slippery category – the narrative of hundreds of millions rising from humble backgrounds to ‘middle-class’ status is powerful precisely because of its haziness.

Neoliberalism’s promise of depoliticised, ‘free’ markets and a fast-track to individual mobility is perpetually unhinged by the volatile political economy of neoliberalisation in practice. In short, while acceding to the logics of the market and deeply ingrained patronage networks can facilitate mobility ‘from below’, the nexus of capital and state ultimately generates immiseration for many middle-class aspirants, as spectacularly demonstrated during the pandemic.

**FEAR AND DESIRE**

The depiction of a rising middle strata in non-western countries with sociological roots in the toiling classes, oppressed castes and peripheral ethnic-linguistic nations – not to mention prominent
and vocal representation across genders and sexual preference —
certainly contains a kernel of truth. The palpability of a ‘better life’
represents, in fact, the very foundations of the hegemonic order.

However, the choreographed production of hegemonic middle-
class subjectivity in an increasingly digitalised field of
politics also betrays the fact that, as Gramsci asserts, hegemony
is always protected by the armour of coercion; the neoliberal
developmental regime has systematically intensified processes of
de-peasantisation, exploitation, dispossession and the creation of
‘surplus populations’, the (post) colonial state apparatus doubling
down on established traditions of suppressing dissent alongside.

A now vast literature on contemporary practices of accumula-
tion in non-metropolitan settings confirms what Rosa Luxemburg
noted more than a century ago: ‘[T]he accumulation of capital, seen
as an historical process, employs force as a permanent
weapon, not only at its genesis, but further on down to the present
day’. This resort to force betrays the grandiose proclamations
of endless prosperity that have defined the neoliberal age, thus
exposing a volatile rather than stable hegemonic order.

To borrow from the evocative title of a book written on the
contradictory totality of India’s experience with neoliberal glo-
balisation, the hegemonic appeal of being amongst ‘the beautiful’
is set against the spectre of becoming one of ‘the damned’. Even
Branko Milanovic, who describes the current conjuncture as the
‘uncontested dominion of the capitalist mode of production’,
acknowledges that the dominant ideology projects ‘the belief that
social mobility is more feasible than it really is’.

In recent years, categories like the ‘precariat’ have risen to
prominence in western contexts. Hundreds of millions of working
people in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa have suffered
various forms of exploitation, and precarity more generally, since
long before the neoliberal epoch. The coercive and exclusionary
nature of capitalist markets in many postcolonial societies, not to
mention war, dispossession, and other manifestations of struc-
tural violence, have always been, and remain, brutalising to no
end. Exceptional moments like the COVID-19 pandemic simply
confirm the systemic logics that keep the majority of working
people in South Asian and Sub-Saharan Africa, middle-class aspi-
rations notwithstanding, on a knife-edge.
I conceptualise middle-class hegemony in terms of a dialectic of fear and desire.* ‘Middle-class’ aspiration engenders the accumulation of wealth through savings, interest and the acquisition of property and rental income so as to partake in conspicuous consumption. The desire for elevated social status both at home and in the digitalised ‘global village’ is dialectically conjoined to an ‘other’ that threatens both the middle-class subject and the political community to which the former pledges allegiance.

For the most part, this ‘other’ is physically proximate and therefore an imminent threat: the toiling classes; the disloyal ethnic/racial/religious community; women and other oppressed genders; political dissidents; and so on. There is always some ‘other’ that symbolises one’s fears. The struggle ‘from below’ to secure some wealth and power entails not only competition with those of a similar aspiration, but rejection of those further down the status ladder, many of whose social identities render them intrinsically ‘different’ or ‘other’.

The politics of fear is symbiotically connected to state nationalism. Ideological state apparatuses and the mass media continuously invoke the nebulous enemy that threatens from without. The domestic ‘other’ and the foreign enemy together constitute an unholy nexus that must be subjected at the very least to the watchful surveilling eye of the state, and, quite often, its strong-arm.

Indeed, as man-made disasters proliferate due to climate change/global warming and/or outbreaks of mass pandemics like COVID-19, fear and panic associated with an ostensibly Hobbesian state of nature will likely be instrumentalised by nation-states, or even global governing regimes, to generate consent for what some left theorists have termed ‘Climate Leviathan’.31 In the post 9/11 world, the so-called ‘war on terror’ has served explicitly authoritarian ends; in chapters to come I discuss how the politics of fear has been generated in Pakistan by the militarised state apparatus under the pretext of subduing the seemingly perennial threat of ‘terrorism’.

**PAKISTAN AS A LABORATORY OF NEOLIBERALISM**

Forged in the crucible of colonialism, South Asian and African states have inherently authoritarian lineages. A militaristic con-

---

* I thank Hafeez Jamali for first getting me thinking about fear and desire.