

The WSF Revisited: Back to Basics?¹

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Why am I writing about the World Social Forum (WSF) again? At the NESCO grounds in Mumbai, the WSF has given way to other exhibitions and events. Across the road, at the veterinary college grounds, the students have returned to where the Mumbai Resistance 2004 (MR-04) held their events. And, the WSF is no longer headline news in the city papers. Indeed, if WSF I created waves, WSF IV has ebbed very quickly.

The principal actors have no doubt returned to their think tank organisations and research institutes to reflect over questions of 'where to next'. But, what of the large number of 'ordinary activists' who came there to occupy the 'open spaces' that the WSF offered for 'self-organised' events? Those participants too have returned to wherever they came from taking with them what they could take from the events. It was fortuitous therefore to be in Canada on a speaking tour when the participants were reporting back on their experiences of WSF, MR-04 or both to their home constituencies. Undeterred by the merciless Montreal winter and the ice and sleet on the streets of Ottawa, people turned up on Sunday afternoons and late evenings on weekdays to hear about civil society, WSF, MR-04 and other issues.

It struck me that most people reporting back on the events, overwhelmed by Mumbai, spoke more about the city and the chaos at NESCO grounds, or about the specific issues their organisations focused on than about the WSF itself, its wider politics, role or future. This is hardly surprising given the paucity of debates, or critical assessments of the WSF. While a plethora of publications and writings on the anti-globalisation movements generally and on the WSF in particular exist, most of them are written by active participants and leaders. Often resources and funds from Western governments and large funding agencies support the research and publications directly or indirectly through think tank/research organisations.

Critical voices, and there are many, remain confined to smaller groups and organisations. There, there is unease and discomfort about the direction of the

¹ This article was originally written on 26 January, 2004 as my regular commentary for *ZNet*. *ZNet* declined to publish it. It is published here without any changes. The article raises important questions about the direction of the "New Social Movements" from "Third World" perspectives.

WSF and at least some of the trends within anti-globalisation movements. If lack of transparency and democratic functioning were matters widely acknowledged, even within the WSF IV, it is at least in some measure, due to the growing strength of dissident voices within the anti-globalisation movements. However, transparency and democratic functioning may be symptomatic of the politics and ideology. In the absence of a critique of the ideology and characterisation of the movement itself, the growing disquiet and unease could well be reduced to individuals and personalities.

Taking cues from the rallying slogan: "another world is possible", the first question that needs to be asked is: in what sense is the WSF anti-establishment, if at all? For, implicit in the slogan is the idea that the WSF is anti-systemic.

The WSF claims it is the voice of 'civil society' speaking against the inhuman and devastating effects of 'globalisation', meaning a set of economic policies and programmes premised on neo-liberal ideology. Neo-liberalism revives key concepts and ideas from the old liberal ideology of 19th century capitalism and colonialism and adapts them to the present times on enlarged scales. Thus, ideas of sanctity of private property, privileging the economic dimension of social life over all others, the virtues of competition and competitiveness, ideas of 'level playing fields', 'trickle down effects' from wealth creation as the panacea for social inequality, the idea of the state as the invisible regulator, or in Adam Smith's words, as the 'the night watchman', the sanctity of the market and market mechanisms are some ideas, the revival of which is readily identifiable in the present times.

The enlargement of scales and the deeper historical roots of capitalism and colonialism has lead some to characterise 'globalisation' as a borderless phenomenon that has transformed the world into a 'global village', sans history or geography. Like the other ideas from 19th century capitalism, the idea of 'civil society' too has seen a revival in the context of 'globalisation' and undergone expansion of scale and depth in its present avatar.

The idea of 'civil society' denotes the relationship between capitalism, state and society. It is the ham sandwiched between the state and the economy. Different theories and ideologies have characterised the relationship between state, economy and society in different ways. The architecture of capitalist societies rests on the way the relationship is constituted and reconstituted. Changes in the phases of capitalism or in the specific dimensions of capitalism have entailed restructuring the relationship between state, society and economy. Thus when mercantile capitalism under Dutch hegemony ended to give way to industrial capitalism under British hegemony, when the British Empire gave way to the post-war monopolistic finance capitalism under American hegemony, significant restructuring of state-society-economy relations occurred. The restructuring invariably entailed diverse debates, arguments, perceptions, theories and ideologies on the part of actors involved and affected by the restructuring. The arguments were economic, political, moral/ethical. What kind of state-society-

economy relations emerged depended on the concepts and ideas that were thrown into the melting pot during times of transition. In that sense the re-emergence of the debates around 'civil society' became inevitable when 'globalisation' in the post-Cold War era restructured the relations between state and economy. The question then is, is the ham between the sandwich fresh or recycled and stale?

Let us take Third World debt, an issue that has the sympathy of a wide cross section of Western (also capitalist) societies. The WSF would like Third World debt to be cancelled. Evidently, this is because of the poverty in the Third World. However, the idea of cancellation is based on forgiveness and compassion. It overlooks a small detail, namely, that what is called debt is in fact expropriation of the Third World and a means of continued appropriation of their land, labour and natural resources in a new form euphemistically termed 'development' in the post-war era. In that sense it is not a 'debt' at all. Not surprisingly, the Churches throughout the Jubilee year were most vocal in advocating cancellation of Third World debt based on the Christian idea of plenary indulgence and absolution so that the slate is cleaned and the old ties resumed. Every good banker too knows that periodically bad debts must be written off for banking to continue to be business as usual. For the 'Third World' then, debt cancellation will undoubtedly bring some respite, but whether it will end their continued exploitation, the continued decimation of their social and cultural life, is another matter. Did the end of slavery end the exploitation of black people? Or, the advent of western democracies the colonisation of indigenous peoples? Or, did national Independence end poverty and degradation? Already, the World Bank is saying some Third World debts will be written off if countries agree to restructure to conform to conditions of 'globalisation'.

Or, take the Tobin Tax, a tax to limit capital speculation, another favourite of many leading intellectuals in the WSF. Have not states taxed corporations in the past to address social strife? Have not states in the past given a portion of the taxes to 'civil society' including churches to ameliorate the worst excesses of capitalism? Does the global scale of the tax and its use alter its essential character, i.e. to make 'globalisation' more sustainable and enduring? The WSF seeks to put a human face on 'globalisation' by modifying those aspects that make exploitation and injustice unsustainable for capitalism under its most recent incarnation of 'globalisation'. Thus it advocates for a more sustainable exploitation of society.

The most important selling point in the case of the WSF has been the claim that it provides a 'space' for all sections of civil society (see my Z Net article dated 7 February '04). Western democracy as we know it is a product of this common 'space' where everyone could participate, provided of course that they eschew violence and abide by some form of constitutionalism. We also know that in those common spaces, some sections emerge as spokespersons for the whole of society. The moot point is who is the spokesperson for the whole of society today, a society on an enlarged global scale? If it is the WSF (or similar

conglomeration of organisations), then what is the source of their authority within the economy-state-society nexus?

The question becomes pertinent for the 'Third World'. Historically, the idea of civil society has been an ambivalent one in the colonies. In the colonies it was first advocated by J.S. Mill who saw it as a means of strengthening relations between the British and sections of society in the Indian sub-continent who might collaborate with the British against native rulers. J.S. Mill was also the director of the English East India Company and an ideologue of colonialism. The benevolence entailed in the extension of the ideas and privileges of civil society to the colonies and the inclusiveness it suggests blurs important distinctions in the case of colonial societies.

In the colonies the boundaries between the economy, the state and what did or did not constitute civil society were blurred at the best of times. For example the East India Company was delegated sovereign power to govern. The colonial state undertook all sorts of economic activities during the hey-days of Free Market and Free Trade. The extension of ideas of civil society to colonies therefore was one of form while the reality, the politics, was something different. The politics of 'development' in the post-War era did the same. Industrialisation, development assistance, development planning and the like ensured the inclusion into 'civil society' of those who subscribed to the dominant ideas in the neo-colonies that the Third World had become. The restructuring of economy-society-state relations in the post-Cold War era and the renewed debate on the nature and role of 'civil society' quite naturally extended to those sections of the 'Third World' that were able to articulate ideas about 'civil society'.

More fundamentally, the economy-state dichotomy with a civil society sandwiched in between is alien to the architecture of colonial societies. That format of society is something Western capitalism inherited from the Greco-Roman civilisation based on notions of "the public", "the private" and the "state" as distinct social realms, a format of society that did not exist in the colonial world. Although colonialism introduced the distinction in juridical forms, the internal relations within Third World remain vastly different. However, the WSF and similar anti-globalisation movements overlook these important differences. Note the careful choice of words: 'economic globalisation' - not simply imperialism, 'corporate globalisation' - without the states that underpin it, promises of a 'new world' based on disarming the 'Third World' but not the 'First World', a world where 'civil society' stretches out in a borderless 'globalised' world without repeal of immigration laws. Above all, reams and reams of facts, figures and statistics on poverty, inequality and all the rest of it with very little on the causes, on explanations that point to emancipation from the causes of poverty and inequality.

Are the paradoxes of our times surprising then? That at a time when racism is universally decried, it is on the rise, often in vicious forms? While nation-states get hammered everywhere, xenophobia is on the rise everywhere? That, when

secularism is a universally accepted value, religious fundamentalism rules? Is the Pentagon about to wind up and close shop because of 'democratic voices' such as the WSF and other anti-'globalisation' movements that address the effects of 'globalisation' but not its causes? Are we expected to believe that the French and Finnish governments and foundations set up by mega corporations will fund projects against themselves?

Consequently, the concept of self-determination of neo-colonial societies gets subsumed by the choruses of 'civil society' emanating from imperialist nations engaged in finding a comfortable space for themselves within the reconstituted economy-state relations in the wake of 'globalisation'. Unfortunately all this happens at a time when anti-imperialist movements and self-determination struggles of different types are being demonised and militarily suppressed in the name of 'war on terror'. Often the anti-imperialist character of the struggles become difficult to recognise as they are forced to turn to religious, racial and other esoteric ideologies for articulation.

The 'development' discourse in the post-war era effectively pre-empted the deepening of the meaning of self-determination of colonies by the way the discourse was framed and cross-sections of society mobilised in support of dominant ideas. Now, especially since the UN Conference on Human Development in 1995, the 'civil society' discourse, espoused so unequivocally by movements like the WSF threaten, once again, to pre-empt the search for a redefinition of self-determination, a renewed understanding of its relevance and deepening its meaning in the neo-colonies renamed 'Third World' in the context of 'globalisation'. Must we ready ourselves for a neo neo-colonialism under 'globalisation' then?

For those who seek true de-colonisation and emancipation from exploitation, the critique of movements such as the WSF needs to go beyond individuals and personalities, beyond questions of transparency and process to debate the concepts, ideas and ideologies that inform the movements.