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To cite this article: Daniel Kent-Carrasco (2017) A battle over meanings: Jayaprakash Narayan, Rammanohar Lohia and the trajectories of socialism in early independent India, *Global Intellectual History*, 2:3, 370-388, DOI: [10.1080/23801883.2017.1370243](https://doi.org/10.1080/23801883.2017.1370243)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23801883.2017.1370243>



Published online: 30 Aug 2017.



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A battle over meanings: Jayaprakash Narayan, Rammanohar Lohia and the trajectories of socialism in early independent India

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ABSTRACT

This article will argue that during the 1950s and 1960s a battle over the meanings of socialism took place in India. Exploring the ways in which the contending conceptions of socialism defended by Rammanohar Lohia and Jayaprakash Narayan intersected and drifted apart during these decades, and the ways in which these were shaped in response to the gradual adoption of socialism by the Nehruvian state, it will be shown that during these years socialism emerged *at the same time* as a central part of the roadmap for socioeconomic development of the national state *as well as* a central category for doctrines and practices of protest and contestation. For this, it will focus on Narayan's insistence on a politics of the people, or *lok niti*, and his equating of socialism and *Sarvodaya*, as well as on Lohia's doctrine of equal equidistance and his critique of Third Worldism and the Nehruvian state. Moreover, it will be argued that this battle over meanings crated a space for the emergence of original conceptions of socialism wholly unrelated to anything known elsewhere by that name, and inaugurated a set of political trajectories central to the contemporary political horizon in India.

KEYWORDS

Socialism in India;
Jayaprakash Narayan;
Rammanohar Lohia; Third
World; Nehruvian state;
revolution and Utopia

1. Introduction

In the 1950s and 1960s, the meaning of socialism became a crucial matter for thinkers, politicians and ideologues across the Third World. The goal of socialism was central to a broad transnational movement that sought to alter the balance of geopolitical and symbolic power in a rapidly decolonizing world. At the same time, socialism was also widely wielded as a project of alternative social and personal transformation, defined by the ideals of autonomy, freedom, collectivism and solidarity. For many who during these decades adhered to the cause of revolution, the project of socialism necessarily had to go beyond the confines of formal politics to effect a transformation in what Julius Nyerere called the 'attitudes of the mind.'¹ For an entire generation of thinkers, activists and politicians across the globe socialism defined, as Che Guevara would have it, the quest for a new man.²

In India, during these decades socialism ceased to be the sole patrimony of the more radical factions of the nationalist movement and was adopted as part of the official project and rhetoric of the national state, mainly as a result of Jawaharlal Nehru's statist socialist leanings, and his enormous influence on the national and international scenes. Along with the principles of secularism, non-alignment and democracy, socialism became central to the roadmap of socioeconomic development charted by the new national state. In Nehru's view, socialism essentially meant state control over the means of production, and the adherence to a form of economic planning that favoured rapid industrialization and aimed at an increase in production that would vanquish poverty from India. In anticipation of what would become a widespread project of Third World nationalism across different locations in later years, Nehru promoted a cosmopolitan agenda of economic independence that saw growth and development as an entitlement of the newly decolonized countries of Asia and Africa. In his words, socialism effectively meant 'every individual in the State should have equal opportunity for progress.'³

In this paper, it is argued that despite its adoption as the official credo of the Nehruvian state and in spite of the fragmentation of older leftist forces during the first two decades following the transfer of power, socialism remained a central category for doctrines and practices of protest and contestation in India. This paper will chart the main contours of a clash over the meanings of socialism that during the 1950s and early 1960s confronted Jayaprakash Narayan and Rammanohar Lohia, two important leaders of the old Congress Socialist Party (CSP; 1934) and stalwarts of the left in India. Jayaprakash Narayan, or JP as he was popularly known, was the main architect of the CSP and remained the leading ideologue and most visible leader of Congress socialists until the early 1950s, when he voluntarily retreated from institutional politics – which he began to refer to as *Raj Niti* or power politics – and drifted towards constructive activism and the promotion of *Lok Niti*, a politics of the people. Following JP's distancing from party politics, Lohia arose as the most important figure in the ranks of the Socialist Party. In the years following the transfer of power, both identified socialism with the need to oppose the reactionary tendencies of the Congress and the new state and promote the radical transformation of society. However, as a result of their differing conceptions of revolution, the shape and possible outcomes of this transformation were imagined in entirely different ways by each of them.

Despite arising as responses to national – and at times very local – concerns and conjunctures, the thought and politics of JP and Lohia were attuned with broader radical movements taking shape in different locations in opposition to the establishment of the Third Worldist model of developmental nationalism. Both wielded socialism as an integral part of their fierce critique of the Nehruvian state's acceptance of foreign models of socioeconomic organization. However, as will become clear, they had little in common beyond this shared opposition. JP, on the one hand, increasingly came to see socialism as a communitarian project of moral and anti-political protest in the face of an alienating state power. On the other, Lohia clung to a project of socialism defined by institutional opposition against the 'pedagogical style of politics' fostered by postcolonial elites during the 1950s.⁴ Despite the fact that this battle over meanings would not materialize in immediate political gains for either one, the impact of their ideas opened up a space for the emergence of original conceptions of socialism wholly unrelated to anything known elsewhere by that name and, as a result, proved

crucial for the inauguration of a set of political trajectories – both on the left and on the right – central to the contemporary political horizon of India.

Moreover, and beyond its relevance to the history of political thought in contemporary South Asia, this battle over the meanings of socialism exemplifies the ways in which political programmes in different parts of the world were being shaped and cemented in the decades of decolonization and the intensification of the Cold War, both in response to global and local challenges. The politics of protest of JP and Lohia testify to the fact that the projects of Third Worldism and the consolidation of postcolonial national regimes were from the start deeply contested by important sections of anticolonial elites in locations such as India. At the same time, they testify to the fact that, during the 1950s and 1960s, socialism was also used to promote intellectual projects based on the need to go beyond the ideological and political constraints of the Cold War, which shaped the positions of most postcolonial leaders, including those who considered themselves non-aligned.

The paper will start by outlining the projects of socialism defended by JP and Lohia during the 1950s and 1960s and will stress that in order to come to grips with their original approaches to socialism, we must take into account their particular position as non-elite leftists among nationalist ranks, the impact of their international sojourns as young students and their ambiguous relationship with Gandhi's ideas. I will then contrast their postures of opposition to the Nehruvian model of industrial development by focusing on JP's equation of socialism with the Gandhian model of *Sarvodaya*, and Lohia's views on decentralization and the project of the small machine. A third section deals with the fundamental opposition between JP and Lohia's politics, which stemmed from the incompatibility of reconciling JP's emphasis on the notion of freedom and Lohia's insistence on the importance of equality. I wrap up the article commenting on the importance of these contending projects of socialism for local genealogies of politics in India, as well as for globally spread projects of revolutionary and radical politics.

2. The politics of JP: from socialism to *Sarvodaya*.

Born in 1902 in the village of Sitabdiara, in West Bihar, JP was, both symbolically and chronologically, a product of the *Swadeshi* years. Throughout his life, he consistently referred to the Non-Cooperation Movement as 'the most glorious page in the living History of (India's) National Revolution'⁵ and the moment of birth of what he considered as the only valid and truly Indian tradition of politics. Born into a family of relatively poor country *kayasthas*, JP had to secure a government scholarship in order to pursue his studies at Patna College. When he threw his books into the bonfire of non-cooperation, he was not following a liberal political commitment or taking a radical anarchist stance. Being a non-elite revolutionary, the prospect of *Swaraj* for JP was tinged by the anxiety generated by the possibility of failure. In this sense, the prospect of revolution held a special urgency for him, having as he had rejected the chance of a government education, and being unable to afford an English upbringing, like the one pursued by many of the most important leaders of the Congress.

Following Gandhi's decision to bring the Non-Cooperation Movement to a halt following the events at Chauri Chaura in February 1922, JP applied for a visa to the United States and sailed east with the purpose of carrying on with his studies. In the United States, he

had to work hard: he was employed in agricultural labour, restaurants, warehouses and factories. Having grown used to the economic dynamics of Bihar marked by caste hierarchies and hereditary specialization of labour, his experience in the United States of the 1920s had a momentous influence on the young JP. During this period, he later testified:

(t)he equality of human beings and the dignity of labour became real things to me (...). I noticed how foreman and workers addressed each other by their first names. There was no feeling of being below or inferior or anything like that.⁶

JP studied first in Berkeley. Due to the high fees, he moved to Iowa University and, finally, enrolled in Wisconsin University for a degree in social sciences. During his years in the United States he read Marx, Lenin, Luxembourg, Trotsky and Plekhanov, and the tracts of the famous Bengali revolutionary turned Marxist ideologue M. N. Roy. JP experienced first-hand the poverty and injustices generated by capitalism, as well as the realities of racial and social discrimination. He also engaged in discussions and friendship with members of the Communist Party and other young people of radical inclinations. It was in this context that JP began to drink 'deep at the fountain of Marxism,'⁷ an experience that deeply transformed his political views and his concept of revolution. He finished his BA in 1928 and completed an MA in Sociology at Ohio State University the following year. Despite having been awarded a scholarship for pursuing a Ph.D., he was forced to return to India in October 1929 after learning that his mother was seriously ill.

Following his return to India, JP became very active politically and participated in campaigns of civil disobedience until his arrest in 1932. He was sent to Nasik jail, where he shared his imprisonment with a group of young radical nationalists, including Rammanohar Lohia, Achyut Patwardhan, Minoo Masani, Yusuf Meherally and Asoka Mehta. Under JP's leadership, these men would form the core of the Left Wing of the Congress during the following years. Their political project crystallized with the creation of the CSP in Bombay, in October 1934. The formation of the CSP formalized the confrontation between the undeclared factions of the Congress, with the leftists looking to extend *Swadeshi* programmes based on the demand for total and immediate *Swaraj* and the rejection of constitutional methods, by infusing them with a socialist revolutionary discourse. The CSP remained at the centre of leftist politics in India during the 1930s thanks to their closeness to important Congress leaders like Nehru and Bose, as well as to their ability to garner together contending organizations like the Royists and communists in a common Left Bloc, in which the role of JP was instrumental.

In young JP's view, socialism essentially represented a politics capable of involving the masses, being understood by the people, and going beyond the logic of the elites and higher power circles. He believed that it was only through socialism that the national struggle could be embedded with true revolutionary meaning. During the 1930s and 1940s, he often referred to 'Swaraj for the poor' as the only valid kind of self-rule acceptable,⁸ and spoke of the obligation of the Congress to establish a 'common's man *Raj*.'⁹ Crucially, during the 1930s JP conceived of socialism as a programme capable of endowing the nationalist movement with the tools to move beyond the limitations of Gandhi's project. JP militantly promoted socialism, described as a true 'science of society (...)' looked upon by millions of people the world over as their only guide and saviour,¹⁰ as an antidote to Gandhi's politics of nonviolence. In relation to Gandhi's insistence on the importance of constructive work, JP stated that the Congress should 'go to the

peasants, but (...) not with a spinning wheel but with the militant force of economic programme.¹¹ In 1936, JP published his first and most systematic analysis of socialism, *Why Socialism?* In this text, he equated Gandhi's views with those of international reformism, and dismissed them as decisively un-revolutionary. For JP, Gandhi's programme was focused 'not in securing social justice, but in covering up the ugly fissures of society, (...) deceiv(ing) the masses and encourag(ing) the upper classes to continue their domination.'¹²

However, in the last years before the transfer of power, and following a period of stressful incarceration in the Lahore Fort Prison, JP grew increasingly preoccupied with the limitations of a purely materialist approach to politics. He began pondering on the importance of taking into account what he termed 'the human aspect' of politics and of going 'beyond the question of social relationships' and 'economic organisation.' Socialists, he claimed, had to stop believing 'complacently that when economic life had been socialized (...) man (...) would evolve automatically into a paragon of virtues.' The project of socialism, he suggested, had to be thought beyond a preoccupation with economic prosperity to include the 'deeper' realities of social life.¹³

This change in orientation was coupled with a growing rejection of the Congress as the party of the state. In his view, the leading members of the party had betrayed the organization's original revolutionary potential as a result of their 'petty ambitions, intrigues,' and their unbridled focus on 'power politics.' As a result, the Congress had 'forsaken its fundamental task of serving the people (...) and preparing them for (...) *Swaraj*.'¹⁴ Following the transfer of power in 1947, JP began to think about the need to bring socialism and Gandhism together in the task of countering the decadence of the Congress. In his view, the Congress had become 'so identified with the government (...) that it ha(d) lost the power to protect the rights of the people.'¹⁵ He began to develop a renewed approach to socialism in which anti-statist action was seen as the best way to promote an emphasis on the 'human aspects' of politics. Now that political independence was a reality, the time was ripe for the development of a true social revolution capable of leading the way in this direction. For this, it was necessary to promote revolution beyond the limits of the state. The state, he claimed, should be forced to become 'an instrument in the hands of a popular socialist movement (...) rather than the source and fountain-head of all authority and will.'¹⁶ It was in this emphatic rejection of the state as the goal of politics that JP saw the first links between the ideas of Gandhi and Marx, since both he noted, defended as 'the highest stage of democracy (...) that in which the state had withered away.'¹⁷

Following the violence of 1947–1948 and the murder of Gandhi, JP experienced a deep emotional, intellectual and personal crisis, which fed his disowning of materialism and his eventual turn towards the Gandhian ideal of *Sarvodaya*. In a comment made at the annual conference of the Socialist Party, celebrated in Nasik during March 1948, he made clear his full assumption of the formerly tentative rejection of a materialist approach to socio-political analysis, and his concern regarding the irrelevance of the socialist programme in the current circumstances of India. An '(e)conomic approach cannot be the only approach,' he sentenced. 'Why,' he asked his fellow socialists, 'must you talk of materialism all the while?'¹⁸

Following a fast undertaken in June 1952 he clearly stated that the path of institutional change and the traditional goals of socialists focused on conquering the state and power

were insufficient and had to be complemented by a focus on the transformation of individual men as the only way to strive for the establishment of the ideals of socialism. The establishment of such ideals would be described as a task of curing society through the transformation of its individuals:

Traditionally, socialism has relied on institutional changes for curing the evils of modern society. We have in our movement, however, realized that institutional changes are not enough and that the individual man, the root of society, must also be cured. (...) If we have to serve socialism and create a new society and a new man we must make ourselves worthy instruments. Then only shall we succeed.¹⁹

Having completed his fast, which he described as a 'kind of rebirth,'²⁰ it became impossible for him to remain faithful to a materialist approach to society, or to the practice of power politics defended by political parties and institutions of the state. During the 1950s, JP's anti-statism would become more pronounced. As a result, he began to view society as the privileged site of transformation. Following 1954, the year in which he became involved with the *Bhoodan* movement, JP began to codify his politics through the formula of *Lok Niti* – people's power – which he borrowed from the Gandhian activist Vinoba Bhave.²¹ By 1957, in his famous tract *From Socialism to Sarvodaya*, we find that JP had thoroughly adopted the distinction between *Raj* and *Lok Niti* as a central axiom of his politics. The term *lok* referred to an open and unqualified conception of the public, close to the Western idea of the *demos*, or the postmodern concept of the multitude. Rather than being based on a belonging to a definite class, caste or community, for JP *lok* referred to a unity that emerged from a shared liberty that permitted acting in solidarity *and not* from a notion of equality.

At the time, he found in the *Bhoodan* movement, which advocated for the voluntary donation of land, a promising path towards a real transformation of man and society and for the establishment 'in actuality (...) the noble ideals of socialism.'²² Following his retreat from *Raj Niti*, JP became one of the main ideologues and promoters of *Sarvodaya* and Gandhian socialism, which he saw as a programme of action based on the rejection of the state and power institutions in favour of the promotion of voluntarism and constructive work. Thereafter, JP adhered to the logic of *Lok Niti*, a political culture that he saw as emerging from the coming together of the revolutionary thrust of Gandhian nationalism and the ideals of socialism. Power politics, he concluded, could simply 'not deliver the goods.'²³ Socialism, in his view, could not be created through law or force, but only through voluntary action. In this sense, he declared that '*Sarvodaya* (was) people's socialism.'²⁴ Indeed, far from relinquishing the cause of socialism, JP would thereafter equate socialism with *Sarvodaya*, referring to them as 'two words with one meaning.'²⁵

3. The socialism of Rammanohar Lohia: a politics of equal equidistance

Born in Faziabad district, United Provinces, in 1910 and son of an active nationalist and follower of Gandhi, Lohia pursued his initial studies in Bombay, Benares and Calcutta before travelling abroad to pursue a degree in higher education. His departure from India, in late 1929, coincided with the return of the young JP from the United States. Lohia initially travelled to London, but soon decided to leave the capital of Empire for Berlin, an important point of communist effervescence as well as a 'centre of Indian

intrigue²⁶ frequented during the previous years by anticolonial revolutionaries such as M. N. Roy and Virendranath Chattopadhyaya. Although the motivations behind his choice of Berlin over London remain unclear the unusual decision presents us an image of young Lohia as a man ‘imbued with the spirit of discovering a new world, which was not bounded by Thomas Cook, Ballard Pier, Tilbury Docks, Gower Street, three or four years in England and back.’²⁷

Both California in the early 1920s – the time of JP’s arrival – and Berlin during the late part of the decade were relevant centres of anticolonial activity, involving the agitation behind the creation of the *Ghadar* party in the first case, and that of international communist revolutionaries in the second. However, the experience of Lohia as a student abroad was very different from that of JP. Unlike JP, Lohia never thoroughly discussed this period of his life, nor wrote about it; nevertheless, there is enough evidence to trace a few relevant distinctions between the international experiences of the two young socialists. For one, it is possible to assume that, unlike JP – who was employed in a wide variety of activities, from packing vegetables to selling complexion creams to African-Americans²⁸ – Lohia remained a full-time student in Berlin, since it was not allowed at the time for foreign students to be legally employed in Germany.²⁹ Further, JP enjoyed great physical mobility in the United States, while Lohia seems to have remained in Berlin for the length of his stay abroad. Likewise, the subjects of their dissertations were very different and revealing of their later intellectual and political inclinations: JP wrote on the theoretical and abstract subject of ‘Cultural Variation’ and discussed the different approaches to truth and knowledge across different cultures³⁰; on the other hand, Lohia’s dissertation versed on the very specific and grounded issue of salt taxation in British India.³¹ Finally, while JP admitted to his fascination and intellectual engagement with Marxist thought during his stay in the United States, Lohia seems to have been less constrained by Marxism and more open to different strands of thought while in Germany, as is made clear by his own testimony: ‘I did not like the German Socialists, but my intellectual kinship was with them. Emotionally, I was with the communists for their warm-heartedness and the Nazis for their anti-British passions, which were to me at least pro-man passions.’³²

Following his return to India in 1933 and imprisonment shortly thereafter, Lohia became part of the founding group of the CSP. Throughout the 1930s he acted as editor of the party’s periodical, the *Congress Socialist*, and remained one of the most important organizers of the Left Wing of the Congress. During that time, Lohia distinguished himself from most of his socialist colleagues by his open anti-elitism, managing to irritate and antagonize a few of them with his unconventional demeanour. Madhu Limaye credits Narendra Deva, senior member and first president of the CSP, with reprimanding Lohia for wasting too much ‘time in the company of *lafange* (riff-raff) at the Coffee House.’³³

Apprehended during the Quit India agitation, Lohia once again shared imprisonment with JP inside the Lahore Fort, where both friends were subjected to torture and solitary confinement. The experience generated a strong bond of closeness between them that would gradually dissolve during the first years of the 1950s. After the transfer of power, both of them were opposed to the transformation of the Congress into the party of government; however, while JP committed himself to a non-statist project of opposition encompassed under the tag of *Lok Niti*, Lohia decided to take the road of

party opposition and became the leader of the Socialist Party, formed in 1948. Having secured 12 seats in the Lok Sabha during the first general elections of 1951,³⁴ the vote share of the Socialist Party would steadily decline during the following years. Despite Lohia's attempts to form alliances with different leftist forces, his parties remained unable to challenge the potency of the Congress or the communists in electoral terms until his death in 1967.³⁵

The poor political performance of Rammanohar Lohia as the leader of different socialist parties during the 1950s and early 1960s contrasts with the novelty and audacity of his thought. Lohia managed to develop a potent critique of the shortcomings of orthodox Marxian thought as well as an original philosophy of history, and a programme for an original form of socialism for India. More than any other socialist leader of his time, he reflected upon issues of caste, gender, language diversity and vernacular knowledge in the course of his intellectual development. His focus on the specificities and concrete needs of Indian society, however, did not prevent him from taking into consideration the contingencies of the international arena and devising a plan for a global Parliament. His open-ended vision of socialism was shaped by an awareness of international events, as well as by the deeply felt need to go beyond what he considered the elitism of Nehruvian statist modernization and the potentially violent programme of Indian communists.

Lohia expressed his belief in the need to bring about a new civilization that could overcome the failure of modern Western civilization, which had reached its limits with the invention of the atom bomb and had 'enveloped the world with fear and hatred.'³⁶ His vision of the future emerged from a fundamental criticism of Marxism's incapacity to think through the constitutive relationship between capitalism and imperialism. Unlike JP, who during his youth and early years as leader of the CSP had remained a convinced Marxist, Lohia would very early on denounce the limitations of applying Marxian principles to non-Western and colonial settings. In his essay 'Economics after Marx,' written during the Quit India movement while in hiding from the colonial authorities, Lohia observed:

Marx's initial fallacy was to have examined capitalism in the abstract, to have wrenched it outside of its imperialist context. Marx was not unaware of imperialist exploitation and his disciple, Lenin, was even more keenly aware of it. But, imperialism is with both Marx and Lenin a tumour of capitalism, an odorous after-growth and this has at best awakened an unintelligent concern for the colonial races. Marxism has therefore not been able to give a consistent theory of capitalist development. Its picture of capitalism is that of a West European entity (and) a self-moving West European circle.³⁷

Lohia vehemently denounced Marxism as Eurocentric and thus as a doctrine unable to account for the link between capitalist accumulation and colonialism, as well as the existence of what he termed internal capitalism in countries like India, a phenomenon that caused similar socioeconomic imbalances and inequalities to arise *within* the country as those observable between the country and its former colonial metropolis.³⁸ However revolutionary it might appear as a doctrine, he argued, Marxism remained tied to a colonial logic that favoured the preservation of the 'the status quo, at least that part of the status quo which means European glory.' In this sense, Lohia assured that '(t)he effort of Marx was, after all, a colossal construction of the mind to keep the smile on the visage of Europe ever dancing.'³⁹

Lohia's critique of Marxism also entailed a revision of the teleology of historical materialism. In a broader sense, Lohia wanted to point out the way in which 'such abstractions as capitalism, communism or even socialism'⁴⁰ took the history of Europe as their implicit reference and were thus useless in non-Western settings. He was deeply worried about the possible harmful results of implanting such a partial historical and political logic to a non-Western setting such as India. In this sense, he warned that in India 'any attempt (...) to achieve the modern civilisation, which the world has known for the past 300 years, must result in barren cruelty, cruelty which knows no success.'⁴¹

His objections to Marxism were complemented by his open critique of the 'leadership of sterile Marxists' in recently decolonized countries, a group in which he included Nehru and his fellow champions of Non-Alignment during the late 1950s, Nkrumah and Sukarno.⁴² In Lohia's view, the rulers of the newly created countries of Asia and Africa had 'arrested revolution' in their lands by adopting the 'mode of modernisation of the consumption of their elite, before they (had) modernized the production modes of their masses.'⁴³ In this way the 'criminal luxury and waste' of the national elites was hindering the possibility of a true revolutionary change towards greater social equality and perpetuating 'natural greed and indolence' in these countries. In an early formulation of later subalternist and postcolonial critical positions, Lohia observed in 1958 that:

Post-freedom India is but a strict continuance of British India in most essential ways. The Indian people continue to be disinherited. They are foreigners in their own land. Their languages are suppressed and their bread is snatched away from them.⁴⁴

In order to avoid the cruelty that would result from implanting a foreign model of Marxism in India, Lohia pointed towards the need to create a new kind of socialism, equidistantly separated from Marxian communism and Western capitalism. He referred to this position as the principle of equal irrelevance. In this sense, he declared that the likely 'debacle of capitalism and communism is easily understood when they are viewed as parts of a single civilization that appears to have neared the end of its voyage.'⁴⁵ Lohia's new socialism required going beyond 'mind-imperialism' and awakening those 'colonials of the mind' that unknowingly perpetuated the power of the privileged and the hostility of the underdog.⁴⁶ For this, it was necessary to identify the possibility of alternative sources and points of origin for a new socialist civilization. Following a line of thought similar to that of JP after his imprisonment at Lahore Fort, Lohia identified Gandhi as the only original political thinker of the twentieth century, and saw in Gandhian thought the seeds for a new brand of revolutionary socialism.

Like JP, Lohia exalted Gandhi's anti-statist stance on social transformation and defended socialism as the only viable political option for independent India. However, Lohia's appropriation of the revolutionary potentialities of socialism was radically opposed to that of JP. While the latter had come to think of socialism as the result of a moral transformation of society effected through an emphasis on self-sacrifice and non-statist voluntary action, for Lohia socialism remained defined as a horizon structured by the possibilities of statist political action and modern technology. In other words, Lohia never rejected the imperative of acting in the sphere of power defined by JP as *Raj Niti*; rather, he sought to revolutionize it through an appreciation of India's specific conflicts and possibilities and a vocal opposition to the Nehruvian project of economic development. For this reason, Lohia remained active in party politics and openly chastised

JP for his retreat into *Lok Niti*. For Lohia, and here we find a rare coincidence with Nehru's position, socialism had to be promoted from the state.

4. Two socialist critiques of the development project of the Nehruvian State

During the 1950s and 1960s both JP and Lohia deployed sustained attacks on the national state's policies of economic development, which they conceived of as the noxious result of the elitism and excessive reliance of Nehruvian socialism on Western models. Both expanded their critique by invoking the socialist trope of a new civilization and by appealing to Gandhi's stance on economic decentralization and rejection of 'satanic' modern civilization. This resulted in two powerful socialist critiques of the Nehruvian state's development project: Lohia's critique stemmed from a revolutionary approach to modern technology, while JP's emerged from a spirited defence of village development.

Starting in 1951, even before his retreat from *Raj Niti*, JP had made clear his defence of the village as the only possible starting point of true socioeconomic change. In a speech delivered at Dekuli, Bihar, in March 1951, JP referred to village-based voluntarism as the only option available to counter the harmful elitist policies of the national state. 'The village,' he pronounced, 'is ours.' Given that 'Pandit Nehru will not come to our villages for building roads and doing sanitation work' he went on speaking to the villagers, 'you should build roads and plant trees on their sides, which may be used as fuels.'⁴⁷ Village-dwellers, he concluded, could not expect to receive any help from the state, and should instead take the issue of economic development collectively into their own hands.

JP saw community development as a fundamental prerequisite for the successful and inclusive economic development of independent India. The villages had to be transformed into 'self-governing, self-sufficient, agro-industrial (...) local communities' that could form the basis for a 'meaningful, understandable (and) controllable'⁴⁸ socioeconomic dynamic capable of resisting the onslaught of centralization and bureaucratization. In short, community development meant going beyond a concern with 'industrial development, education, communication and electrification' and focusing on the 'the development of the spiritual community (and) of a climate in which families living in rural communities might come together to live a cooperative life.'⁴⁹ JP's message to the villages of India was complemented by an appeal to the elites of India, in which he advocated for a voluntary limitation of wants that amounted to a 'rejection of materialism or the unlimited pursuit of material satisfaction.'⁵⁰ However, despite being coherent with his overall project of anti-statist opposition, JP's stance on economic development remained fuzzy and ill defined, and did not go beyond the promotion of Gandhian notions of trusteeship and decentralization. His approach to economic possibilities was shaped by his conviction of the importance of *Lok Niti*, and thus remained limited by the latter's undefined and broad logic.

Despite sharing JP's insistence on the importance of simple living and his rejection of the wasteful luxuries promoted by industrial capitalism, Lohia was not interested in drawing upon Gandhian notions of trusteeship or village self-sufficiency. Instead, he pushed Gandhi's early critique of modern civilization by insisting on a revolutionary approach to the potentialities of technology for the transformation of human society. Lohia described modern civilization, whether communist or capitalist, as a 'complex

consisting of production of remote effect, tool of remote production, democracy of remote second-rate application and even class struggle of remote justification.⁵¹ This modern civilization, he argued elsewhere, was based on the construction and extensive use of ‘monster-machines,’ designed to remain beyond the reach and comprehension of the ‘common man’ and which remained ‘palpably connected with the waste’ and ‘uneconomy [*sic*]’ of war.⁵² In the political sphere, a reliance on such monster-machines perpetuated the hidden imperialisms inside a country like India, and promoted the thriving of Euro-American superiority on a global scale. This industrial model of economic development, Lohia posited, remained unquestioned by the two struggling systems of capitalism and communism. In this sense, he added, ‘Mr. Ford and Mr. Stalin share(d) each other’s attitudes on mass production and efficiency and high wages.’⁵³ In India, the pursuit of this shared dream of limitless industrialization was reducing men to the state of beasts and turning postcolonial toilers into mere ghosts ‘invisibly moving the machines in imperial factories.’⁵⁴

Lohia’s alternative to the harmful effects of these monster-machines and industrialization was articulated by bringing together the Gandhian insistence on economic decentralization – also defended by JP – with the original concept of the small machine. Despite never having fully developed what it entailed in practical terms, it is possible to extract the general principles of what Lohia meant by small machine from an analysis of his writings during the 1950s and early 1960s. In broad terms, Lohia used the formula to refer to the development of a brand of decentralized industrial production aimed at the attainment of village autonomy – instead of self-sufficiency. In this sense, he was not advocating for a mere revivalism of cottage industries or a celebration of the autarkist village. In his view, the questioning of technology did not necessarily have to entail relying on handicrafts and village markets. Thus he declared that the

basic problem (was) not to cut down the use of mechanical or electrical power but to make it available for production in the same small units in the manner in which it is available today for consumption in prosperous economies.⁵⁵

In this sense, he was arguing for a revolutionary approach to technology that did not aim at an ever-increasing margin of material profit but rather at the liberation of mankind:

The only way to overcome industrial and scientific inequalities among nations would be (...) through the ushering in of a new civilization and a new technology. The materialist bull we dare not slay. Futile revivalists of cottage craft would alone attempt that, more in speech than in action. The materialist bull will have to be fed but held by the horns, so that a doctrine that combined truth with pleasure could be evolved. Small-unit machines, wherever possible, and mass production, whenever necessary, is a formula than which nothing more exact is possible.⁵⁶

Lohia’s harsh rejection of the ‘barren cruelty’ of simplistic implantation of foreign models can be seen as an attack against the Nehruvian model of industrialization, which, in his view, would condemn India to second-rate capitalism and contribute to the unending political superiority of the West. At the same time, Lohia’s concept of the small machine as an alternative to industrial process of economic development links to a broader preoccupation with the hierarchy of knowledge implicit in the Nehruvian project, which denied the validity of people’s knowledge in favour of the knowledge of experts.⁵⁷ The new socialism Lohia pursued had not only to fundamentally rethink the foundations of Marxism, but

also to challenge the supremacy given to Western forms of knowledge in postcolonial countries. This was urgent in order to interrupt the hierarchical tradition of *deshmukh* leadership, the epistemological foundations of which were left untouched by JP and openly defended by Nehru.

Taking this into consideration it is possible to distinguish a fundamental distinction between the socialist outlooks of JP and Lohia. While the former's socialism was defined by the need to promote freedom from the alienating effects of power – both political and economic – Lohia's project was based on a different principle: that of equality. It is to this fundamental divergence that I now turn.

5. Caste, inequality and the limits of *Lok Niti*

JP's reliance on the potential of popular power was at the root of his project of *Lok Niti* and entailed an acceptance of the hierarchies found within the collective, notably that of *varna*, which, he argued, was as 'natural' as a 'communion with neighbours.' This defence of *varna* was consistent with JP's ideal of *Lok Niti*, in as much as he conceived of the former as a 'sign-post' of an original, 'stable (and) democratic basis for (an) Indian polity' in which 'the *dharma*, or social ethics, continued to function independently of the central State.'⁵⁸

Towards the end of the 1950s, JP made clear his central concern with the problem of freedom. In this sense, he declared the strife for 'freedom of the human personality, freedom of the mind (and) freedom of the spirit' as the leading 'beacon' of his life and the driving force of his political activity.⁵⁹ The state, he argued, was the greatest obstacle for the attainment of this freedom; alienation could only be overcome through active political militancy, the defence of socialism – by then thought of as a programme for the creation of a *dharmic* human community – and a strife to re-empower people in the face of power. In this sense, JP participated of a romantic and anti-totalitarian narrative of revolution, marked by vindicationist narratives of freedom and emancipation from injustice widely shared in different regions of the globe among intellectuals and progressive activists during those decades.⁶⁰ For this reason, JP's project of *Lok Niti*, focused as it was on promoting an oppositional project based on the rejection of the vices of the state in favour of an intrinsically virtuous and potentially revolutionary multitude, could not but remain uncritical of the vices and shortcomings of the *lok* which it extolled and defended.

In contrast, instead of being fuelled by the prospect of freedom, Lohia's politics hinged on the promotion of greater equality for the people of India. Lohia's fierce critique was directed at what Anand Kumar has termed the matrix of power in Indian society, shaped by the intersection of the hierarchical inequalities of caste, class, gender and language.⁶¹ Lohia estimated that roughly 90% of the people of India were, in one way or another, victims of injustice as a result of the graded structure of inequality intrinsic to its society.⁶² As a result, he did not focus solely on denouncing the corruption and misused power of the higher spheres of politics, but also, and more vigorously, attacked the social elites of India, the members of which, he claimed, could be identified by sharing two of the three following features: high-caste, an English education and material wealth.⁶³

The project of socialism defended by Lohia during the 1950s and 1960s incorporated this intersectional approach to inequality and focused on the shortcomings of society

rather than the vices of the state. If JP's project *Lok Niti* relied on building up the assumptions behind *Swadeshi* articulations of the virtues of the multitude,⁶⁴ Lohia, in contrast, described traditional Indian society as 'caste-ridden and as frightened of change as it (was) devoid of hope' and attacked it for being fundamentally un-revolutionary.⁶⁵ Consequently, Lohia voiced his intense opposition to JP's Gandhian vision of the village and the virtuous multitude, and remained highly sceptical of the extolment of the *lok* as an alternative for the state. In stark contrast to JP, Lohia described the people of India as 'the saddest on earth,' and spoke of a 'black sadness'⁶⁶ that prevailed over Indian society as the result of the despairing immobility of its structures of segregation, which were perfectly exemplified by caste. According to him, it was precisely the immovable character of caste that distinguished it from class. 'Class,' he argued, 'is mobile caste. Caste is immobile class.'⁶⁷ Caste, however, was not a purely Indian problem, but appeared as the result of a universal social dialectic inspired by the demand for equality. Indeed, for Lohia the movement of history was determined by this constant oscillation between the rigidity of caste and the suppleness of class.⁶⁸

Lohia's rise to prominence as the leader of party socialism coincided with a period of intense debate around the issue of caste-based reservations. Even before the appearance of the First Report of the Backward Classes Commission, written in 1953 and published in 1955, Lohia had advanced his interest in involving members of the lower castes in the ranks and leadership of the Socialist Party, and had begun his active campaign for the application of preferential opportunities for the backward sections of society. During the second half of the 1950s, Lohia advocated for at least 60% of the 'nation's top leadership' to be selected from among the lower castes. However, unlike Ambedkar, Lohia advocated for extending the scope of the Backward Classes label to include other sections of the population, notably depressed Muslims, Adivasis and women.⁶⁹

Equality was not, like freedom, a goal to be attained through the militant belief on a romantic and teleological narrative of vindication and liberation. Rather, it was a never-ending process that had to be constructed gradually through the revolutionary effect of the action of the state upon an un-revolutionary and unjust social order. In this sense, Lohia's position, in as much as he denounced the conservative and hierarchical core of the *lok* or people of India, can be seen to be diametrically opposed to JP's anti-statist socialism. By stressing the intrinsically un-revolutionary nature of society in India and promoting a programme of political change based on the radical demand for equality, Lohia was in fact, making a case for the impossibility of a multitude as the basis for political action and, as a result, for the inherent faults of the project of *Lok Niti*.

6. Indian socialisms and the emergence of new radical trajectories

The gradual separation between JP and Lohia during these years was the result of irreconcilably different conceptions of the possibilities of political action, the role of the state and a disagreement over the relation of socialism to the notion of social revolution. Both of them, as we have seen, identified socialism with the possibility of a radical transformation of society and, through it, the coming of a new civilization. As a result of their differing conceptions of revolution, however, the shape and possible outcomes of this transformation were imagined in entirely different ways by each of them. In this final section, their differing conceptions of socialism and revolution are contrasted with the position

defended by Nehru, promoter of an ambiguous socialistic pattern of development for India and, for many across the world, one the most important promoters of Non-Aligned socialism.

For Nehru, the goal of socialism was to be subjected to the broader project of modernization and industrialization. In the spirit that animated the project of the Third World – captured in the title of Julius Nyerere’s biography *We Must Run While They Walk* – the revolution of socialism was coded by Nehru in the language of state-led economic growth. On the other hand, for JP, especially following his drift towards *Lok Niti* and his equation of socialism and *Sarvodaya*, the revolution of socialism had to be effected through the promotion of a politics of moral transformation capable of going beyond materialism and the alienation caused by modern civilization and the modern state. Finally, and in accordance with his intersectional approach to social inequality, Lohia developed a project of transformation based on what he termed the seven revolutions – *Saat Krantiyan*. These included the fight against the four kinds of inequality predominant in India – namely, and in that order, those of gender, caste, class and race, the fight against the inequality between nations, the revolution against the infringement of the individual by the collective and the promotion of a revolutionary practice based on civil disobedience.⁷⁰

Despite being invested in a form of socialism that could fit the specific needs and problems of independent India, both Nehru and Lohia shared a common international outlook, which contrasted with JP’s more provincial and individual focus. JP sought to extend the autarkic principles of *Swadeshi* nationalism and Gandhian nativism, for the sake of a ‘Total Revolution’ capable of affecting the foundations of life itself. On the other hand, both Lohia and Nehru struggled to make socialism in India relevant and attuned to the events taking place in a wider international setting. In this sense, for Nehru and Lohia, revolution was a global project. However, while Nehru became one of the main promoters of Third Worldism, Lohia was deeply critical and suspicious of his politics and those of other postcolonial national leaders. The great convulsion brought about by decolonization, he assured, had not resulted in the triumph of a revolutionary change towards greater equality: ‘No spectre,’ he declared in 1966, was ‘haunting the world or any part of it.’⁷¹

At the same time, while JP literally renounced the state, both Lohia and Nehru were deeply invested in its importance for the promotion of a socialist revolution. For JP, socialism had to transcend the increasing statism that sought ‘to reduce the people to the position of sheep’ and carry on the impulse of *Swaraj*.⁷² Nehru, for his part, became increasingly impatient with anti-statist protest during the 1950s, which he branded as an ‘immature’ and ‘absurd’ political practice and conducive to the weakening of the nation.⁷³ For his part, Lohia saw all initiatives to promote social transformation from outside the state as doomed to failure. Both Nehru and Lohia conceived of the national state as the product of the triumph of anticolonial nationalism, and as the main tool for the transformation of society. Nevertheless, their projects of socioeconomic development could not have been more at odds with each other. Nehru’s conviction that modernization through industrialization would lead India out of material poverty and put an end to unjust social structures was harshly criticized by Lohia, who actively advocated for caste reservations and the promotion of the revolutionary technology of the small machine.

Finally, beyond the formal and conceptual differences between these positions, it is important to note the ways in which they participate of opposed conceptions of revolution.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, both Nehru and JP acted on the conviction that '(t)he world (was) moving towards Socialism,' that 'the message of Socialism (was) the message of history,'⁷⁴ and that this marked a 'slow but sure' progress of man 'from barbarism to civilization.'⁷⁵ Lohia, on the other hand, had a pronounced non-teleological view of history, which he conceived of as cyclical and thus inevitably marked by perpetual instability and flux. Unlike JP or Nehru, Lohia could see no evidence to hint at the possibility of an ascending or linear progress in the movement of history. Unlike the *event* of freedom that JP longed for, or the moment of modernization that Nehru dreamt of, for Lohia socialism could only emerge as the result of a never-ending process that had to be constructed gradually through the revolutionary action of the state upon an un-revolutionary and unjust social order.

These ideological and conceptual differences would crystallize in the final and irredeemable estrangement of the three most important socialists of early independent India. This process would be complemented by an open political confrontation between the three leaders. During the 1950s, it was clearly Nehru's ideal of socialism, that emerged victorious from this battle over meanings. At the same time, however, JP and Lohia were crucial figures in the establishment of socialism as *an important category for protest* at a time, the 1950s, in which socialism was being domesticated as a central part of the roadmap for socioeconomic development of the national state across the Third World. Despite the fact that their 'battle over meanings' did not materialize in significant immediate gains for either JP or Lohia, it created a space for the emergence of original conceptions of socialism wholly unrelated to anything known elsewhere by that name. In later years, their opposing ideas of socialism would play out as part of the agitations of the JP Movement, the debates on caste reservations, the growth of the NGO sector, and the consolidation of important political parties such as the *Janata Dal* (United) and the *Rashtriya Janata Dal*.

Beyond India, both Lohia and JP were path breaking critics of Third World nationalism and its wielding of early twentieth century anticolonial utopias, especially regarding the ambiguities of sovereignty in the new nations and the harmful implications of statist developmentalism.⁷⁶ Rammanohar Lohia must be seen as a precursor to postcolonial and subalternist critiques, as well as of influential debates taking place in academia and outside it regarding the importance of epistemic justice⁷⁷ and affirmative action. For his part, in JP's socialism it is possible to find traces of an early example of the brand of politics that expanded across the globe following decolonization in Asia and Africa, and which, in sharp contrast to earlier political utopias, focused primarily on the promise of anti-politics, the potency of the social and the potential of morality.⁷⁸ As a result, the battle over meanings that engaged JP and Lohia in the 1950s must be seen as a crucial moment in the inauguration a set of political trajectories central to the contemporary political and intellectual horizon of India, as well as a particular stance of wider intellectual processes taking place during the 1950s and 1960s that would radically transform the global landscape of progressive and radical politics after the 1970s.

Notes

1. Nyerere, *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism*, 1.
2. Guevara, "Socialism and Man in Cuba."

3. Nehru, "Speech at the All India Congress Committee," in Ghose, *Socialism and Communism in India*, 206.
4. Chakrabarty, "Legacies of Bandung."
5. Narayan, "To Students. 1943," in *Jayaprakash Narayan: Selected Works*, Vol. 3, 135.
6. Cited in Scarfe and Scarfe, *J.P. His Biography*, 52.
7. Nehru Memorial Museum and Library Oral History Archives, cited in Jani, "Bihar, California and the US Midwest," 163.
8. Narayan, "The Task Before Us," in *Jayaprakash Narayan: Selected Works*, Vol. 2, 205.
9. Narayan, "Speech at a meeting of Muslims," in *Jayaprakash Narayan: Selected Works*, Vol. 4, 193.
10. Narayan, "Letter to the General Secretary of the AICC," in *Jayaprakash Narayan: Selected Works*, Vol. 1, 70.
11. Narayan, "Comment on Vallabhbhai Patel's Speech," in *Jayaprakash Narayan: Selected Works*, Vol. 1, 69.
12. Narayan, "Why Socialism?" in *Jayaprakash Narayan: Selected Works*, Vol. 2, 50–62.
13. Narayan, "In the Lahore Fort," in *Jayaprakash Narayan: Selected Works*, Vol. 3, 195.
14. Narayan, "The A.I.C.C Session."
15. Narayan, "Annual Report of the General Secretary," in *Jayaprakash Narayan: Selected Works*, Vol. 4, 236.
16. *Ibid.*, 241.
17. *Ibid.*, 240.
18. Narayan, "Reply to the debate," in *Jayaprakash Narayan: Selected Works*, Vol. 4, 246.
19. Narayan, "The Fast," in *Jayaprakash Narayan: Selected Works*, Vol. 6, 251.
20. Scarfe and Scarfe, *J.P. His Biography*, 273.
21. JP's first use of the term is found in "Jeevandan," published in *Janata*, 27 June 1954.
22. Narayan, "The Fast," 251.
23. *Ibid.*, 245.
24. *Ibid.*, 247.
25. *Ibid.*, 251.
26. Anonymous, "Indian Communists. Reports from 21 November 1922 to 10 May 1923" in Zentrum Moderner Orient, Krüger Nachlass Annex, Berlin (ZMO-A): Item 41, in Manjapra, *M. N. Roy*, 76.
27. Mirza, *Welcome Each*, xii, in Oesterheld, "Lohia as a Doctoral Student in Berlin," 86.
28. Scarfe and Scarfe, *J.P. His Biography*, 59–60.
29. Oesterheld, "Lohia as a Doctoral Student in Berlin," 86.
30. Narayan, "Cultural Variation," in *Jayaprakash Narayan: Selected Works*, Vol. 1, 1–40.
31. Oesterheld, "Lohia as a Doctoral Student in Berlin."
32. Kelkar, *Dr. Rammanohar Lohia*, 77.
33. Limaye, *Galaxy of the Indian Socialist Leaders*, 85. Parenthesis in original.
34. Election Commission of India, "Statistical Report on General Elections."
35. Lohia was an important figure of the Praja Socialist Party (1952) and the Samyukta Socialist Party (1964). For more on the trajectories of these parties see Fickett Jr., "The Major Socialist Parties of India" and "The Praja Socialist Party of India."
36. Lohia, *Marx, Gandhi and Socialism*, 245.
37. *Ibid.*, 16.
38. *Ibid.*, 26.
39. Lohia, *Wheel of History*, 23.
40. Lohia, *Interval During Politics*, 94.
41. Lohia, *Marx, Gandhi and Socialism*, 109.
42. Lohia, "Revolution Arrested," 53.
43. *Ibid.*, 52.
44. Lohia, "Caste," 30.
45. Lohia, "Presidential Address at the Pachmarhi Convention," 479.
46. Lohia, "On Hidden Imperialisms," 49.

47. Ibid., 114.
48. Narayan, "A Plea for Reconstruction," in *Jayaprakash Narayan: Selected Works*, Vol. 7, 489.
49. Narayan, "Panchayati Raj and Democracy," in *Jayaprakash Narayan: Selected Works*, Vol. 9, 34.
50. Narayan, "A Pea for Reconstruction," 441.
51. Lohia, *Wheel of History*, 82.
52. Lohia, *Marx, Gandhi and Socialism*, iii.
53. Lohia, "Presidential Address at the Pachmarhi Convention," 475.
54. Lohia, *Marx, Gandhi and Socialism*, 24.
55. Ibid., 50.
56. Ibid., 204.
57. Basole, "The Technology Question in Lohia" and Tolpadi, "Context, Discourse and Vision."
58. Narayan, "A Plea for Reconstruction," 451.
59. Narayan, "From Socialism to Sarvodaya," in *Jayaprakash Narayan: Selected Works*, Vol. 7, 227–9.
60. For more on different narratives of revolution during the second half of the twentieth century, see Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 70.
61. Kumar, "Understanding Lohia's Political Sociology."
62. Lohia, *The Caste System*, in Kumar, "Understanding Lohia's Political Sociology," 65.
63. Lohia, *Wheel of History*, 106.
64. Chakrabarty, "In the Name of Politics."
65. Lohia, *Marx, Gandhi and Socialism*, xxv.
66. Lohia, *The Caste System*, 1–3.
67. Lohia, *Wheel of History*, 28.
68. Ibid., 42–3.
69. Lohia, *The Caste System*.
70. Lohia, *Marx, Gandhi and Socialism*, xxx–xxxx.
71. Lohia, "Revolution Arrested," 51.
72. Narayan, "From Socialism to Sarvodaya," 245.
73. Nehru, "Students and Discipline," in *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, edited by Sarvepalli Gopal, Second Series: Vol. 29, 83.
74. Narayan, "Presidential Address at the Second Convention," in *Jayaprakash Narayan: Selected Works*, Vol. 4, 200.
75. Nehru, *Glimpses of World History*, 6.
76. Patel and McMichael, "Third Worldism and the Lineages of Global Fascism."
77. See, for example, de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*.
78. For a revision of related theoretical and political changes in radical politics after the 1970s, see Moyn, *The Last Utopia* and Zamora and Behrent, *Foucault and Neoliberalism*.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Swapna Kona Nayudu for her generous enthusiasm and careful reading of early drafts.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was funded by the Programa de Becas Posdoctorales de la UNAM 2017, and completed at the *Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, UNAM*.

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