CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Hegemonic and Counter-Hegemonic Generative Politics

The late twentieth century was marked by an outpouring of scholarship hailing the arrival of a new politics that departed dramatically from the “old” political party model that characterized the twentieth century. The World Social Forum (WSF) in particular signified the culmination of a new era of political mobilizing that brought together activists and civil society organizations from the local to the global within one continuous, dynamic space (e.g., de Sousa Santos, 2006; Fisher and Ponniah, 2003; Mertes, 2004). This recent literature highlights the fact that under processes of neoliberal globalization, more and more people (especially the poor, disenfranchised, and landless) are exorcised from decision-making processes that directly affect the quality of their lives—from basic livelihood issues to the institutional allocation of resources. As a result, the literature has focused on social movement responses to the tremendous economic inequalities that divide the rich and the poor, the Global North from the Global South, tending to dismiss political parties as anachronistic relics from a bygone era. The focus on social movements, however, overlooks the continued importance of political parties in shaping the contours of political and economic development. This book, thus, looks at the role political parties play in fostering patterns of democratic, egalitarian development.

While perhaps not capturing the imagination of the global Left, political parties in many peripheral countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America are important political actors, engaged in coordinating the panoply of voices into coherent political projects using many of the same practices as the celebrated global social movements. Unlike social movements, however, political parties do not focus their energy primarily on protest politics, but engage in generative politics in order to build new institutions and channels for mass participation. Thus, in the search for “another world” some political parties, and more surprisingly some communist parties, in the Global South have revisited their ideological foundations and developed
dramatically new understandings of party-civil society synergies that bridge participatory and representative democracy in both political and economic spheres. The activities of these parties are significant as they turn our attention from the level of global social movements to the level of local practice and reveal the vibrant role political parties can play in empowering people. The central question animating this study is why have some parties been more successful in engaging the state and civil society to initiate more equitable and democratic development?

The Communist Party of India (Marxist)’s (CPI(M)) and the South African Communist Party’s (SACP) recent efforts in democratic transformation in Kerala and South Africa represent a challenge to the dominant wisdom permeating our thinking about twenty-first-century alternatives. Both parties have sought a politics that facilitates the capacity of ordinary citizens to participate in decision-making processes and have thus been at the forefront in pursuing a politics that engages the state in order to build new institutions and organizational strategies moored in participatory and representative democracy.¹ In Kerala the 1990s were marked by an extensive democratic decentralization campaign that included devolving significant financial and decision-making authority to lower tiers of government through participatory democratic institutions. In South Africa, the 1994 African National Congress (ANC) election victory ended the oldest liberation struggle on the continent and marked the beginning of the consolidation of a democratic South Africa that extended adult suffrage to the entire population and developed institutional mechanisms for participatory democratic politics.

In a global context in which political parties—and especially communist parties—are seen as anathema to dynamic social movements (e.g., de Sousa Santos, 2007; Holloway, 2002; Escobar, 1992; Klein, 2004), the efforts by the SACP and CPI(M) offer a powerful corrective to much of our scholarship on emancipatory politics. How do we understand political parties that are organizing and mobilizing in similar ways as global social movements? In this book, I undertake a comparative analysis that follows the CPI(M)’s and SACP’s ideology and practices over the course of the 1990s. Drawing lessons from their experiences, I argue that democratic, emancipatory politics requires transforming the state and to do this requires political parties with deep roots in civil society.

Looking to two communist parties in the Global South might seem an unlikely place to find inspiration for theorizing the constituent elements of an egalitarian, democratic politics. Indeed, since the 1950s Western scholarship² on communism has painted a monolithic and devastating picture of the deleterious effects of communist parties, interested as it was in the Soviet Union’s undemocratic and authoritarian control of the international communist movement (e.g., Claudin, 1975; Talmon, 1952; Selznick, 1952; Arendt, 1951; Marcuse, 1958). While the influence of this anticomunist genre of scholarship still bears its mark on academic literature, there have been studies interested in the implications of the collapse of the Soviet Union for socialist futures. For example, there have been studies on the causes and consequences of the demise of the Soviet Union (Miliband, 1991; Habermas, 1991; Hobsbawm, 1991), studies on the link between the fall of the Soviet Union and the expansion of neoliberalism (Eyal, 2002) as well as theoretical statements on the future possibilities of various