



Wresting the possible from the impossible Lessons from Barcelona

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“Just like the Franco days” was the comment of Manu Chao, singing star of the huge anti-globalisation concert in Barcelona to ‘celebrate’ the end of the March 14-15 European summit here. He was referring to the massive ‘security’ presence in the city. 10,000 police – including 2,500 riot police – were drafted in from all over Spain to shield heads of state participating in the summit from protest demonstrations called by the major trade unions here, the anti-globalisation and other protest movements. Add to that the three naval vessels moored in the Mediterranean just off Barcelona harbour, four jet fighters on standby in nearby Prat Airport together with one AWAC from the NATO fleet, police snipers on rooftops and ground-to-air missiles mounted on buildings in the city centre, and you’d wonder what they were frightened about. More Seattle, more Genoa action? Or did they reckon bin Laden might have a go at Europe’s ‘top dignitaries’ assembled here? With the closing of the Diagonal, one of our main traffic arteries, normal traffic arrangements collapsed and business life in the city was “just like on a holiday”, as one shopkeeper said to me; universities closed or just went on strike. The security overkill, together with police harassment of pedestrians, so reminiscent of ‘the bad old days’ was bitterly resented by most citizens. But if security strategy was to cow citizens into not supporting the demonstrations, it backfired, to say the least of it...

The demonstrations, routed well away from the major summit events, were massively supported. Thus, for example, the trade union demonstration brought 100,000 of us, including leaders of Catalonia’s left-wing political formations, on to the streets in a carnival atmosphere under the slogan “*Volem més Europa, pero amb Drets i amb Manteniment i Millora del model social!*” (briefly: “More Europe, but with rights and a better social model!”). The anti-globalisation demonstration called by the *Companya contre l’Europa del Capital* brought an estimated 300,000 out under the slogan “*Altra Europa es Possible*”. But the mother of all demonstrations was that of the Sunday before the summit to protest against the re-routing of the river Ebro, a measure to be significantly financed from EU coffers. Almost half a million citizens came out on the streets to demand an end to this plan, which will have the almost certain effect of ruining agriculture in Valencia’s highly fertile Ebro delta. A little violence, but pretty much a marginal sideshow. And everywhere the *senyera*, the official flag of Catalonia, with its four red stripes on a yellow background and, frequently, its *independista* variant, with white star on a blue triangle superimposed on the official flag, announcing to the world at large: Catalonia is not Spain. *No senyor!*

It was great while it lasted, of course. Warm feelings of solidarity, brotherhood, sisterhood animate people on the move, people who want change. All on the one road, the road to God knows where... And heated discussions about where this illusory one road might lead us...

But when we reach home, sober reflection replaces the warm glow.

Even if we had been allowed near the summit events, I doubt if the assembled heads of state would have been too unhappy to see us, or the host of banners and placards we carried to represent the views of the many sectional interests that participated in the protests. Banners and placards calling for support for the *Zapatistas*, *Polisario*, Immigrant Rights, Full European Recognition of the Catalan Language, Real Equality for Women, the Tobin Tax, and an end to Transgenic Foods, Third World Debt, the Flexibilisation of Labour, Israeli

Oppression of Palestinians, the American Blockade of Cuba, the Erosion of Social Gains, the Ebro Plan, Anti-Gay Discrimination, Spanish Oppression in Euzkadi, to mention but some of the concerns of the demonstrators expressed on their banners and placards. All causes that I agree with! But such senior politicians would have appreciated, I think, that in a divided society, different minority groups, each pursuing independently its own sectional goal, can never mount a serious challenge to the reigning hegemony. And that, in fact, such diversity is the best formula for reproduction of the system.

And in spite of the expenditure of so much energy and enthusiasm, banging of drums and shouting of slogans, the summit went ahead anyhow, with its profoundly anti-democratic decisions to privatise energy etc. (For an assessment of the political results of the Summit itself, see Bernard Cassen's article in the May issue of *Le Monde Diplomatique*.)

The 'think tanks' that plot consolidation of the neo-liberal ethos understand clearly that the way to maintain protest groups isolated from each other is to disorientate them systematically with respect to their potential common goals, thus rendering impossible the adoption of common struggle on the part of these groups. Such a strategy of social disorientation operates on three levels:

- the atomisation of society into minority groups with little prospect of achieving power;
- the orientation of groups towards the adoption of partial and exclusive goals which don't invite wider participation; and
- the neutralisation of their ability to form pacts.

To achieve these goals, inhibition of the ability to create an intellectual space in which objectives that transcend the sectional interest of individual groups can be negotiated with other groups, and agreement and alliances achieved, is crucial. Thus, the incessant propaganda barrage trumpeting the end of ideology (postmodernism), history in general (Fukuyama), and of Marxism—lock, stock and barrel—in particular. The fatuous interpretation of history as "the clash of civilisations" (Huntingdon) is another key element in this strategy. All major print and visual media have been co-opted as allies in this battle to internalise in the hearts and minds of everybody—including members of the various protest movements themselves—those values that best promote overall reinforcement and reproduction of the 'global economy' and the current neo-liberal dispensation that underpins it. Thus, it is hoped, society will cease to be understood and analysed in a comprehensive all-embracing fashion, and those social utopias that create spaces for dialogue among the different groups will evaporate into thin air. At the same time, neo-liberal strategy encourages rampant individualism, a sort of 'shipwreck culture'—'save yourself, if you can, and the devil take the hindmost'—that denies any possibility of a collective solution to society's ills. In this way, the time-old imperial strategy of *Divida et Impera*—divide and conquer, roughly—is employed to fragment and so debilitate opposition to the emerging new world order.

The neo-liberal project and its means of realisation are clear: massive redistribution of the social product toward the already wealthy, under cover of the Big Lie (dealt with above) and circuses (sports business, media spectacles etc.) which are promoted incessantly with all the persuasive force of the media at its command. And such is the persuasive and co-optative force of this juggernaut that, in most western societies, repression as such has ceased to be the main obstacle to the development of liberation movements. Though, as the impressive display of force here at the Barcelona summit demonstrated (not to mention the use of force in Seattle, Stockholm, Genoa etc.—and, minimally, here in Barcelona), state violence is always there as a resource of last resort. But the upshot of these influences is popular consent/obedience to the overall *diktat* of the *status quo*, which is the main obstacle to the development of the various liberation movements that comprise the loose 'anti-

globalisation' alliance. We are faced with a sort of vicious circle here, as this consent is both the cause and effect of the huge and complex production of reality itself. This production is geared to the current needs of capitalism and is inextricably linked to reproduction of the social sphere in all its aspects.

The suicidal irrationality of the current phase of capitalism hardly needs to be spelled out in detail here. Destruction of the world's ecosystems and the very delicate environmental balances that underpin all life on this planet goes on apace. The production of various classes of death machine is integral to the smooth functioning of the advanced economies. In the context of the increasing impoverishment and malnutrition, we know the productive capacity of the world's societies could provide a comfortable, not luxurious, life for every denizen of the planet. Etc., etc.

However, the basic need to survive seems to leave no other choice but to go on producing that manifestly unjust and immoral reality, which implies in practice obedience to the same. The demonstrators of Barcelona return to work to reproduce the very reality against which they have been demonstrating – not being aware, seemingly, that the facet of that reality that drove them out into the streets is integral to the whole picture. In short, we produce that which dominates us – surrendering to the seemingly irresistible force of the productive colossus and offering it our passive consent/obedience. Not that being aware of all of this would make much difference! This domination is organised in such a manner that the only alternative to obedience/consent for individuals or small groups is death or social exclusion, neither of which is particularly attractive for most of us. For others, the domination we produce doesn't even give them the opportunity to be exploited.

In the light of such formidable obstacles then, the question must be asked: is an effective fightback really possible? And, if so, where does it begin? To that I say: the only response to 'Divide and conquer' is 'United we stand, divided we fall'. Unity of all major anti-systemic forces about a common democratic project is a *sine qua non* if the present profoundly anti-democratic neo-liberal set-up is to be replaced with a genuinely egalitarian order. In practical terms, to achieve such unity, the primary need is for all would-be participants to arrive at a common starting point. Even before that possibility can be realised, though, many socialists need to recognise that much rubble lying about since the levelling of the Berlin Wall needs to be cleared away.

To put it in another way, just as nations/human groups cohere on the basis of a common language, shared historical consciousness and agreed (albeit implicitly) common goals, a coherent anti-capitalist left can only be articulated on the basis of a willingness to overcome sectional differences and to arrive at a common understanding of the lessons our history has taught us, i.e. a common 'language' of discourse.

So what has history taught us, then? Among many other things that

- The 'Soviet model' and Soviet Marxism are dead ducks. Learn from them and bury them!
- The eventual collapse of capitalism is neither guaranteed nor inevitable.
- No transcendental dynamic of history can be appealed to in order to justify political action. Still less can it be claimed that such action is the mandatory expression of said dynamic, human essence or divine will. Historical tendencies that can help to understand, not 'explain': yes! Laws of History: no!
- The revolutionary nature of political action is not predetermined, and can only be gauged by comparing the results it yields with the objective(s) it had in the first place. The various possibilities inherent to the action will always be discussed, of course, along with their relation to perceived historical tendencies, but always with the understanding

that nobody can guarantee beforehand the revolutionary potential of the action nor claim a privileged revolutionary authority.

- Following on the last point, the 'revolutionary subject' is not predetermined in any way nor, therefore, is the 'vanguard' of such a subject. The self-proclaimed 'vanguard of the proletariat' leading the working class to a jacobin-type conquest of political power belongs only to the past history of that class.
- The exploitation of labour by capital is not the only form of repression that leads to conflict with the established order. Others struggles, such as ethnic, linguistic/cultural, gender, antimilitarist, Third World solidarity etc., etc. can be just as important or, depending on the context, more important as agents of social/historical change. Nor does the disappearance of the exploitative capital-labour relationship in its present form guarantee the automatic disappearance of other forms of repression (as witness the Soviet experiment).
- It is impossible to fully explain the current world order, however, with its well-publicised destructive side-effects, other than by reference to the global domination of capital. It is, above all, in this sense that Marx's *Capital* and other economic writings remain our basic reference. For example, present-day patriarchal societal relations cannot be disassociated from the role assigned to women in the reproduction of labour. (Which is not to suggest that every socialisation of the means of production automatically guarantees the disappearance of patriarchy and other forms of oppression: working-class history shows otherwise.) Third World misery cannot be understood without understanding the global reach of profit-maximising capitalism. Etc., etc.
- Whatever viable socialist project emerges must involve the development of 'ground up' participative democracy, based on an ethic of total social equality. Such a project offers the only possibility of articulating the various anti-systemic groups, gaining widespread popular support and undermining the present repressive power structures. Details of such a project can only be the fruit of much intensive negotiation.

The word 'democracy' has been so debased (the term Progressive 'Democrats' in Ireland, for example), however, that we need to clarify use of the term here. To begin with, the *status quo*, neo-liberal or limited (or bourgeois) democracy – which always seeks a minimum state in terms of defence of workers' interests together with a maximum state to copper-fasten the political conditions it needs to underpin its own economic project – is not what is meant. The struggle for full egalitarian democracy, which is nothing more or less than the struggle for socialism, is what is meant. So what is this 'full democracy'? Let's consider the concept in its three fundamental aspects:

- *Representative democracy.* The right to elect governments and enjoy legally-guaranteed civil rights. In practice, this has meant alienation of the vast bulk of citizens from power (the decision-making process) and the favouring of powerful minority groups, creating a nucleus of first-class citizens and a second-class citizen majority.
- *Social democracy.* A social order based on representation and bureaucratic implementation, but where real social problems – living standards, employment, housing, welfare, health, education etc. – are addressed, with the aim of achieving a more egalitarian society. Regarding the long-term viability of such a project, the recent political history of Europe, east and west, tells its own (sad) story.
- *Participative democracy.* The great untried project, and the major political and intellectual challenge facing the real left! Popular participation in social decision-making would be the basic aspect of this form of democracy, forms and mechanisms of such participation to be worked out through comprehensive dialogue involving all committed groups and the public at large.

While a future agreed socialist project would combine all three aspects of democracy, what would most differentiate it from all pre-existing models would be its insistent emphasis on the third: a genuinely participative democracy where the people themselves, rather than a bureaucratic elite, become the true creators of a new society.

Present-day systems of parliamentary democracy, and social democratic policies that served to legitimate it during the Cold War, have been systematically undermined over the last twenty or so years by a capitalism that no longer needs them. In the present dictatorship of money and “tittytainment”, as Zbigniew Brzezinski cynically (and accurately) described the culture he would prescribe for the masses, both have been placed at the same level as television and shopping mall entertainment. Popular and well-founded suspicions that real decision-making power lies outside the present political process, failure to effectively address the manifold social problems that come in the train of the new economic order, along with distancing of the politico-bureaucratic process from the average citizen, have led to increasing abstention levels at elections and an ever-growing disenchantment with politicians and the political process itself. Add to that the inability of citizens to distinguish between the policies of the different political formations—not surprisingly, since the majority of them have assimilated comfortably into the neo-liberal ‘centre’.

This disenchantment and boredom with politics carries its own dangers. The rise of the ultra-right, with its simplistic panaceas, throughout Europe is the right-wing equivalent of anti-systemic mobilisations of the left such as ours in Barcelona. But whereas the political right can do without party politics, as it has demonstrated during various dictatorships, for the left, insofar as it is necessary to construct a popular anti-systemic force to qualitatively transform society, an open political space is a basic necessity, whether it be for a party, a political alliance or some other formula.

And such a formation is needed crucially for two reasons: Firstly, social transformations don’t occur spontaneously. The ideas and values of capitalist society permeate all of society, but especially those sectors least equipped theoretically to distance themselves critically from them. A counter-source of ideas and values is a necessary antidote to such brain-washing. And secondly, because it is necessary to be able to overcome the immensely more powerful forces that can be expected to fight tooth and nail against any such transformation. Such will not be possible without a political grouping capable of formulating a project, now glaringly conspicuous by its absence, that can effectively challenge the neo-liberal *diktat*, mobilise the masses and articulate and unify the various liberation movements that comprise our present fragmented, and hence ineffective, opposition to the current order.

Present circumstances place the left in the impossible situation of a David confronting a gigantic Goliath. But David overcame the giant, wrested the possible from the impossible. The political will to wrest the possible from the ‘impossible’ is the key. And a ready willingness to dialogue without preconditions, abandoning the fetid bunker of nostalgia-based dogma for the fresh air of political creativity. Objectively, the bunker-folk have sold out to the enemy. The serious left must move on without them!

Red Banner 13
July 2002