

The First Newsletter (2018): Money and People.

Dear Friends,

Many of you have been on a mailing list that I have maintained over the course of the past decade. This mailing list began as a lark – as a way to send out my stories when they appeared and then to share other interesting things I have been reading. The list has grown very long and the mailing became fairly regular (coming to you each week).

That mailing list will no longer be my personal method of reaching out to you. This year I have taken a new job – to lead a global inter-movement research initiative called [**Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**](#). The initiative has come after many years of serious discussion about the lack of a movement-driven research project that has been able to stimulate intellectual debate about policy issues in the present and – importantly – to help construct a new vision for the future.

The Left has before us a serious challenge – people think we are good and sensitive people, but that we are utopian and fail to provide reasonable answers to practical problems. We have to overcome this penalty. We have to show that radical thinking is not merely utopian (no-place) but that it attempts to solve practical challenges given the constraints of property and power; it has to show, more importantly, how certain problems cannot be solved within these constraints and requires more ambitious transformations of the political and economic system. This kind of thinking – guided by political and social movements – will be at the heart of the institute.

Tricontinental is named in homage to the conference held in Havana, Cuba in 1966. That conference was held during the high point of the wars of national liberation being fought across the continents of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Obdurate colonial powers refused to acknowledge that the time of human freedom was at hand. In December 1960, the UN General Assembly had passed an important resolution on the granting of independence to colonial countries and peoples. The resolution, rarely read these days, contained a strong phrase – ‘the process of liberation is irresistible and irreversible’. This was the ethos of the Tricontinental meeting. It remains the ethos of the Organization of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa and Latin America (OSPAAAL), set up in the aftermath of the 1966 conference and at work today as it was then in Havana. It will be the ethos of the Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, which will be enlivened by the living revolutionary spirit of working people as we develop our research agenda.

For now, our institute has offices in Buenos Aires (Argentina), Johannesburg (South Africa), New Delhi (India), and Sao Paulo (Brazil). We are linked to political and social movements in these regions and will develop our empirical research and theories from the practical work undertaken by these movements and by the intellectuals who will work alongside them.

Our institute shall do two things: produce regular reading material and develop longer term research projects. The regular material will include,

1. **Newsletter** (weekly). The newsletter will – by and large – read very much like the newsletter you have been getting from me.
2. **Dossier** (monthly). The dossier will take up a problem or a crisis that we think has been poorly reported in the media. The first dossier, on the Crisis in the Korean Peninsula, is already on our website. You can download it as a PDF [here](#). It is a brief assessment of the flashpoint in North-East Asia. The dossier comes with photographs by the Brazilian photographer Rafael Stedile from his trip to North Korea last year. The next dossier, which will appear on March 15, will be on cities and water (we have two dossiers for our first month, but only one per month from April).
3. **Working Document** (biannually). The Working Document will be a long text that we hope will open up a discussion. The first document, which will be released on March 22, tries to rethink the main categories of our time such as globalisation, neoliberalism, neofascism and imperialism. It is written by me – in discussion with hundreds of militant intellectuals from various parts of the world. The next Working Document, which will appear in a few months, is on property and the digital world, as well as on the ideas of surveillance for commerce and security.

In the long term we will assemble research groups to conduct original empirical research on the nature of our contemporary world. We plan to create a network of intellectuals who have an interest both in the problems of our contemporary world and in the living revolutionary spirit of working people whose activity will be essential for the transformations necessary to produce a humane world.



The picture above is taken by **Gautam Prashad**. It is of a bus conductor in Kolkata (India), holding cash in the way that bus conductors do. The picture is called ‘Demonetisation’, a reference to the policy of the government of India to withdraw bank notes in favour of new notes – but really a policy designed to push ordinary people to deliver their money to banks. What do banks do with the small savings of hundreds of millions of people? Do they then give loans to these small holders, offering them the chance to some liquidity in order to expand their businesses or open new businesses? Not a chance. In fact, as the data show, bank lending to small holders has declined over the years. Instead, the commercial banks collect the savings of the working-class and the peasantry, accumulate them into capital and then lend this money out to the propertied elites and their corporations. This money – now capital – is used to hire the working-class and peasantry for low wages, which then produces more money for the propertied classes. Policies such as demonetisation are a direct class attack on the working-class and the peasantry. These are not neutral policies that are designed to ‘modernise’ the economy. They make the people more dependent on a system that impoverishes them.

Readings on Demonetisation:

1. Jayati Ghosh, C. P. Chandrasekhar, Prabhat Patnaik, *Demonetisation Decoded. A Critique of India’s Currency Experiment* (**Routledge India**, 2017).
2. *Note-Bandi. Demonetisation and India’s Elusive Chase for Black Money*, ed. R. Ramakumar (**Oxford University Press India**, 2017).

There are actual problems of the working-class and the peasantry, of the working-poor and the petty

bourgeoise, that are not addressed by governments who are guided more by the logic of the banks. There is the problem of grave unemployment and underemployment. There is also the problem of vulnerability. In the continents of Africa, Asia and Latin America, 40% of employed workers are in vulnerable forms of employment. This percentage is predicted to increase by 2019 (as has been estimated in the report by the International Labour Organization's World Employment and Social Outlookreport). Furthermore, 40% of the workers in the continents do not earn enough to keep them above the poverty line. Hunger is general, famine is a condition that has returned to areas wracked by war and conflict. The number of hungry people has increased from 777 million (2015) to 815 (2016) and is expected to be on the rise, according to a joint report by the World Food Programme and the Food and Agricultural Organization.

This joint report shows that hunger has increased disproportionately in areas of great war and hunger. In Yemen, for instance, 17 million people – 60% of the population – are on the edge of famine.

In Afghanistan, 7.6 million people – 26% of the population – are in dire need of food. The last estimate in July 2016 was that 4.3 million Afghans lived near starvation. After sixteen years of conflict – since the United States began its war in October 7, 2001 – tens of thousands of civilians have been killed in the country and hundreds of thousands of people have seen their lives descend into great fragility. At **Alternet**, this week, I have a report on the situation in Afghanistan. You can read it [here](#).

Readings on Afghanistan:

1. Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict. Annual Report 2017. United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and United Nations Human Rights (Kabul, Afghanistan, February 2018).
2. Louis Dupree, Afghanistan (Oxford, 2002).

Despite the experience in Afghanistan, the Trump team continues to believe that it should start a war against Iran. This is not only bad policy, but it is one that faces resistance from the Europeans. In the current issue of Frontline, I have a short report on Trump, Iran and the Europeans. You can read it [here](#).

Warmly,
Vijay.