



The postmodernist sickness in the anticapitalist movement

Fri, 15/06/2007 - 17:00

Probably the most sophisticated expression of the postmodern theory that has been used to support the idea that the World Social Forum should not organise struggles and should remain merely a space is that of Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Professor of Sociology at the School of Economics, University of Coimbra in Portugal.

He is worth quoting at length:

?The WSF is the first critical utopia of the twenty-first century an aims to break with the tradition of the critical utopias of western modernity. (?) The utopia of the WSF is a radically democratic utopia. It is the only realistic utopia after a century of conservative utopias. Some of them the result of perverted critical utopias. This utopian design, grounded on the denial of the present rather than the definition of the future, focused on the processes of intercourse amongst the movements rather than an assessment of the movements? political content, is the major factor of cohesion of the WSF. It helps to maximize what unites and minimize what divides, celebrate the intercourse rather than dispute power, be a strong presence rather than an agenda. This utopian design which is also an ethical design, privileges the ethical discourse, quite evident in the WSF?s Charter of Principles, aimed at gathering consensus beyond the ideological and political cleavages among the movements and organisations which compose it.?

What is striking about this passage is the looseness with which the term ?utopia? is used, to both describe the failed utopias of modernity, i.e., for de Sousa, the various currents of socialism and liberalism, and the project of the WSF. This confuses a general goal or objective, with a utopian goal that is unachievable ? an idea not possible within the actual conditions of reality. For instance, while it was possible for classical Greek scholars to conceive of the concept of genuine equality amongst the people neither the productive base to create a society of abundance, nor the class force with an interest in pursuing it, existed to end class society.

De Sousa however, argues that the concept of utopia needs to be changed, from an idea of a definition of the future, i.e. a goal, towards something which is perceived to exist in the actual struggles of today. This is what he calls the ?denial of the present? ? an oblique and postmodern way to describe struggles against existing orders. Thus, for de Sousa the WSF is the utopia in that it allows a space for struggles to gather together ? have ?intercourse? ? and in its charter of principles establishes a set of ethical values based on consensus decision making.

Despite lacing his approach with postmodern rhetoric, a grand narrative is clearly present here. What de Sousa does is romanticize the social struggles, to the extent that they are seen as the goal ? utopia ? once a space is established that aggregates them together. What is missing is an analysis of the social and political forces these struggles oppose and how to get rid of them ? indeed, such a goal-centred approach is theorised away by de Sousa. Of course, the struggles against neoliberalism can be hugely inspiring but to describe them as the goal is to ignore the terrible conditions and injustices they are fighting. In short, to ignore the existence of capitalism as a system which is fundamentally exploitative and oppressive, and the role of the state in regulating it and defending it against those that challenge it.

Of course this approach is not new. It is a historic feature of de Sousa Santos? own political tradition, reformist Social Democracy. At the very birth of this tradition lies the famous dictum of Eduard Bernstein: ?The final goal, whatever it may be, is nothing to me: the movement is everything!?

Our reply to its latest incarnation remains the one Rosa Luxemburg delivered as long ago as 1898: 'The conquest of political power remains the final goal and that final goal remains the soul of the struggle. The working class cannot take the decadent position of the philosophers: 'The final goal is nothing to me, the movement is everything.' No, on the contrary, without relating the movement to the final goal, the movement as an end in itself is nothing to me, the final goal is everything.'

Our anticapitalist goal – the expropriation of the exploiters and the destruction of their instrument of repression, the capitalist state, is no airy utopia dreamed up by Marxists, but based upon an analysis of the actual reality – the real existing conditions – against which struggles take place. Far from slipping in to one-sidedness, it must recognize the contradictory development of capitalism. The capitalist system has socialized production to a huge extent – creating great industries, globally connected workforces, production networks and large productive units – but the benefits of these great developments accrue to a small class of exploiters. By creating a global working class and great technological and industrial change, capitalism creates the material conditions for its own destruction because the exploited working class has both the interest and power to overthrow the system of exploitation.

Pointing to the overall combined character of the capitalist system in no sense precludes understanding its unevenness, particularities and diversity. Likewise, it does not preclude but actually aids analysing such issues as national and racial oppression, indigenism, religion, the land question and the stratification of the peasantry, the differences within the working class, and so on. In short, Marxism is perfectly capable of understanding and developing strategies for addressing the diversities of life on our planet, including the many economic, social and ideological survivals of previous modes of production.

In this way it is capable in Lenin's words of making a 'concrete analysis of a concrete situation'. At the same time, by pointing to the systemic problem of the destructiveness of capitalist production and its systematic reproduction of inequalities, it is able to explain how the multiple forms of exploitation and oppression beside that of labour by capital can be tackled at root only if the 'property question' is posed: who controls the means of production, the means with which to reproduce the social – the workers or the rich?

The analytical coherence and method of Marxism causes offense to postmodernists, who perceive it to be an extreme example of modernist thinking as it seeks to establish objective truth, through reason and empirical investigation, of both the natural and social worlds. For Marxism, uncovering such knowledge is a practical question. As Marx said, to ask whether a world exists externally to thought is simply scholastic, as such a world is presupposed and demonstrated in every example of human activity.¹ It is because Marxism is a philosophy of practice that it seeks to derive from this theoretical foundation a programme of political action for human emancipation – and this opens up the second great tension with the postmodernists of the social movements.

Over the development of capitalist modernity a number of Marxists have tackled the question of how to turn the struggles of today into a struggle for socialism. As Marxist ideas have often dominated radical movements from the 19th century onwards, its history of development is not only a question of abstract theorising, but of the actual revolutions and counter-revolutions of the last century. As so many academics and postmodern theorists simply equate Marxism with Stalinism, they studiously ignore the historical fact that revolutionaries like Leon Trotsky challenged the counter-revolutionary theory and practice of Stalin and his supporters in the Communist International.

An analysis of the history of the 20th century, far from revealing the death agony of Marxism, demonstrates the need for a revolution to rid humanity of class society. The experience of central and western Europe in the 1930s through to Chile and Argentina in the 1970s shows that no capitalist class has ever allowed its power to be eroded piecemeal to the point that it can no longer defend its property. Even at the level of the 'commonsensical rather than theoretical knowledge' that de Sousa Santos says he prefers, this is true.

De Sousa Santos draws on the experience of the Zapatistas – what he calls 'subaltern cosmopolitanism' – to declare the object of the movement 'to make the world less and less comfortable for global capital.' The idea that you can with impunity destabilise or make the world less comfortable for capitalism without suffering the repression of the state

machine is frivolous. To give such advice to the workers and peasants is potentially disastrous ? an example par excellence of the irresponsibility of a privileged intelligentsia socially cut off from the dangerous repercussions of its own incoherence. Nor is bourgeois state repression rendered impossible even when radicals assume governmental power within the structures of a bourgeois state: for instance, the radical reformist regime of Chavez, who despite his nationalisations-with-compensation has not systematically challenged the property rights of the bourgeoisie, has had to rely on the mobilisation of the masses to defend his regime against the counter-revolutionary forces of the state.

Of course our post modernist imagines that he and the political current he represents have done something very new and have overthrown (in his mind alone!) the antipodes of reform or revolution:

?Rebellion and non-conformity must be privileged to the detriment of the old strategic options (reform or revolution). There is no unique theory to guide the movements strategically because the aim is not so much to seize state power as to confront the many faces of power as they present themselves in the institutions of society at large. Social emancipation does not have a general historical subject. In the struggle comprising the WSF, subjects are all those that refuse to be objects, that is to say to be reduced to the condition of vassals.?

Or elsewhere, he argues:

?Under Zapatism what is tactics for a movement may be strategy for another and the terms may mean different things for different struggles in different parts of the world and in some of them may even be utterly meaningless. Moreover, no unified theory can possibly render the immense mosaic of movements, struggles and initiatives in a coherent way.?

The emphasis de Sousa places on plurality and difference is typical of postmodern schools of thought and takes as its theoretical foundation the view that ?knowledge claims? about the world are inherently uncertain and contingent. Thus, they argue political programmes cannot claim objectivity. What this implicitly denies is that, while claims to objective truth are contested, political programmes can also appeal to the objective world, i.e. the programmes of the social movements can be practically tested in the class struggle.

In addition, De Sousa?s rejection of the working class as a key force in political and social change and his celebration of subjectivity is not a new idea, but a return to early modern concepts of populism. This leads him to reject the very idea of a working class international:

?The internationalism promoted by the WSF represents a stark departure from the old internationalism that dominated anticapitalist politics throughout the twentieth century? The latter was based on a privileged social actor (workers or workers and peasants) a privileged type of organisation (trade unions and working class parties together with their federations and Internationals) a centrally defined strategy (the Internationals? resolutions): a politics originating in the North and formulated according to the political principles prevailing in the anticapitalist North . The emphasis was on social and political homogeneity, as a condition of unity and solidarity?On the contrary the internationalism of the WSF elaborates social, political and cultural diversity within the broad limits set by the Charter of Principles.?

Again, what it denies is that class forces are constituted objectively, in the course of the reproduction of capitalism as a social system. It is the power of the working class by withdrawing its labour, the centrality of labour to value creation and thus to profit, the growth of the proletariat in the course of global capital accumulation, the reality of working class political combination and above all the ?universality? of the working class in that it is the bearer of no new exploitative social system but of the classless society or communism, that gives the proletariat a critical and leading role in the struggle for human emancipation.

The political goals, programme and strategy of this approach is clear: for working class power and socialism. As would be expected, De Sousa?s conclusions are quite different:

?Instead of theory that unifies the immense variety of struggles and movements, what we need is a theory of translation ?w that is, a theory that rather than aiming at creating another (theoretical) reality over and above the movements, seeks to create mutual understanding, mutual intelligibility among them so that they may benefit from the experiences of

others and network with them. Instead of our rarified descriptions the procedure of translation rests on thick descriptions. Indeed, there is never enough specificity in the accounts of two or more movements or struggles to guarantee an unproblematic translation among them.⁴

What this theorises is a failure to advance a political programme at all. It is because, for De Sousa, there can be no objective basis for determining political strategy ? in an analysis of actual social relations ? that he concludes that a uniform strategy is itself an impossibility. Such a position runs in total contradiction, not just to Marxist doctrine (one would expect this!) but to the actual experience of workers in struggle. Whenever class struggle intensifies and workers radicalize, far from just creating something new, they will want to look to analyse the past and the present in order to learn what political strategy may guide their own struggle, i.e. in order to generalise ? to impose a uniformity.

In new language De Sousa is simply expressing a series of old and failed ideas. He starts with an idealist epistemology that leaves us in a relativist gloom? uncertain of what truth is. He continues by romanticizing the social struggles and adopting a populist déclassé approach. Then the very goal of human emancipation ? a society based on genuine equality and freedom ? is dispensed with for being just too ?totalizing.? What this leads to is classical reformism and one can see this in how postmodernist theory has been applied by the WSF leadership, to block the movement developing as a militant opposition to Lula?s capitalist government.

Endnotes

1 Marx and Engels, p.13, Theses on Feuerbach, in The German Ideology, Marx and Engels Selected Works, 1969, Lawrence and Wishart, London

2 The Rise of the Global Left; The World Social Forum and Beyond, Boaventura de Sousa Santos p11-12

3 Can Law be Emancipatory? Boaventura de Souza Santos <http://www.geocities.com/relaju/souzasantos.htm> [1]

4 *ibid*, p.38

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/postmodernist-sickness-anticapitalist-movement>

Links:

[1] <http://www.geocities.com/relaju/souzasantos.htm>