The Roy-Lenin Debate on Colonial Policy: a New Interpretation

JOHN P. HAITHCOX

BEFORE the opening of the Second World Congress of the Communist International (July 19-August 7, 1920) [which met on the first day in Petrograd but subsequently in Moscow], Lenin prepared a draft thesis on the national and colonial question. M. N. Roy, a young Bengali attending his first international Communist gathering, eagerly responded to Lenin's request for criticisms. As a result, Lenin invited him to write an alternative thesis. Both theses were modified as a result of discussions within the National and Colonial Commission, and both were subsequently adopted by the Congress. After his encounter with Lenin, Roy rose rapidly in the Comintern hierarchy. In 1922 he was elected a candidate member of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI), and a full voting member in 1924. He became a member of the Presidium in 1924. It was in the year 1926, however, that Roy attained the peak of his influence in the Comintern. In February of that year he was appointed to the editorial staff of the Communist International,¹ and in the following December he was elected to the Presidium and joined the Political Secretariat of the ECCI.² At the time of the Seventh Plenum of the ECCI (November 12–December 16, 1926), Roy became Secretary of the Chinese Commission, a post he held jointly with Petrov, and a member of the Agrarian Commission.³ The Plenum, convened for the purpose of considering the China problem, adopted a thesis on the question and Roy was sent to China as a representative of the Comintern to carry it out. Following the events in China in 1927, Roy's influence declined precipitately, though he was not formally expelled until December, 1929.

Three notable attempts have been made to assess the influence of M. N. Roy in the formulation of the colonial policy of the Comintern and the part he played in Soviet relations with the Chinese Communist Party. In both these respects, a number of discrepancies exist between North and Eudin's M. N. Roy's Mission to China on the

² "Election of the Presidium and the Secretariat of the ECCI," (Dec. 20, 1926), Ibid., p. 1646.
³ "VII Meeting of the Enlarged ECCI," Ibid., p. 1432.
one hand, and Whiting's *Soviet Policies in China 1917–1924* and Overstreet and Windmiller's *Communism in India* on the other.4

North's book, unlike the other two, focuses exclusively on Roy. As a consequence his assessment is based on a more careful analysis of the relevant documents, and is, incidentally, the most complimentary to Roy. However he leaves the reader with the impression, which is open to question, that Roy's China episode was the principal cause of his expulsion from the Comintern. Whiting adopts an opposite point of view. Because of an error of interpretation, he seriously underestimates the significance of Roy's contribution to the Comintern's colonial policy. The wide acceptance of the book as an authoritative work in its field serves to magnify the error. Overstreet and Windmiller, for example, repeating the error, come to a similar conclusion. Furthermore, speculating on the basis of highly inconclusive evidence, they strongly intimate that Roy's challenge to Lenin's colonial thesis was prompted by considerations of self-aggrandizement or by emotional reactions.

This paper does not attempt to support North's view that "Roy ranks with Lenin and Mao Tse-tung in the development of fundamental Communist policy for the underdeveloped . . . areas of the globe."5 That would require a careful appraisal of Roy's contribution to Comintern activities throughout the period 1920–1927, whereas the present work is confined largely to Roy's participation in the Second Comintern Congress. However, it is maintained that Roy played a highly significant role in the formulation of Comintern policy on the national and colonial question.

Though there were several points of disagreement between Lenin's and Roy's original draft theses on the national and colonial question, the main issue revolved around Lenin's assertion that Communist parties in all colonial areas must assist "bourgeois-democratic liberation" movements.6 In his draft theses and in discussions with the National and Colonial Commission, Roy opposed alliances with certain bourgeois-democratic movements—it was evident that he had the Indian National Congress in mind—which might desert to the imperialist camp in a revolutionary situation. According to official Russian newspaper summaries, Roy argued that in countries such as India, which are characterized by the absence of "reliable" nationalist movements, the Comintern, rather than supporting such movements, should "assist exclusively the institution and development of the communist movement . . ." and the indigenous Communist parties, or groups, avoiding entanglements with these potentially reactionary bourgeois-nationalist leaders, should "devote themselves exclusively to the organisation of the broad popular masses for the struggle for the class interests of the latter."7 It is evident that Roy was making a distinction between two different types of bourgeois-democratic nationalist movements—the precise nature of which will be explained below—with only one of which were alliances for the Communists practical.

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5 North and Eudin, p. 1.


As a result of Roy's criticisms, Lenin's theses on the national and colonial questions were modified; the Comintern was counseled to support "revolutionary movements of liberation" rather than "bourgeois-democratic liberation movements." 

In attempting to evaluate Roy's influence on the formulation of Lenin's colonial theses, Whiting concludes that the verbal substitution, noted above, did not alter the meaning of the sentence. In support, he quotes from Lenin's report to the Comintern Congress on the deliberations of the National and Colonial Commission that "there is not the slightest doubt that every national movement can be only a bourgeois-democratic movement, for the bulk of the population in backward countries are peasants, who represent bourgeois-capitalist relations." Whiting's conclusion is seconded by Overstreet and Windmiller. Citing the identical sentence, they write that "it was clear to Lenin's mind the change was more apparent than real."

But Whiting has failed to quote the entire passage, and this clearly indicates that the distinction which Roy was trying to make, evidently with a marked degree of success, was not between nationalist and bourgeois-democratic movements but between different types of bourgeois-democratic movements. After observing that all nationalist movements can only be bourgeois-democratic in nature, Lenin reported to the Congress: "it was argued that if we speak about the bourgeois-democratic movement all distinction between reformist and revolutionary movements will be obliterated; whereas in recent times this distinction has been fully and clearly revealed in the backward and colonial countries." Elaborating on this distinction, Lenin explained that "very often, even in the majority of cases perhaps, where the bourgeoisie of the oppressed countries does support the national movement, it simultaneously works in harmony with the imperialist bourgeoisie, i.e., it joins the latter in fighting again all revolutionary movements and revolutionary classes." The report concluded:

In the Commission this was proved irrefutably, and we came to the conclusion that the only correct thing was to take this distinction into consideration and nearly everywhere to substitute the term "nationalist-revolutionary" for the term "bourgeois-democratic." The meaning of this change is that we Communists should, and will, support bourgeois liberation movements in the colonial countries only when these movements are really revolutionary, when the representatives of the movements do not hinder us in training and organising the peasants and the broad masses of the exploited in a revolutionary spirit. . . . Reformist parties already exist in colonial countries. . . . The above mentioned distinction has now been drawn in all these theses, and I think that, thanks to this, our point of view has been formulated much more precisely.

It is important to note that the theses constituted Lenin's first attempt to formulate in a systematic manner his ideas on the problems of revolution in Asia. Obviously Lenin attributed to Roy a larger role in the shaping of his thoughts on this question than have some subsequent scholars.

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9 Whiting, pp. 51-52.
11 Overstreet and Windmiller, p. 29.
12 Lenin, pp. 240-241.
Whiting claims that in his final theses as adopted by the Second Comintern Congress, Roy had inserted "a single sentence . . . which was a virtual capitulation to Lenin's point of cooperation with the bourgeoisie." The sentence in question reads: "for the overthrow of foreign capitalism, which is the first step toward revolution in the colonies, the cooperation of the bourgeois-national revolutionary elements is useful." But Whiting has overlooked the important qualifying adjective "revolutionary." The statement is entirely consistent with Roy's distinction between nationalist movements of truly revolutionary potential and those of a merely reformist nature.

Much confusion has arisen among practicing Communists and disinterested scholars alike over the interpretation of these theses because of a failure to keep in mind the distinctions which were evolved at the Second Comintern Congress between different categories of the bourgeoisie—(a) feudal remnants and militarists, (b) compradores, (c) national bourgeoisie, and (d) petty-bourgeoisie. The first two groups were considered to be unambiguously reactionary, but it was believed that the petty-bourgeoisie, though fickle, could be induced to support the proletarian cause if given a firm lead. The question of the "reliability" of the national bourgeoisie was, however, a much more difficult matter. Lenin felt that they could be a progressive force, particularly in the early stages of the nationalist movement when anti-imperialist fervor was strong, but that continued alliance with them, once their revolutionary potential had been exhausted, would be self-defeating.

But how to determine the point at which this crucial stage has been reached—the point at which Communist tactics must abruptly change from "revolution from above" to "revolution from below"? Though never clearly stated, an analysis of the theses and debates of the Second Congress reveals that this would depend on three factors: the class structure, the stage of development of the nationalist movement, and the relative strength of the bourgeois and proletarian forces within the country in question.

In accordance with the first two considerations, continued support of a bourgeois-nationalist movement would be considered inadvisable should bourgeois sub-groups, deemed reactionary, capture its leadership or should the national bourgeoisie, sensing impending victory over the imperialists, begin to panic at the prospect of unleashing class antagonisms. The former situation occurred in China in 1926-1927, when feudal remnants and militarists gained predominant influence over the direction of the nationalist movement. Roy held out the latter prospect for India. In either case, the national movement would cease to be revolutionary and lapse into reformism. To illustrate the third factor, it would obviously be folly to continue to subordinate the interests of the proletariat to those of the bourgeoisie should the former become sufficiently strong to capture the leadership of the movement for itself.

Though Lenin and Roy agreed on the principle of supporting "revolutionary movements of liberation" or "bourgeois-national revolutionary elements," they differed markedly in their analysis of the Indian situation with respect to the class structure of the leadership of the Indian National Congress, and the relative strength of class forces within India.

13 Whiting, p. 55.
15 See North, p. 14.
The first disagreement centered on the role of Gandhi. Lenin believed that as a leader of a mass movement Gandhi was a revolutionary. Roy maintained that “as a religious and cultural revivalist, he was bound to be reactionary socially, however revolutionary he might appear politically,” and, in support, he cited Plekhanov’s similar judgment of Russian Populist and Socialist Revolutionary Movements, which Roy felt corresponded with Gandhiism in that, believing in the special genius of the Slavic race, they had denounced capitalism as a Western vice and championed a return to the village and the revival of the “Mirs.”

In his analysis of class forces, Roy greatly exaggerated both the numerical and ideological strength of the Indian proletariat. Estimating that India possessed thirty-seven million landless peasants and five million proletariat, he reported to the Congress that, although the nationalist movement rested for the most part on middle classes, the proletarian masses would shortly blaze their own revolutionary trail. In his supplementary theses, he claimed that “the real strength of the liberation movement is no longer confined to the narrow circle of bourgeois-democratic nationalists. In most of the colonies there already exist organised revolutionary parties.”

But Lenin did not share Roy’s optimism in the Indian proletariat. He lacked Marx’s faith in a “spontaneous” development of class-consciousness. He saw an essential difference between the proletariat and the socialist, i.e., the class-conscious proletariat. Two years earlier Lenin had written that “workers have to work in the factory as if on a chain gang and neither time nor possibility remain for them to become socialists.” “Spontaneity” represented merely nonrational opposition to society, which might temporarily coincide with the interests of a class, but would in the long run oppose it. Lenin considered the development of genuine class-consciousness dependent upon party organization, discipline, and indoctrination. At the time of the Second World Congress, there was no Communist Party in India but only a few scattered revolutionary groups. Lenin is reported to have pointed out to Roy that it would take some time before the Indian proletariat and peasantry could be mobilized.

Their differing assessment of the Indian situation resulted in contrasting attitudes toward nationalist movements. Lenin urged “temporary relations and even unions” with nationalist movements. Roy, with India undoubtedly in mind, spoke only in terms of “cooperation” with such movements. More distrustful of the national bourgeoisie than Lenin, he laid greater stress on the development of the Communist revolution than in supporting the bourgeois-democratic revolution in the colonies. In his theses he recommended a modified agrarian program of land reform and

11 U. S. Department of State, p. 41.
12 “Theses on the National and Colonial Questions,” loc. cit., p. 74. Roy later admitted his error. He wrote that he gradually came to the realization that the Indian proletariat were not only “weak numerically” but “formed but partially as a class” for “very few are consciously inclined toward communism.” M. N. Roy, Heresies of the Twentieth Century (Bombay: Renaissance Publications, Vora & Co., Ltd., 1943), pp. 118–119.
15 “Theses on the National and Colonial Questions,” loc. cit., p. 70.
urged that “peasants and workers soviets” be organized “as soon as possible.”

In his fervent faith in the class-consciousness of the proletariat, Roy resembled Marx before 1848. Marx had looked forward eagerly and with high optimism to the European revolutions which finally erupted in 1848, but each one had failed. It is not unreasonable to assume that, as a result of these events, Marx concluded that he had overestimated the degree to which class-consciousness could arise spontaneously as a result solely of “objective conditions” and that he came to realize the necessity not only of a longer apprenticeship of the proletariat than he had thought necessary heretofore, but also of aiding the proletariat in the development of class-consciousness by destroying those elements in the objective situation which tended to retard this development.

To achieve this, Marx conceived what has been termed a minimum program. It was devised to remove all obstacles to the maturation of capitalism—a stage which Marx considered a prerequisite to the development of full-scale class warfare. It sought to facilitate class-consciousness by the promotion of democratic liberties, such as universal suffrage, in order to bring social grievances into the open and solidify class divisions. It also involved the undermining of religious and patriotic sentiments, beliefs in reform, and other ideological blinkers.

In conjunction with the minimum program, a maximum program was also to be pursued. While working for the development of bourgeois democracy in its purest form, Communist parties were simultaneously to strive to weaken the bourgeois order by making ideological attacks on the capitalist system and by encouraging rebellions. It can be seen that these programs, in the sense that they urge the strengthening of the bourgeoisie as a step in the direction of their overthrow, require antennae acutely sensitive to a developing situation and a delicate sense of timing.

In a sense the conflict between Roy and Lenin over the question of supporting colonial nationalism can be viewed as a disagreement over the relative weight to be given to a maximum and minimum program in the formation of colonial policy. At the time of the Second World Congress, Roy was young and impatient. Like Marx before 1848, he tended to underestimate the task of effectively mobilizing class unrest. Roy wanted to force the pace set by Lenin in order to liberate the masses at once from all oppressive relationships, both foreign and domestic.

Whiting claims that at the Fourth Comintern Congress held in November, 1922, Roy expressed views decidedly at variance with those he had held earlier on the important questions of the role both of the national bourgeoisie and of the imperialists in the development of revolution in backward areas. In support of the first proposition, he quotes Roy’s statement that “although we know that there is always the danger of a compromise of the colonial bourgeoisie with the imperialist bourgeoisie, we always must insist in principle that the bourgeois-nationalist movement in colonial countries is objectively revolutionary and therefore has a right to our support.” But this is what Roy had been saying all along. Whiting confuses the issue by contrasting this position with Roy’s early demand that the Comintern assist exclusively

22 Ibid., p. 75.
24 Whiting, p. 93, quoting from IV Semirnyi Kongress, p. 194.
the development of the Communist movement, which he made before his views were modified as a result of discussions before the National and Colonial Commission.

On the question of the role of imperialism in the colonies, Whiting maintains that, although Roy had held earlier that imperialist nations were restricting the growth of a capitalist economy in colonial areas, he now claimed that England was encouraging the growth of industry in India. He concludes that "the Indian radical seemed to parrot the Russian leader [Lenin] rather than develop detailed bases for his... new views." 26

It is true that Roy's supplementary thesis, which states that "the imperialist policy of preventing industrial development in the colonies" had restricted the growth of a proletarian class "until recently," 27 is ambiguous on this point. But Roy's whole case in 1920 had rested on the assumption that India had already attained a stage of capitalist development in which class interests were beginning to solidify. In defense of his thesis, Roy attempted a Marxian analysis of Indian society which was published under the title India in Transition in 1922. A Russian version had appeared as early as 1921. 28 In his book he argued that as a result of the "spectacular" growth of Indian industry during World War I, the Indian bourgeoisie was now demanding a much larger share in the exploitation of the natural and human resources of India, 29 and that the British Government, in order to prevent the native bourgeoisie from joining forces with the masses against their common enemy, was now pursuing a policy of placating the former by granting them larger concessions. But the Indian capitalists, Roy argued, shared the British fear of mass revolt; though for a time they would use the strength of the masses to win still further concessions, they would eventually compromise with their rulers and settle for less than complete independence. 30 This was the basis of Roy's distrust of the national bourgeoisie.

The above interpretation of the Roy-Lenin debate is at variance not only with Whiting's account but also with that of Overstreet and Windmiller. The work of the latter authors, though it reflects a remarkable degree of painstaking research and presents a highly valuable account of Communist activities in India, is nevertheless decidedly short on interpretation. Moreover it appears that the authors became so engrossed in questioning Roy's motives for entering into the debate with Lenin that they overlooked altogether the possibility that he might have been prompted by legitimate, theoretical considerations. In explanation of Roy's actions, they offer several suggestions, the principal one being that his challenge constituted a bid for the control of Communist affairs in India. 31

In support of this proposition, it is argued that Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, the leader of a group of Indian revolutionaries in Berlin called the Indian Revolutionary Committee, had also offered his assistance to the Comintern and represented a serious challenge to Roy's bid for control of Communist activities in India. Roy's con-

25 Ibid., p. 94.
26 Ibid., p. 95.
27 "Theses on the National and Colonial Questions," loc. cit., p. 73.
30 Ibid., p. 40.
31 Overstreet and Windmiller, pp. 30-32.
tacts in India had been limited to Bengali and Punjabi terrorist groups; whereas Chattopadhyaya, as the brother of Sarojini Naidu, one of the leaders of the Indian nationalist movement, offered better prospects for effective relations with the Congress Party. Overstreet and Windmiller conclude that

In his own interest Roy might have been tempted to minimize the value of bourgeois nationalism to the Communists, and to play up the importance of the proletarian movement. . . . Whether Lenin realized it or not, his analysis of Indian conditions made Chattopadhyaya a more logical choice than Roy to head the Communist effort in India.32

A similar imputation of Roy's motives was first made by the Trotsky-oriented leader of the Revolutionary Communist Party of India, Saumyendranath Tagore, in his *Historical Development of the Communist Movement in India*. A representation of the Berlin Revolutionary Committee travelled to Moscow to challenge Roy's right to represent the Indian revolutionary movement. Tagore blamed the failure of its mission on Roy's machinations:

Roy had already established himself as the obsequious handyman of a powerful Russian Communist clique in the Comintern which wanted to determine the political line, the tactics and the organization of the Indian Revolution and to keep the Colonial Section of the Third International as the clique's special sphere of influence.33

Overstreet and Windmiller appear to have given considerable credence to this point of view, although in another context they warn that, because of Tagore's "strong bias against M. N. Roy together with some factual errors," his book "should be used with caution."34 The authors fail to support the imputation regarding Roy's motives at the time of the Second World Congress. They were unable to establish any contact between Chattopadhyaya's group and the Communist International before October, 1920—two months after the conclusion of the Second Congress. Moreover it was not until May, 1921 that the delegation of the Berlin Revolutionary Committee arrived in Moscow. There is no evidence to suggest that at the time of the Second Congress Roy considered this group a potential rival. But even if this point were granted, it still would not appear plausible that Roy would have considered this group such a challenge to his authority that he would have been reduced to the drastic expedient of countering the thesis of the formidable Lenin with one that proposed a line of action more suitable to his own contacts in India.

Throughout the discussion of Roy runs a common thread of suspicion concerning Roy's motives. Thus we find it "quite possible" that Roy opposed the resolution of the Fifth Congress of the Communist International which called for direct contact between the Comintern and the "national emancipation movements" because he saw it "as a threat to his position, since it called for that direct contact with the colonial nationalist movement which he himself had been unable to attain."36 Yet earlier we

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32 Ibid., p. 32.
33 Saumyendranath Tagore, *Historical Development of the Communist Movement in India* (Calcutta: Red Front Press, 1944) p. 4. Saumyendranath Tagore is the grandson of Rabindranath Tagore's eldest brother, Dwijendranath Tagore.
34 Overstreet and Windmiller, p. 36. Among Tagore's numerous errors is the statement that as late as 1927 there was no Communist Party of India.
35 Ibid., p. 32.
36 Ibid., p. 71.
learn that Roy had hoped the Congress would reject his overtures in order to substantiate his own position that the national bourgeoisie were unreliable. The latter argument negates the former. It could have been argued, perhaps more convincingly, that Roy opposed the resolution of the Fifth Congress out of theoretical considerations.

In this paper an attempt has been made to show that, contrary to Whiting's assessment of the Roy-Lenin debate, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that Roy's influence in the formulation of the Comintern's colonial policy was considerable. Second, differences between Lenin and Roy have been interpreted as stemming from considerations of a theoretical nature and the suggestion of Overstreet and Windmiller that Roy's challenge to Lenin was motivated by self-interest has been questioned.

The conflict today between Russia and China over the correct attitude to adopt toward nationalist régimes in underdeveloped areas, such as Nehru's in India, is an extension of the problem, first raised in the Roy-Lenin debate of 1920, of how to utilize nationalist movements for Communist ends.

37 Ibid., p. 49.