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The World Social Forum : Great Success, Shaky Future, Passé ?

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I have attended most meetings of the World Social Forum since the second one at Porto Alegre in 2002. I have done so because I have believed that it has been the “only show in town” for the world Left in the twenty-first century, the one most likely to achieve that other world that is possible. Ever since that first meeting I attended in 2002, I have been witness to a continuing debate about the merits and future of the WSF, a debate in which more or less the same arguments have been repeated endlessly.

There have always been three basic assessments among those who have attended and written about it : That it has been and continues to be a great success; that it has at best a somewhat shaky future; that it may have once been useful but is now passé. Of course, there have also been some who have derided it from the outset and refused to attend. Among those who have attended and therefore have thought, at least at one time, that it has been a useful institution, there is one outstanding characteristic. The debate among them has been remarkably civil, relatively free from the denunciatory and sectarian polemics that crippled the world left throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The debate may have been civil but it has been intense and revolved around several different themes. One has concerned the structure of the WSF itself : Between those who thought it should be an open forum without collective leadership and official positions but rather a horizontal meeting-ground of all those who are left-of-centre and those who wanted it to be a movement of movements that would engage in some forms of direct political action. A second debate has been about who shall be allowed to attend. Shall NGOs be admitted alongside social movements ? Shall political parties and movements that engage in violence be excluded ? A third has concerned how it should be financed, that is, whose financial support shall be sought and accepted. A fourth has been whether and to what degree it should engage in ‘dialogue’ with the World Economic Forum.

Over the years, the WSF has managed to expand its geographic inclusiveness, but still incompletely. It has been able to improve in multiple ways how the actual meetings have been conducted - both by encouraging bottom-up programming and reducing the multiplicity of

sessions by encouraging cooperation among persons interested in the same themes. It has been able to improve, but again still incompletely, the transparency of its decision-making. And despite all of this, the three basic evaluations - great success, shaky future, and passé - have remained constant.

What underlies this continuing debate is, in my view, the uncertainty of the world left as to how it should reorganise its global strategy following the transformatory experience of the world-revolution of 1968. I don't think we can make sense of the debate internal to the WSF without assessing two things : The historic trajectory of antisystemic movements in the world-system since the mid-nineteenth century, and the trajectory of capitalism as a historic social system. Let me take each in turn, and then see how this affects our evaluation of the potentialities of the WSF as a structure that may or may not be able to contribute to achieving another world that is possible.

I

Antisystemic Movement

The story of the antisystemic movements starts, in my view, with what I call the world-revolution of 1848. The historians generally use two descriptive phrases about what happened in 1848. First of all, they talk of the “social revolution” in France, which started in February and was quashed by June. The significance of that social revolution is that it was the first attempt by workers, some workers, to make a revolution that was anti-bourgeois. It was a political failure, analysed in great detail by Marx in the 18th Brumaire.³⁹

But 1848 was also the “springtime of the nations”, which refers to the multiple attempts in various European nations - Germany, Italy, Hungary, Poland and others - to achieve either national unity or national independence with ‘liberal’ constitutions. These revolutions too were quashed after some initial success. It should be noted that 1848 marked also the first important meeting of feminists seeking suffrage. They assembled in Seneca Falls, NY, in the United States. And while the feminists too had no immediate success, this meeting more or less launched feminism as an organisational force in the modern world-system.

The significance of the world-revolution of 1848 is to be found in the conclusions that adherents of the three ideological currents drew from what happened. The ‘liberals’ who had, prior to 1848, been in great conflict with the ‘conservatives’ were deeply frightened - less by the nationalist revolutions, which seemed to them ‘liberal’ in spirit, than by the social revolution in France. They suddenly seemed to realise that the

radical elements in the working classes, previously considered a minor adjunct to the liberals were to be taken seriously as an autonomous political force. As Marx said, "a spectre [was] haunting Europe, the spectre of communism". As a result, liberals favoured measures that would hold these radical forces in check. In France, for example, they moved towards accepting the ascension of Louis-Napoleon because of his potential to repress the radicals.

The 'conservatives' however drew a quite different conclusion. They noted that the one country that did not have a revolution in 1848 was England, although this was the country that seemed to have had the strongest radical movement in Europe, the Chartists. What they noticed is that - under the leadership of a conservative, Sir Robert Peel, and even that of his more conservative predecessor, the Duke of Wellington - England had made a number of 'concessions' to more 'radical' demands - for example, concerning the rights of Catholics, the suffrage, and the Repeal of the Corn Laws. These 'concessions' seemed not to have strengthened the radicals but rather to have vitiated the level of popular anger that underlay their political position. The conclusion the continental 'conservatives' drew from this analysis was to turn away from the stance of total 'reactionary' refusal of any change (as had been practiced by Metternich) and to move instead towards a more flexible outlook, in imitation of English conservatives.

And the 'radicals' - sometimes called at the time republicans, socialists, or communists - drew the conclusion that spontaneous uprisings, such as those that had been vigorously preached by Blanqui, were not likely to be politically effective. They saw the need for 'organising' for change by creating movements that had continuing hierarchical structures, whose purpose was to educate their potential followers and prepare the struggle for the revolution over a longer time scale.

In the next thirty years or so, two things happened. At first, the radical forces were suppressed with some vigour in most countries. And the liberals proved quite timid about promoting their own programme of prudent socio-political change under the guidance of competent experts. However, a new brand of political figures - the so-called enlightened conservatives - moved in to implement the programme that the liberals had advocated but been too timid to carry out.

Napoleon III in France, in his second decade in office, relaxed repressive measures and permitted labour organisations to emerge, while maintaining universal male suffrage. Benjamin Disraeli in Great Britain enacted a significant extension of male suffrage in 1867, on the gamble, which turned out to be successful, that there would be a significant segment of enfranchised workers who would support the Conservative Party in future elections. And in Germany, after its unification in 1871,

Bismarck enacted the beginnings of the welfare state as well as the extension of the suffrage.

We might designate this as the 'triumph of centrist liberalism' and note that the conservatives were now pursuing what was in fact a mere variant of liberal ideology. The question was now what would the 'radicals' do. In the last third of the nineteenth century, both the social movements (workers in the pan-European world) and 'nationalists' in the various 'empires' within the world-system engaged in serious discussions about strategy.

Within the social movements, the struggle was between the anarchists and the Marxists. It was basically an argument about how they should relate to existing states. Anarchists regarded the states as total enemies, which had to be shunned and destroyed. Marxists argued that the road to transform the world required taking state power as the necessary interim step. A parallel strategy debate took place among the nationalist movements - between 'cultural' nationalists and 'political' nationalists, once again revolving around how to regard the state. Cultural nationalists wanted to transform the 'people' by reviving languages, customs, and local values. Political nationalists insisted it was necessary to obtain state power (by secession or unification) as the necessary interim measure.

The Marxists and the political nationalists felt they were political realists, deriding what they considered to be the romantic assumptions of the anarchists and the cultural nationalists. The anarchists and the cultural nationalists warned that seeking state power would actually undermine rather than achieve the objectives of the movements. The outcome of the debate was that the Marxists and the political nationalists won out and began to implement their two-step strategy : First obtain state power, then change the world. And collectively, the social movement (which came to be divided between those who sought state power via suffrage and those who called for insurrection) and the national movement constituted what came later to be called the Old Left.

The emphasis on obtaining state power led the radicals in turn to become in fact merely a variant of centrist liberalism in the same way that enlightened conservatism had transformed the conservatives into a variant of centrist liberalism. And in the period 1945-1968, both varieties of social movement - the Communists and Social Democrats - and the national liberation movements all seemed to accomplish the first step of the two-step strategy. The Communists came to state power in the East, the so-called socialist bloc. The Social Democrats (under multiple labels) came to power in the West, the pan-European world. To be sure, it was 'alternating' power, but alternating power in regimes in which the conservative parties accepted the basic programme of the social-democrats, the welfare state. And the national liberation movements came to power in the South - in colonies that became

independent states, in semi-colonial countries where more militantly nationalist regimes came to power, and in Latin America where more populist regimes came to power.

So what had seemed so difficult to imagine in the last third of the nineteenth century - the coming to power of the Old Left movements - actually occurred quite rapidly and dramatically in the post-1945 period. Step one of their strategy was achieved. But what about step two - transforming the world? The multiple movements we lump together under the label of the world-revolution of 1968 (which actually took place between 1966 and 1970) were all about step two. They said to the Old Left movements, 'You may have come to power but you have definitely not transformed the world. There are still great economic inequalities. The new regimes are not in fact democratic. There is still a class system, perhaps under different names such as Nomenklatura. And the supposed champion of world anti-capitalist revolution, the USSR, is in collusive partnership with the world's hegemonic power, the champion of world capitalism, the USA'.

Just as in 1848, so in 1968, the revolutionary movements had some initial political successes in many parts of the world, but were quashed soon thereafter. However, there was one extremely important consequence of the world-revolution of 1968. The ability of centrist liberals to hold both the conservative right and the radical left forces in check as their avatars collapsed. The world-system became once again the arena of three competing ideologies. Both the left and the right were liberated to be what they had set out to be in the wake of the French Revolution.

II

The WSF

If we wish to understand the dilemmas of the WSF therefore, we must start by realising that in this transformed situation post 1968, the revitalised conservatives were at first far more politically successful. What we today call 'neo-liberalism' is really aggressive rightwing conservatism. This form of aggressive right came to political power in Great Britain in 1979 when Margaret Thatcher became the Prime Minister and in the United States in 1980, with the election of Ronald Reagan. Both transformed first their political parties and then their country's economic and social policies.

The key programmatic change that Thatcher and Reagan led was embodied both in the new discourse of 'globalisation' and also in the new set of global policies that we have come to call the Washington Consensus. In the world economic stagnation that began in the 1970s,

country after country ran into suffering from balance of payments deficits. And when they sought relief, the IMF - with the strong support of the US Treasury - imposed on these countries the requirements of so-called structural adjustment. Structural adjustment meant renouncing import substitution as a policy in favour of export-oriented production. It meant reducing the size of the civil service, undoing what welfare state provisions a country had in place, privatising state enterprises, and allowing free movement of capital in and out of the country. Mrs Thatcher said there was no alternative - the famous TINA - but of course there was no alternative precisely because of the strong hand of the IMF.

What we have to remember is that it was not only the South that suffered these drastic conditions but much of the so-called socialist bloc which also needed to borrow money on the world financial market. The net result was the collapse of most Old Left governments both in the South and the East, as a result of popular anger over their economic suffering, culminating in the disintegration of the USSR in 1991.

The world Right proclaimed victory - the presumed victory of the United States in the cold war, the presumed victory of capitalism over socialism as an economic programme. Neither victory was to prove more than an illusion, but the illusion was widespread in the early 1990s, and one result was enormous disarray among left forces throughout the world. The Old Left had been routed by the world-revolutionaries of 1968, and their movements were forced from state power in the 1980s because of their inability to sustain the economic position of their citizens. The resurgent neoliberal Right acclaimed itself a historical 'victor' in 1989-1991. And large numbers of Left leaders, intellectuals, and followers despondently believed they were correct.

What kind of strategy could now rescue the world Left ? The gloom of the world Left did not last too long, as the world's peoples saw that the promises of the world Right of renewed prosperity were vapid, if not totally dishonest. A counter-offensive of the world Left began in the mid-1990s with three formative events : The neo-Zapatista uprising in Chiapas in 1994; the successful demonstrations at the Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organisation in Seattle in 1999; and the founding meeting of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2001. It is the different lessons of these three events that explain the conflicts about strategy within the WSF and more generally within the world movement for social justice. It is by reviewing the message of the three events that we can clarify what kind of overall strategy might actually work in the next decade or two.

Before, however, I outline what I think are the strategic choices we are making, I must intrude one important assumption which others may or may not share. I believe that the capitalist world-economy is in its terminal phase, faced with a structural crisis that it cannot contain, and that therefore the question before everyone is not whether or not the present

system will survive but what kind of system will replace it. I do not have space here to explain this assumption. I refer readers to two places where I have outlined my views in greater detail - an article in the *New Left Review* in 2010 and a book written in 1998.⁴⁰

The key relevance of this assumption, in discussing future strategy for the world Left, is that capitalism as a historical system cannot survive and will disappear in the next 20-50 years. That seems to be certain. But what will succeed it is totally uncertain and inherently unpredictable. We have entered a phase of historic transformation that takes the form of a bifurcation, that is, a 'choice' between two alternative modes of bringing order out of chaos, thereby constructing a new, relatively stable world-system (or multiple world-systems). I call this choice one between the spirit of Davos and the spirit of Porto Alegre.

The spirit of Davos refers to those who wish to replace the existing capitalist world-system with a different one that retains its three essential characteristics : Hierarchy, exploitation, and polarisation. There are many ways to achieve this that are not capitalist. The spirit of Porto Alegre refers to those who want another world that is possible, that is, one that is relatively democratic and relatively egalitarian.

III

Lessons

Let us now look at the lessons we have drawn from what I think of as the three formative events - Chiapas, Seattle, and Porto Alegre in 2001. The neo-Zapatistas launched their struggle against US imperialism (embodied in the NAFTA agreements) and the Mexican state by fighting for the right of the peoples of Chiapas to control their own lives under their own institutions. They demanded that the Mexican state withdraw its army from the region and recognise their local institutions as having juridical primacy.

It is important to underline what they did not demand. They did not ask to take power in the Mexican state. Instead, they offered their support to all movements and peoples throughout Mexico and throughout the entire world that fought for their autonomy and their right to follow their own paths. They built their movement, the EZLN, around the principle of *mandar obediendo* ('lead by obeying') - a concept intended to constrain the leadership to be followers, not the avant-garde.

What the neo-Zapatistas started has bloomed into a panoply of strong movements among the so-called indigenous peoples of all the Americas, and indeed beyond the Americas - movements that speak the

language of a civilisational crisis, movements deeply suspicious of the revival of Old Left modes of operation, movements however that seek lateral ties with other comparable local movements and peoples everywhere.⁴¹

The lessons of Seattle are quite different. The Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organisation was intended to be the one in which the principle of guaranteeing intellectual property rights would be adopted by the member states of the WTO and therefore end, or at least constrain, the ability of states in the global South to interfere with the trade dominance of the large multinational corporations in all those fields in which they had obtained patents. In a sense, this was to be the capstone of the Washington Consensus, and the world's dominant forces thought that this treaty was a sure thing to be enacted.

To their surprise, the WTO meeting was met with popular demonstrations of a massive sort, which brought together in a common objective - stop the meeting - three widely different popular forces that had hitherto been unwilling to cooperate with each other : Radical anarchists, trade-unionists, and environmentalists. What surprised everyone was that those who were demonstrating were very largely from the United States (not the usual source of radical demonstrations) and that, despite the different priorities of the three groups, their de facto collaboration was successful.

The demonstrators in effect brought the meeting to a halt. The WTO never adopted the treaty on intellectual property rights, and has never since been able to resume effective functioning as an international institution. The demonstrators had won. The lesson was that collective political action can work. This sort of action was then successfully repeated at the a number of other international meetings in the next few years, until the organisers of these meetings realised they had to locate their meetings in remote corners of the world where police could block the very access of the protestors to the sites. Protest had sent the world's dominant forces into well-defended ghettos, somewhat akin to the Green Zone the US military found it necessary to establish in Baghdad.

The message of Seattle is the one that has been persistently put forth within the WSF by those who have called for the concentration on direct political action - as the only efficacious method to move towards that other world that is possible.

The last formative event was the initial meeting of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2001. One of the facts that impelled the convening of the WSF was the lesson drawn from the counter-reaction of the world right to Seattle. The attempt of groups to demonstrate at the Davos meeting in 2000 was in effect derailed by the actions of the Swiss government to block access to the country and the site of potential demonstrators.

A group of Brazilian left organisations and a spirited group of French activists organised under the banner of ATTAC-France came up with the idea that instead of demonstrating at the Davos meeting, they should hold a counter-meeting at the same time as Davos, locate this counter-meeting somewhere in the global South, and invite the world's social movements to attend. This came in 2001 to be the first meeting of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre. It was called the World Social Forum to mark its opposition to the World Economic Forum, the official name of the meeting at Davos.

The initial meeting of the WSF proclaimed itself open to all those were opposed to neoliberal globalisation and imperialism in all its forms. Porto Alegre turned out to be a great success, far beyond what had been anticipated. Twice as many people came as were expected. The world's press took note of it. Many political, intellectual, and movement notables attended. Participants were enthusiastic. To be sure, the attendance was geographically a bit lopsided - primarily persons from the southern cone of Latin America and from France and Italy. But attendance would begin to broaden as of the second WSF. What the first WSF had demonstrated was that the forum model of horizontal discussion among the movements worked and had positive political consequences.

IV

Conclusions

So what can we learn from the impact of these three formative events, which were exemplary moments ? We learn from Chiapas that an organisational process that gave priority to civilisational change and rejected seeking state power works. We learn from Seattle that organised political demonstrations that bring together various movements in direct political action works. We learn from the first WSF that horizontal debate among vastly different movements that are left-of-centre works. All three are contradictory modes of action work.

What I conclude from these lessons is that it is not only possible to move forward with all these methods simultaneously but that it is imperative to do so if we are to have a real impact on the choice of a new historical social system, one that is truly better than our present one. What we have to do is not to choose among these three organisational tactics but rather to figure out how we can in practice do all of them at the same time. I do not think this is a fantasy, but I concede that it is very difficult.

There is one last element to put into the picture of developing a strategy of change. That element is time scale. All humans operate on a

dual time scale - the immediate future (three years at most) and the middle term (say twenty to fifty years). Individuals, families, communities must all survive in the immediate present. No one can afford merely to wait for middle-term change. And in the immediate present, what takes priority, especially in a time of chaotic transformation, is minimising the pain. Movements that do not participate in the short-run struggle to minimise the pain will find no resonance - should find no resonance - in the world's population at large.

Minimising the pain in the short run is a game of constantly changing political alliances, which always amount to choosing the lesser evil. To be sure, we have to choose wisely, but there is no way we can choose other than the lesser evil if we wish to minimise the pain. Purist preferences are what Lenin justly denounced as "infantile leftism".⁴²

However, the choice is completely different in the middle run. In the middle run, there are no compromises, only choices. There can be no 'dialogue' between the advocates of the spirit of Porto Alegre and the spirit of Davos. There is only struggle. So the next part of our tactics is learning how to combine the short-term tactics of the lesser evil with the middle-term tactics of total commitment to a fundamentally different and far better historical system than the one we have now. Capitalism cannot be reformed, and in any case will not survive. We need a relatively democratic and relatively egalitarian world, and this is the opposite of what the advocates of the spirit of Davos really want, even those who seem most ready to use 'progressive' terminology.

If the question is whether the World Social Forum as an institution will continue to be the principal framework for the world movement for social justice and a better historical system, my answer is that I am not sure. It is however the best framework we have at present. And I for one think we should continue to try to use it. If however in several years it is not functioning - because it has not learned how to combine the three different tactics and priorities - then we may have to create an alternative. Let us first however make the effort to realise the fusion of the three seemingly contradictory tactics and priorities.

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