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The Left after Porto Alegre

THE GEOGRAPHY OF the current anti-globalization protests signals a new world-political landscape for the Left. In a sense, this is a reversal of that historic shift of which Isaac Deutscher spoke—the relocation of the anti-capitalist movement from its nineteenth-century origins in Western Europe to Russia, then China. Behind this millennial transformation, of course, lies the earthquake that brought down the Soviet bloc; set China on course for a pragmatic integration with the capitalist market; provoked an identity crisis—and then a political one—in social democracy and the old mass Communist Parties; and led to the selective immiseration of the Third World. An entire topography of the Left was obliterated in that upheaval. From its ruins—in Chiapas or Porto Alegre, Seattle, Genoa, Barcelona and elsewhere—have grown the groups and networks that are now questioning neoliberal globalization. They point towards an entirely new ideological, political and geographical design.

Chiapas: an impoverished region of southern Mexico. Seattle: symbol of the microchip and American postmodernity. Porto Alegre: a ‘European’ city in Brazil’s deep south, run by a party that claims to represent its workers. What kind of movement can arise from such social and geographic diversity? In a country not known for its leftist traditions, Porto Alegre has suddenly emerged as the emblem of the new

groupings, the point at which a host of hopes and fears, illusions and questions converge.

I

The development of the Brazilian Left was delayed relative to that of other countries in the region. Although its Communist and Socialist parties were founded at roughly the same time, the late 1910s or early 1920s, Brazil's socio-economic formation—its coffee economy and low level of industrialization—made it impossible for these forces to acquire the critical mass of those in Argentina, Chile or Uruguay. A comparison between the national-populist programmes of Vargas in Brazil and Perón in Argentina points up the distinction. In response to the devastating consequences of the Wall Street crash, Vargas took power in 1930—overthrowing a conservative, primary-exporting government—in an essentially agrarian country. The state had little difficulty in harnessing, both politically and institutionally, the syndicalist structures through which he promoted the rights of a limited urban working class. In Argentina, by contrast, it was a progressive, Radical government, which had played a leading role in university reform in Córdoba in the late 1910s, that fell victim to the 1929 disaster. A military regime that would renegotiate Argentina's dependency on regressive terms was in place throughout the thirties and early forties. When Perón seized power in 1943 it was at the head of a socially constituted working class, with a clear political and ideological trajectory and a distinct set of traditions—Perón had to defeat socialist and communist influence in order to project himself as the people's leader. Vargas had far less difficulty in imposing his rule (as dictator, from 1930–45; as elected president, 1950–54), due to the weakness and political backwardness of the Brazilian working class.

One of the consequences of this fragility was that the nationalist labour-communist coalition that had backed Vargas virtually disappeared after the military coup in 1964. The *trabalhistas*, who owed their strength entirely to the state apparatus, the Labour Ministry in particular, ceased to exist once this had been taken over by the junta, whose first measures decreed the military supervision of all trade unions, a wage freeze, and police persecution of working-class leaders. The Communists' strategy of subordinate alliance with the 'national bourgeoisie' collapsed in ruins, and the Party effectively disappeared.

Thanks to its important geostrategic position, the sixties' coup in Brazil occurred relatively early compared to others in Latin America—1964, the same year as Bolivia's; 1966 saw a failed putsch attempt in Argentina, successfully pushed through ten years later; the military seized power in Chile and Uruguay in 1973. Although the Left was weaker in Brazil than elsewhere, ferment in the countryside on a hitherto unseen scale and the politicization of lower-ranking army officers was considered a risk to national security both by Washington and by the upper echelons of the armed forces, concentrated in the Escola Superior de Guerra.

Coming at this stage, the Brazilian coup allowed the military dictatorship a honeymoon period during the final years of the long postwar boom. An influx of surplus dollars funded economic expansion, albeit based on exports and the luxury-goods sector.¹ Growth rates exceeded 10 per cent per year, right up to the international capitalist crisis of 1973. Even then, while practically every other economy was entering recession, Brazil's rates merely decreased to between 5 and 7 per cent. The expansionist momentum was maintained up to the end of the seventies by loans and dubious public-works projects—football stadiums, the still unfinished Transamazonian highway, large hydroelectric plants and other grandiose affairs. At this point the boomerang of borrowing and state spending came back, bringing to a close five decades of continuous growth that had transformed the country in almost every respect, while leaving it choked with debt, inflation and public deficits. This crisis resulted not just in a 'lost decade', but an era of virtual stagnation, with indices of economic expansion barely exceeding demographic growth.

Left resistance to the military coup mostly took the desperate route of armed struggle between 1967 and 1971, all other methods being ruled out by the repression. Despite a few spectacular actions, this strategy proved unable to accumulate forces on a mass level. Following the Left's defeat there was a broad liberal hegemony over the opposition to the dictatorship, ideologically oriented by the 'authoritarianism' theses of Fernando Henrique Cardoso—then gaining prestige as an intellectual trying to start a political career. This force crystallized in a broad party—the Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (MDB)—grouping together all elements of the legal opposition. Alongside it, a

¹ See Ruy Mauro Marini, *Dialéctica de la dependencia*, Mexico 1973.

grass-roots trade unionism began to develop from the devastation of the earlier syndicalist tradition.

The old unions had been based in state enterprises—oil, transport and public services—with Rio de Janeiro, the former capital, their focal point. The core of the new worker militancy lay in the automobile plants on the outskirts of São Paulo—socio-economically, by this stage, Brazil's most important city. Car production has driven Brazilian industrial growth since the fifties, and still accounts for a quarter of the country's GDP. With their strong class-consciousness and visceral hostility to a military regime bent on wage-freeze policies, these unions would forge the nucleus of the largest new party of the Brazilian Left, the Partido dos Trabalhadores. Their leader, Luis Inácio da Silva, known as Lula, a migrant from the impoverished, rural northeast, would be its head.

The PT brought together progressive elements of the Catholic Church—transformed, under the influence of liberation theology, from component of the military regime to haven for social activists—with civil-rights campaigners, Trotskyists, Maoists and former guerrillas, under the hegemony of Lula's militant trade unionists. Since its foundation, the PT has been the major player on the Brazilian Left. Its role has changed from that of a party of resistance to the dictatorship—and to the subsequent transition to a partial democracy that maintained the world's highest income disparity—into a national alternative to government. Lula has been runner up in every presidential election since 1989, with the PT consistently gaining a plurality—30 per cent—of the vote; by the time this appears, he could be President-elect of Brazil. The PT has won a series of municipal elections, and has a record of successful local administrations marked by their social policies, their transparency, their engagement with popular movements and, above all—as in Porto Alegre—their participatory budgets.

II

Porto Alegre is the capital of Brazil's southernmost state, Rio Grande do Sul, abutting on Uruguay and Argentina. This frontier character gives it a special status. Despite Brazil's vast territories, debouching onto every country in South America save Chile and Ecuador, nearly all its borders are impassable. Jungle and mountain block the route to Bolivia,

Colombia, Peru and Venezuela. The Paraná crossings to Paraguay are the only other exception. Early on, then, Rio Grande do Sul became a military stronghold and, once the Brazilian army began intervening in government, shortly after the vicious war of the Triple Alliance in 1865–70, an important power base in national politics. Many of the country's leading figures have come from here—Getúlio Vargas himself, João Goulart, president from 1961–64, Leonel Brizola, ex-state governor and currently leader of the Partido Democrático Trabalhista—not to mention several high officials of the military dictatorship, including three presidents: Costa e Silva, Garrastazu Médici and João Figueiredo.

The PT has inherited the state's politicized tradition, in a more radical form. In 1988, Olívio Dutra—trade unionist, bank employee and founder member of the PT—was elected mayor of Porto Alegre. His deputy, Tarso Genro—lawyer and ex-militant of the clandestine opposition, now standing as the PT candidate for state governor—developed the concept of the participatory budget. This consists of shifting decisions on how to allocate municipal resources from the City Council to popular assemblies. The process has politicized budgetary debates, taking them out of the technocratic and legislative sphere, allowing broad public debate about funding priorities and their social and political implications. Throughout the year, a series of assemblies decide where the money should go, follow up on implementation and make a balance sheet of the results. This process has become the PT's trump card, differentiating and legitimizing its administration through mobilizing its citizens—to the extent that the other parties now include a diluted version in their programmes.

III

When the idea of holding a Social Forum, in opposition to the Economic Forum in Davos, was first floated, Bernard Cassen of *Le Monde diplomatique* suggested it take place in Porto Alegre—a city on the periphery, whose participatory budgets had become emblematic of an alternative approach. In other words, it was the success of specific political measures, implemented by a Left party through a process of democratic state reforms involving a strengthening of the public domain, that initially attracted the moving spirits of the Social Forum to Porto Alegre. In spite of this, the Organizing Committee of both the first and second Social

Forums was mainly composed of NGOs, with only minority representation for the country's two main social movements—the CUT trade union federation, under the central leadership of the PT, and the Sem Terra, identified with the Party's more radical base. It was due to this central role of NGOs that the Forum assumed the function of a meeting place for 'civil society'—a key notion for the new movements—with all the multiple and diverse meanings this concept provides. This is not the place to explore their genealogy, but two features—one inclusive, one exclusive—need to be pointed out. The first relates to the use of NGOs as agents for neoliberalism within civil society—particularly through the World Bank's tactic of using these organizations to implement its social-compensation policies. Mexico has been a test-site for these attempts—increasingly so, under Fox. The NGO practice of entering into 'partnerships' with big business—though never announced as such—is another aspect of the same problem. The ambiguities this overlap has created have not, as yet, had a negative impact on the anti-neoliberal character of the Forum, established under the strong propulsion of another founding element, the anti-WTO demonstrations in Seattle.

The second, exclusive aspect of the emphasis on 'civil society' lies in its rejection of parties and governments, its embrace of the civil society/state opposition. This is more serious, not only because it means rejecting a potential weapon in a radically unequal contest but also, and more importantly, because the movement thus distances itself from the themes of power, the state, public sphere, political leadership and even, in a sense, from ideological struggle—elements that were essential to the choice of Porto Alegre as the Forums' venue. The result of this exclusion of parties and state, if pushed through, would severely limit the formulation of any alternatives to neoliberalism, confining such aspirations to a local or sectoral context—the NGOs' mantra, 'Think global, act local'; proposals for fair trade; 'ecologically sustainable development'—while giving up any attempt to build an alternative hegemony, or any global proposals to counter and defeat world capitalism's current neoliberal project. These limitations were acutely embodied in the structure of the first two Forums, organized, respectively, into twenty-four and twenty-seven round-table discussions on extremely fragmented themes which tended to dissipate still further—giving the whole an academic overtone, with a corresponding intellectual division of labour. The general lectures were more like testimonies from people connected in some

way to the movement—and the most successful, at the first Forum, were all made precisely by leaders of parties or social movements—Lula, João Pedro Stedile, José Bové or Eduardo Galeano.

The very act of defining themselves as ‘non-governmental’ explicitly rejects any ambition on the NGOs’ part for an alternative hegemonic project, which would, by its nature, have to include states and governments as the means through which political and economic power is articulated in modern societies. They therefore either insert themselves, explicitly or implicitly, within the liberal critique of the state’s actions, or else limit their activity to the sphere of civil society—which, defined in opposition to the state, also ends at the boundaries of liberal politics. In fact, the very concept of ‘civil society’ masks the class nature of its components—multinational corporations, banks and mafia, set next to social movements, trade unions, civic bodies—while collectively demonizing the state. The leading role of NGOs in the resistance to neoliberalism is a sign of the movement’s defensive character, still unable to formulate an alternative hegemonic strategy. A move that brought together the struggle against US imperial dominance with the anti-capitalist elements of the movements would mark the beginning of an offensive, politicized phase in its development.

As the old Left got weaker, lost its mass base or deserted the field, the space of anti-neoliberal resistance was occupied by NGO-type groupings, deliberately distanced from the political arena and thus from any serious reflection on strategy; it was as if this whole area had been abandoned to the enemy. A new class of global citizenship was proposed, transcending national frontiers—the loss of power and political debility of the nation-state were simply taken for granted. Thus the Zapatistas gained international recognition, on the internet and through the global media, which was then projected back into their country of origin. At national level, they are still fighting for an acknowledgement of their right to exist. On the other hand, in a way that differs somewhat from liberalism, the idea of civil society has been used by social movements, NGOs and civil-rights groups that still proclaim their opposition to the state, governments, parliaments and political parties, while searching for ‘partnerships’ with multinational corporations.

IV

The new is always hard to grasp, especially when it emerges within a landscape transformed from that in which the previous events occurred. The picture presented by the Social Forums would be incomprehensible within the frameworks that have characterized earlier attempts at international co-ordination—that of the Internationals, for example, or the Third World-dominated Non-Aligned Movement. The world of work intrinsic to the First International, in particular—where solidarity was premised on the universalized exploitation of labour—has been transformed. Not industrial workers but farmers' unions, from peripheral or semi-peripheral countries, have a significant presence at the Forums. They are held in the Third World, and a large fraction of the participants are from the South, but the movement's largest demonstrations since Seattle have been in countries of the core—Genoa, Barcelona—where the young subproletariat has played a central role. Comparisons with the Internationals, the Bandung Conference or Woodstock—the media's favourite—can thus fail to capture the historical specificity of the Forums, and the very different set of elements that are combining here to construct a new subjectivity in the fight for a post-neoliberal order.²

It was the mass working-class movements of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries that provided the basis for the Internationals, throwing up Socialist and Communist parties, trade unions, workers' representatives in parliament and manifold forms of cultural expression. Politically, the scenario is now quite different. The long-established parties of the European Left were largely absent from the first Forum, and had only a minimal presence at the second. The reasons for this lie both in the ideological crisis caused by social democracy's conversion to neoliberalism and in the declining weight, or real implantation, of these currents. Labour-movement concerns were raised instead by the new trade unions of the semi-periphery—South Africa, Korea, Brazil. If common motifs can be traced between the Forum and the First International—the insurgent, pluralist, libertarian, highly ideologized character of the mobilizations; social heterogeneity; internationalism; opposition to a liberal free-trade order—it is impossible to grasp the meaning of the new forms without an examination of the historical

² See Manuel Monereo, 'Porto Alegre II: en transición', *Memoria* 158, April 2002; Michael Hardt, 'Today's Bandung?', *NLR* 14, March–April 2002.

rupture that divides them. For what splits the two asunder is the defeat and disappearance of all that once constituted ‘actually existing socialism’, and the transformation this has wrought upon the Left.

From the moment of the Bolshevik revolution—and especially since the Second World War—the world stage was polarized by the socialist/capitalist opposition, determining relatively fixed ideological and political reference points. While the Left proclaimed a struggle between the two systems, the Western superpowers called for a battle of ‘democracy’ against ‘totalitarianism’. This was the determining contradiction of the epoch. With the fall of the USSR and the ‘socialist bloc’, capitalism was once again sole ruler of the world scene. The remaining post-capitalist countries reinvented themselves. China opted for a form of market economy—as in all likelihood will Vietnam. Cuba sought to defend the basic gains of the previous period rather than advance towards socialism. The radical shift in the balance of forces reverberated through the social and political movements. With growing unemployment in Europe, unions were thrown onto the defensive, mounting at best a partial resistance to ‘flexibilization’ while rapidly losing members. In the increasingly informal and heterogeneous world of labour that was emerging, traditional methods of organizing had ever less effect. Parties had to confront the universalization of neoliberal policies. European social democracy adapted to this at the very moment when, for the first time, the Centre-Left was in power in nearly every EU state; the Communist parties of the region shrivelled, or vanished altogether. A similar scenario was enacted in Eastern Europe, where former Communist parties took up a radicalized neoliberalism or local versions of the Third Way.

The magnitude of this defeat for the Left—its depth and reach—has not been sufficiently evaluated. Its principal component is the victory of liberalism, on both the economic and political planes. Economically, the expansion of the financial sphere, deregulation and the market-led annulment of social benefits have dissolved the foundations of the welfare state. Commercialization has absorbed and penetrated the field of social relations, daily practice and consciousness, becoming the lodestone of ideological life. The corporation now plays a leading role in determining economic processes, to the detriment of social forces—unions, parties—premised on more associative forms of life and opposed to the unlimited extension of the market. Politically, with the displacement of the ‘capitalism/socialism’ binary by that of ‘democracy/totalitarianism’,

liberalism conquered hitherto undreamt-of areas of the Left. Neoliberal economics and representative democracy were embraced as the definitive form of politics by huge swathes of the traditional Left. Parallel to this, 'imperialism' as current historical reality disappeared from the political lexicon, enabling the US to impose its international hegemony, as the model of both 'democracy' and economic success—its deregulated 'Anglo-Saxon' system triumphantly counterposed to the remnants of the European welfare state. Economic progress was identified with free capital flows; levels of deregulation became the measure of potential growth. The process took 'globalization' as its logo, to underline its distinction from 'backward' national models, asserting the international movement of capital as the only possible paradigm.

The combination of these elements has resulted in a deep and wide-ranging hegemony, consolidated at the ideological and cultural level, unlike any that capitalism has previously enjoyed. In the aftermath of the Second World War, Japan—despite its cultural distinctiveness—embraced the basic assumptions of Western capitalism, adapting the system to the national context. In the last two decades China, undefeated in war, has taken on the same priorities, transforming its social habits, customs and values at a pace previously unseen in Eastern culture. In Western Europe social democracy has become the main mouthpiece of neoliberalism. In Latin America, traditional populist tendencies—always characterized by a real or rhetorical nationalism—have played the same role, here opting for extreme variants of neoliberalism, with the PRI in Mexico and Menem in Argentina as the prime examples.

With the disappearance of socialism from the current historical horizon—and with it, all discussion of capitalism as a historically determined social system—the Left was disarmed in face of the conservative counter-offensive launched by Reagan and Thatcher, and continued by Clinton and Blair. It has abandoned strategic programmes for the construction of a new type of society and turned to defending the rights of the oppressed, or to creating local and sectoral sites of resistance. The proliferation of alternative municipal governments and NGOs are the best examples of this.

The project of building an alternative to capitalism was abandoned in favour of resistance from within—opposition to neoliberalism rather than to the overall system. 'Anti-totalitarianism' now mutated into

an antagonism towards any overarching analysis—any attempt to see historical processes as a whole. These would inevitably result in reductive programmes with the state as their monolithic agent. Pluralist democracy demanded more ‘complex’ diagnoses, irreducible to the ‘economism’ attributed to (actually existing) Marxism, and would therefore renounce ‘grand narratives’.

It was in this context that local and sectoral forms of resistance—ecological, feminist, ethnic, human rights, municipal democracy—combined to form the movement that, together with union organizations and anti-WTO groups, would surface so explosively in Seattle in November 1999. If they represent an advance, in creating new spaces in which opposition forces can come together, many of them also implicitly renounce any attempt to construct an alternative society: as if our indefinite confinement within the limits of capitalism and liberal democracy was accepted as fact.

V

The Social Forum is a unique meeting place for anti-systemic forces to gather at a world level. It is unprecedented both in its diversity—bringing together not only parties and political currents but social movements, NGOs, civil-rights groups, unions—and in its own non-state, non-partisan character. It proposes to formulate global alternatives to current capitalist practices, and strategies for their implementation. In this sense, by its very existence the Forum creates a space in which the anti-neoliberal struggle can escape the narrow limits of the globalization vs nation-state binary, in which its opponents seek to imprison it. Basic to the Forum is the idea that alternatives to neoliberalism need to move beyond it, and therefore have to operate at the international level. The role of the nation-state in these proposals varies, but the common framework is an alternative globalization—not that of capital and the multinational corporations.

Secondly, the Forum recreates the possibility of an alliance between radical forces in the periphery and those in the core—a connexion sundered by the triumph of neoliberalism and the fall of the USSR. During the 1990s, the largely Centre-Left governments of the core redefined the regions of world power and influence, abandoning the periphery to its

fate as privileged victim of capital's new offensive. Thirdly, the Forum allows theoretical, social and political contributions to the project to converge in the same space, without a hierarchy being defined—recovering, in a sense, the legacy of the historical Left, by addressing the themes of an alternative globalization.

The movement reflects both the strengths and weaknesses of the struggle against neoliberalism. Its virtues include the high level of some of the theoretical contributions, whether global or sectoral analyses; the social heterogeneity—trade unions, environmental, gender and ethnic groups alongside political, intellectual and cultural figures; and the moral certainty that the great themes confronting humankind at the beginning of the twenty-first century will be discussed here, not at Davos. Deficiencies include the inability to convert these benefits into political strength—whether at the level of governments and parliaments, or as mass mobilizations—that could effectively exercise a veto on the reigning neoliberal policies, or take other innovative forms of political action. There is also a weakness in the whole field of economics. The movement lacks any strategy for transforming the growing feelings of exasperation and distrust of neoliberal dogma into an alternative policy, or at the very least a project to curb the speculative movement of capital and point towards new forms of international trade. Another shortcoming is the uneven participation in the Forums, with very poor representation from some of the core countries—the US, Germany, Japan, Britain—or emerging superpowers such as China and India.

VI

Important steps were taken to address the Forums' weaknesses at the seminars held by the WSF's International Committee in Barcelona, in April, and Bangkok, in August this year. One of their main decisions was to transfer the political leadership of the Forum from the original organizing committee—consisting of Brazilian organizations, for the most part NGOs—to the International Committee. This is made up of around sixty international networks from all continents, with a fairly representative range. The Committee decided on a more concentrated format for the Forums, with an agenda of five basic themes around which all others would be grouped, in order to move towards a more decisive way to formulate comprehensive political proposals, and strategies to fight for

them. It had already been decided that the Forums were not events, but a process of elaborating alternatives, and of struggle for their realization. With this in mind, continental and sectoral Forums will take place before the Forum of 2003, as before, in Porto Alegre.

The Social Forum represents a milestone, marking the shift from a period of fragmented, defensive resistance to a phase of accumulating forces, while looking towards the stage at which an international articulation of political, social and cultural movements can confront neo-liberalism and overcome it. The first decades of the new century are the setting for that challenge, to be taken up in full awareness of its complexity and of the huge discrepancy in relative scale that still exists.

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| <p>Signs of the Times</p> <p>seminar</p> | <p>New War Order: The USA and Global Power</p> <p>After September 11 George Bush declared 'war on terrorism'. Is this the beginning of a new imperial order where might is right, resistance outlawed and the USA the only model of political, economic and cultural power?</p> <p>Speakers ■ ROBERT BRENNER author <i>The Boom and The Bubble</i> & <i>New Left Review</i> Editorial Committee</p> <p>■ PETER GOWAN author <i>The Global Gamble</i> & <i>New Left Review</i> Editorial Committee</p> <p>■ ZIAUDDIN SARDAR co-author <i>Why Do People Hate America?</i></p> <p>Monday 28 October 7.30pm The Union Tavern, 52 Lloyd Baker Street, London WC2</p> |
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