

THE POLITICS OF COMMON SENSE

State, Society and Culture in Pakistan



Aasim Sajjad Akhtar

The Politics of Common Sense

This book offers a refreshingly different perspective on Pakistan – it documents the evolution of the country's structure of power over the past four decades, and in particular how the military dictatorship headed by General Zia ul Haq (1977–88) – whose rule has been almost exclusively associated with a narrow agenda of Islamisation – transformed the political field through a combination of coercion and consent-production.

The Zia regime – and its successors – have inculcated within society at large a 'common sense' privileging the cultivation of patronage ties and the concurrent demeaning of counter-hegemonic political practices which had threatened the structure of power in the decade before the military coup in 1977.

The book demonstrates how the politics of 'common sense' has been consolidated in the past three decades through the agency of emergent social forces such as traders and merchants, as well as the religio-political organisations that gained influence during the 1980s. While these constituencies thrived on the back of the dictatorship, their rise is also organic inasmuch as capital has penetrated into society at large, leading to (often unplanned) urbanisation and the proliferation of informal market networks, initially in the secondary and tertiary sectors of the agrarian economy but more and more extending to manufacturing and service sectors.

The rise of individuals and networks 'from below' accords the patronage-based system its resilience – the similarities in background and outlook between the mass of working people and the political and economic entrepreneurs that act as intermediaries in a vertically-organised structure of power blunt counter-hegemonic impulses, religion often serving as the final source of legitimacy in a world that revolves around the ruthless accumulation of power and capital.

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For Amar
Who truly is forever

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Preface

While the plethora of literature being produced on Pakistan these days might suggest otherwise, writing a book about the country's politics, history and culture is a task fraught with difficulty. Quite aside from the popular stereotypes and misleading scholarship that one feels compelled to debunk, there has been little grounded research on state and society over a period of three decades which renders dated even substantive literature serving as a point of departure. The constant recourse to material produced in a different time and place can impede our understanding of the present as much as it helps to enhance it.

The task becomes even more challenging in an environment often hostile to 'traditionalist' conceptual and empirical debates about class, state and the like. Embodying this challenge is the work of Antonio Gramsci. On the one hand, Gramsci's ideas have very much become part of the mainstream (western) academy. On the other hand, this mainstreaming equates to Gramsci being invoked exclusively as a scholar of the discursive realm, separated by academic fashion from the materialist concerns which underlay his own efforts.

This tendency can be explained in part by the changing mores of western societies. As reiterated in this book time and again, Pakistan has also changed dramatically over the past few decades, and efforts to theorize state and society are doomed to futility without recognition of this (ongoing) process of change. The work of note on Pakistan to have emerged in recent times is based on this recognition, as well as the imperative of being critical of Eurocentric conceptual apparatuses. Yet, I sometimes feel that for all the 'newness' of such approaches, the proneness to aping trends in the western academy remains intact.

In this book, I have tried to generate insights in the mould of new-age post-colonial scholars that have grown up being suspicious of conceptual approaches associated with their predecessors, whilst insisting that it is still worth thinking about what this earlier generation uncovered. In short, we must not throw the baby out with the bath water. In practice, this means a book that tries to cover a lot of bases in a 'grand theorizing' way which is increasingly uncommon. I

recognize the shortcomings of such an approach, but I take this risk consciously. Let me explain.

What draws me to Gramsci is that, instead of a cold-blooded analysis of social and political forms, his method facilitates a much more grounded understanding of why people – and by this, I mean all sorts of people, even if Gramsci's emphasis is typically on the lowest orders of society – are motivated to action (or not) by different political imaginaries. Gramsci's ideological commitments demand that his analysis is always imbued by the question of how political imaginaries sustaining the status quo can be displaced by transformative ones.

In what circumstances, Gramsci asks, is the 'national popular collective will' generated? In short, Gramsci never steers too far from the political imperative of developing a shared vision of an egalitarian and just society. This, for him, is a prerequisite to building such a society.

For almost two decades, I have interacted extensively with working people across ethnic, religious and gender backgrounds, governing elites, the well-to-do chattering classes, religious functionaries, small and medium entrepreneurs, and professional groups such as journalists and lawyers. Most of these interactions have been while being active with social movements and everyday political struggles. The knowledge of society, its mores and the everyday considerations informing political action that I have thus acquired have not been from a 'neutral' vantage point. My political commitments have impelled me to think deeply about how and why the potentialities for counter-hegemonic politics have declined so sharply over the past 2-3 decades.

To state the obvious, politics in Pakistan is very different today than a generation or so ago. Indeed, the meaning and practice of politics has changed irrevocably all over the world following the demise of 'actually existing socialism' (and attendant proclamations of the *End of History*). I waded directly into active politics while capitalist triumphalism was unchallenged at the end of the 1990s. The incredible exposure afforded to me by political activism allowed me to experience – feel, even – the texture of a political field that has changed greatly since the heyday of radicalism in the 1960s and 1970s.

I have thus attempted to put together a somewhat grand narrative of continuity and change that can improve our understanding of contemporary political economy, social mores and the daily play of power relations. The purpose, as noted already, is to sketch a picture of Pakistan that builds upon the seminal treatises of the past and incorporates new empirical realities, all while critically engaging with innovative approaches popular in the contemporary period.

In truth, it does not take much to improve upon the scant literature on Pakistan that raises interesting questions and derives meaningful insights.

Accordingly, the major contribution that this book makes is to systematically demonstrate how the urban commercial classes and the religious right have forced their way into a structure of power which is based on the passive consent of the subordinate classes. While there have been many impressionistic offerings about the religious right and the intermediate classes over the years, linking their emergence to wider developments is important if we are to avoid either under- or over-stating their significance.

By illustrating how these emergent social forces are the major protagonists of the everyday politics of patronage in Pakistan, I hope to direct attention away from overemphasized and 'culturalized' themes like religious militancy and 'rogue' state behaviour. As is the case when trying to build a 'grand narrative' of state and society on the whole, there is also hazard in bringing under emphasized aspects of social and political life to the fore at the expense of overemphasized ones. But this, again, is a risk worth taking.

In the final analysis, I hope this book, with other efforts, helps scholarship on Pakistan turn a bit of a corner. Over the past few years, I have been fortunate to witness first hand the emergence of a number of young critical scholars educated in Pakistan and abroad. Despite the deep and pervasive legacy of dictatorship and the 'global restoration of class power', I am hopeful that this number will grow to become a critical mass capable of challenging the hegemonic intellectual – and political – order that prevails in contemporary Pakistan.

Acknowledgments

It would not be possible for me to thank all the many people that have been sources of support and inspiration over the years that this book was written. As an accidental academic that took on a day job allowing me the most possible leeway to fulfil my political commitments, I have been privileged to know and learn from many comrades over the course of a political struggle that is almost two decades old. Quite aside from my being terrified at leaving out even one name that matters, it is also in many ways appropriate that I do not name anyone. The struggle for a more just and equal world has persisted for almost as long as human society itself, and many have come and gone along the way. The vast majority of those who have given of themselves for the cause of human emancipation have remained nameless. So it will be in the future too. To the many who have journeyed with me in the present – I do not need to name you for you to know how important you have been to me.

I thank my students at the Lahore University of Management Sciences, where I taught between 2003–09, and Quaid-i Azam University in Islamabad, where I still teach today. I have been lucky to come across so many vibrant young people who inspire tremendous hope for the future. I have always enjoyed the classroom and it has been a major site of learning for me over the years as I have tried to make sense of the social order in Pakistan. Some of my students have become friends as our paths have criss-crossed, and I am the richer for it.

It is difficult for me to separate intellectual from political influences, but it was as a doctoral student – which I was for a very brief time – that I first recognized what it means to think deeply about words and the ideas hidden within them. For that, I must thank Sudipta Kaviraj, who was able to relate to my political leanings, yet encourage me to experiment. Matthew Nelson was generous and extremely efficient, and the environment at SOAS suited my kind perfectly, not least of all in allowing me in and out very quickly.

I must thank the editors at Cambridge University Press, and particularly Lucy Rhymer and Qudsiya Ahmed for taking on what turned out to be a rather long project. The production team in Delhi was very patient and put in many

hours during the editing phase. Anonymous reviewers helped shape the book into the form that it has finally taken, while thanks are due to the handful of (again nameless) people who read portions and offered suggestions at different stages. I am particularly grateful for the extremely tedious logistical work done by Annam Azeem at my home institution of NIPS at QAU towards the bitter end when I was unwilling to even look at the manuscript.

I have joked with those close to me that this book was written by three different people, spread out over many years. The second of those people was based at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) on the National University of Singapore campus in the summer of 2014. I thank friends at ISAS for the opportunity they provided, and hope that I can eventually take them up on their repeated offers to return.

Being in Singapore allowed me to spend some time with my family, which justifiably protests that it has not seen enough of me over the years. Despite my choosing a radically different life trajectory to theirs, my parents, Ruby and Sajjad, have continued to do what parents do – offering support through thick and thin. My brothers Usman and Emaad, and Saba, Esa and Hasan – much love to you. My extended family saw more of me as a student than they see now, and while I have not been in touch with them as much as I could, they have been, and will always be, a big part of my world.

I do not count many intimate friends, and in recent years have only developed close ties with comrades in the struggle. I am lucky, however, to still be in touch with childhood friends from Singapore, and those who I made later as a teenager and (very) young adult in New Mexico and Chicago. AB and the bracas deserve special mention. I see most of them rarely now, but would like to believe that they all know how important they remain to me.

Finally, to the family that I became part of and is now my own. My grandparents – and *Nani* in particular – were the only family I had when I first moved back to Pakistan almost eighteen years ago. Soon afterwards, I became involved, perhaps inevitably through shared political commitments, with a kinship group (could not help it!) unlike anything I had ever come across before.

To Asha – thank you for sharing so much with me and helping me grow in the process; I am grateful that our journeys continue to be intertwined, not least of all because of our boy. Hajra has taught me dignity and grace, Pervez the value of remaining steadfast in one's commitments, and Neil's friendship has been the most unexpected, but a lovely surprise. And then there is Alia, who has taught me the most important lessons of all, helping me uncover all that being human and loving someone entails.

Last, but most definitely not least, there is Rumi. It is to you that I dedicate this book, the first version of which was written as you came into the world. I know that you will inherit even more difficult challenges than my generation has done and can only hope we bequeath you something to take forward. In the meantime, know that every passing day that I get to be your Abba, I am reminded that I am the luckiest person alive.



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