

## Depoliticisation

*Have non-party political, non-government development institutions been emasculated?*

*Or are they emasculating the revolutionary political groupings of the masses?*

*The West has openly engaged in wars, military and economic, in favour of manifest self-aggrandisement and wilful exploitation and oppression.*

*What is it that defangs the widespread latent anger, the simmering dissent against what is patently unjust and oppressive?*

*What is it that sustains this depoliticisation?*

*What insulates the politicians and the bureaucrats from the obvious courses of action in matters of fairplay and ethical choices?*

*We bemoan the criminalisation and venality of our domestic political class. Is the West any better with Bush and Blair or Chirac and Putin? Is the West any better with its high levels of literacy and rarefied technological developments?*

*There is a strand of thinking that suggests that the 'good' and the 'able' have abdicated responsibility in politics, that the non-party processes and the non-government institutions have emasculated popular aspirations.*

*Or is politicisation a romantic revolutionary fantasy?*

*Neera Chandoke makes a clarion call for regaining revolutionary imagination.*

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## A Text without a CONTEXT

by Neera Chandhoke

Political commentators compare incensed demonstrations in cities across the world with the anti-War protests in the late 1960s against American intervention in Vietnam. Yet, we find a major difference between the two protests. *The anti-Vietnam movement had some kind of impact upon the American Government ...* Most of the progressive legislation in American politics can in fact be traced to the social upheavals of the late 1960s.

This year, the American and the English people have, along with people in other parts of the world, launched a virtual tirade against the war in Iraq. But this has had little impact on the determination of George Bush and Tony Blair to make the world safe for their own projects. Why is this so? **Why have the current demonstrations failed to talk back to the making of history in an imperialist mode?**

The difference perhaps does not lie in the text; it lies in the context. Recollect for instance that **protests against American involvement in Vietnam** took place in an era of virulent anti-imperialism, **in an era of politicisation**. Further, **allied as it was to other protest movements** – the civil liberties movement of the Afro-Americans, the women's movement, the sexual liberation movement, the anti-nuclear movement, and the labour movement – the anti-Vietnam movement marked a turning point in American politics.

In the first three-quarters of the twentieth century ordinary people across the world had been politicised through processes of sustained mass struggle. People became aware of what it was that they were fighting for; they became conscious of what is possible and probable; what is politically desirable, and what is not, what has to be fought against, and what has to be fought for. In short, ordinary people became supremely conscious of both the constraints as well as opportunities of history, or indeed that ordinary people have the capacity to talk back to histories of oppression.

But history can be made only if people have both the vocabulary and the vision of an alternative world to struggle for. This vision was given by the

vocabularies of the twentieth century – imperialism, anti-colonialism, oppression, power, struggle, emancipation, and 'swaraj'.

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, however, **a gigantic process was set in motion, a process of taming unruly and recalcitrant civil societies; a process of de-politicisation of people who had once been made aware of the possibilities of history.**

Witness the political languages that have erupted recently on to the political scene: globalisation instead of imperialism, governance instead of politics, social capital and trust instead of struggle, community instead of class, civil society instead of the revolutionary imagination, and NGOs instead of popular mobilisation. These vocabularies are so trite that they seem banal; our political visions are so ordinary that they seem commonplace.

#### semantic engineering

<i>globalisation</i>	(instead of imperialism),
<i>governance</i>	(instead of politics),
<i>social capital and trust</i>	(instead of struggle),
<i>community</i>	(instead of class),
<i>civil society</i>	(instead of the revolutionary imagination),
and <i>NGOs</i>	(instead of popular mobilization).

These vocabularies are so trite and our political  
visions are so ordinary.

**No longer do we find any idea of struggle and emancipation in these political vocabularies, only ideas of resignation.** In the middle of these political languages that call for social capital and for building networks of trust – vocabularies that conjure away the fact of political, social, and economic oppression through semantic engineering – *anti-war protests and also the anti-globalisation protests stand alone.* And we all know what happens to political struggles when they stand alone and bereft of support from attendant ideas of solidarity against anti-imperialism – they become isolated.

*If global civil society is to make any headway in bringing states driven by imperatives of power back to civility, its members will have to regain the revolutionary imagination. ▶*