The Politics of Convergence

In the period before the seventies, Immanuel Wallerstein saw two parallel anti-systemic forces: the Social Movements (class struggle) and the National Movements (anti-colonial).

After 1968, a new set of movements,
a) green, feminist, racial or ethnic minority movements
b) human rights and civil society organisations and
c) anti-globalisation movements
are seeking to establish themselves as "anti-systemic movements".

The modern world system is in structural crisis. According to Wallerstein, those in power are no longer seeking to preserve the system, they are trying to change it, to cement the worst features of the current regime, namely hierarchy, privilege and inequalities. It is a period of transition, where there is no known outcome. The 'other' forces do not have a 'historically determined role'. They have to invent it. They have to carve out their strategy.

The basic framework of the World Social Forum probably reflects this uncertainty. Wallerstein highlights four components of the strategy for the 'other' forces:

1. Open debate about this transition, which the WSF represents, but will it be able to maintain this openness?
2. Not to neglect short term defensive action including electoral action. Eg. the NBA type of action, as well as the recent decision by some organisations in Madhya Pradesh to contest elections?
3. Middle range goals of setting up alternative institutions of decommodification, cooperative systems of welfare in health, education, local markets etc. like the CMMS, SEWA etc
4. Develop the substantial meaning of long term emphases on a really democratic and relatively egalitarian system.

In short, it is a call for convergence under a new overarching ideology. Such a convergence is probably possible only if groups by whatever description – movements or agencies, foreign funded or indigenous, revolutionary or reformist – can work autonomously, yet join the convergence, and relate with the larger efforts.

The convergence should be able to take on board and engage with criticism, keeping in mind the larger movement ideals and thus effectively address these challenges. Such should be the shape of the new transparent politics of convergence.

New Revolts against The System

Immanuel Wallerstein

The longue durée of resistance to the established order: after a hundred and twenty years of socialist and nationalist revolts, does the World Social Forum represent a qualitatively new alignment of forces and strategies for change?

I coined the term ***'antisystemic movement'*** in the 1970s in order to have a formulation that would group together what had, historically and analytically, been two distinct and in many ways rival kinds of popular movement—those that went under the name 'social', and those that were 'national'.

Social movements were conceived primarily as socialist parties and trade unions; they sought to further the class struggle within each state against the bourgeoisie or the employers.

National movements were those which fought for the creation of a national state, either by combining separate political units that were considered to be part of one nation—as, for example, in Italy—or by seceding from states considered imperial and oppressive by the nationality in question—colonies in Asia or Africa, for instance.

Both types of movement emerged as significant, bureaucratic structures in the second half of the nineteenth century and grew stronger over time. Both tended to accord their objectives priority over any other kind

of political goal—and, specifically, over the goals of their national or social rival. This frequently resulted in severe mutual denunciations.

*The two types seldom cooperated politically and, if they did so, tended to see such **cooperation as a temporary tactic**, not a basic alliance.* Nonetheless, the history of these movements between 1850 and 1970 reveals a series of shared features:

1. *Most socialist and nationalist movements repeatedly proclaimed themselves to be **'revolutionary'**,* that is, to stand for fundamental transformations in social relations. It is true that both types usually had a wing, sometimes located in a separate organization, that argued for a more gradualist approach and therefore eschewed revolutionary rhetoric.

2. Secondly, at the outset, *both variants were politically quite weak and had to fight an uphill battle* merely to exist. They were repressed or outlawed by their governments, their leaders were arrested and their members often subjected to systematic violence by the state or by private forces. Many early versions of these movements were totally destroyed.

3. Thirdly, over the last three decades of the nineteenth century both types of movements went through a parallel series of *great debates over strategy that ranged those whose perspectives were **'state-oriented'** against those who saw the **state as an intrinsic enemy*** and pushed instead for an emphasis on individual transformation. For the social movement, this was the debate between the Marxists and the anarchists; for the national movement, that between political and cultural nationalists.

4. What happened historically in these debates – and this is the fourth similarity – was that *those holding the 'state-oriented' position won out.* The decisive argument in each case was that the immediate source of real power was located in the state apparatus and that any attempt to ignore its political centrality was doomed to failure, since the state would successfully suppress any thrust towards anarchism or cultural nationalism. In the late nineteenth century, these groups enunciated a so-called two-step strategy: first gain power within the state structure; then transform the world. This was as true for the social as for the national movements.

5. The fifth common feature is less obvious, but no less real. *Socialist movements often included nationalist rhetoric in their arguments, while nationalist discourse often had a social component.* The result was a greater blurring of the two positions than their proponents ever acknowledged.

6. *The processes of popular mobilization deployed by the two kinds of movements were basically quite similar.* Both types started out, in most countries, as small groups, often composed of a handful of intellectuals plus a few militants drawn from other strata. Those that succeeded did so because they were able, by dint of long campaigns of education and organization, to secure popular bases in concentric circles of militants, sympathizers and passive supporters.

When the outer circle of supporters grew large enough for the militants to operate, in Mao Zedong's phrase, like fish swimming in water, the movements became serious contenders for political power.

We should, of course, note too that groups calling themselves **'social democratic'** *tended to be strong primarily in states located in the core zones of the world-economy,* while those that described

themselves as ***movements of national liberation*** *generally flourished in the semiperipheral and peripheral zones.*

7. The seventh common feature is that *both these movements struggled with the tension between* **'revolution' and 'reform'** *as prime modes of transformation.* Endless discourse has revolved around this debate in both movements—but for both, in the end, it turned out to be based on a misreading of reality. Revolutionaries were not in practice very revolutionary, and reformists not always reformist. Certainly, the difference between the two approaches became more and more unclear as the movements pursued their political trajectories.

8. Finally, *both movements had the problem of implementing the two-step strategy.* Once 'stage one' was completed, and they had come to power, their followers expected them to fulfill the promise of stage two: transforming the world. **What they discovered, if they did not know it before, was that state power was more limited than they had thought.**
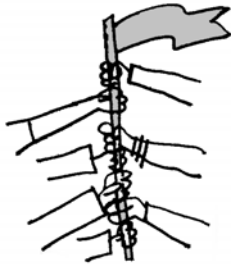
Analysis of the world situation in the 1960s reveals these two kinds of movements looking more alike than ever. In most countries they had completed 'stage one' of the two-step strategy, having come to power practically everywhere.

Communist parties ruled over a third of the world, from the Elbe to the Yalu; national liberation movements were in office in Asia and Africa, populist movements in Latin America and social-democratic movements, or their cousins, in most of the pan-European world, at least on an alternating basis.

They had not, however, transformed the world.

1968 and after

It was the combination of these factors that underlay a principal feature of the world revolution of 1968. The revolutionaries had different local demands but shared two fundamental arguments almost everywhere. First of all, they opposed both the hegemony of the United States and the collusion in this hegemony by the Soviet Union. Secondly, they condemned the Old Left as being 'not part of the solution but part of the problem'. This second common feature arose out of the massive disillusionment of the popular supporters of the traditional antisystemic movements over their actual performance in power.
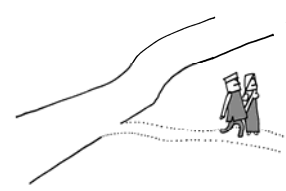
The populations of these countries were adjured by the movements in power to be patient, for history was on their side. But their patience had worn thin.

The conclusion that the world's populations drew from the performance of the classical antisystemic movements in power was negative. They ceased to believe that these parties would bring about a glorious future or a more egalitarian world and no longer gave them their legitimation; and having lost confidence in the movements, they also withdrew their faith in the state as a mechanism of transformation.

This did not mean that large sections of the population would no longer vote for such parties in elections; but it had become a defensive vote, for lesser evils, not an affirmation of ideology or expectations.

From Maoism to Porto Alegre

Since 1968, there has been a lingering search, nonetheless, for a better kind of antisystemic movement—one that would actually lead to a more democratic, egalitarian world. There have been four different sorts of attempts at this, some of which still continue.

The first was the efflorescence of the multiple Maoisms. From the 1960s until around the mid-1970s, there emerged a large number of different, competing movements, usually small but sometimes impressively large, claiming to be Maoist; by which they meant that they were somehow inspired by the example of the Cultural Revolution in China. Essentially, they argued that the Old Left had failed because it was not preaching the pure doctrine of revolution, which they now proposed. But these movements all fizzled out. Today, no such movements of any significance exist.

A second, more lasting variety of claimant to antisystemic status was the new social movements – the Greens and other environmentalists, feminists, the campaigns of racial or ethnic 'minorities', such as the Blacks in the United States or the Beurs in France. These movements claimed a long history but, in fact, they either became prominent for the first time in the 1970s or else re-emerged then, in renewed and more militant form. They were also stronger in the pan-European world than in other parts of the world-system.

By the 1980s, all these new movements had become divided internally between what the German Greens called the fundis and the realos. This turned out to be a replay of the **'revolutionary versus reformist'** debates of the beginning of the twentieth century. The outcome was that the fundis lost out in every case, and more or less disappeared.

The third type of claimant to antisystemic status has been the human-rights organizations. Of course some, like Amnesty International, existed prior to 1968, but in general these became a major political force only in the 1980s.

The human rights organizations claimed to speak in the name of **'civil society'**. The term itself indicates the strategy: civil society is by definition not the state. The concept draws upon a nineteenth-century distinction between *le pays légal* and *le pays reel* – between those in power and those who represent popular sentiment – posing the

question: how can civil society close the gap between itself and the state? How can it come to control the state, or make the state reflect its values? The distinction seems to assume that the state is currently controlled by small privileged groups, whereas 'civil society' consists of the enlightened population at large.

These organizations have had an impact in getting some states – perhaps all – to inflect their policies in the direction of human-rights concerns; but, in the process, they have come to be more like the adjuncts of states than their opponents and, on the whole, scarcely seem very antisystemic.

They have become NGOs, located largely in core zones yet seeking to implement their policies in the periphery, where they have often been regarded as the agents of their home state rather than its critics. In any case, these organizations have seldom mobilized mass support, counting rather on their ability to utilize the power and position of their elite militants in the core.
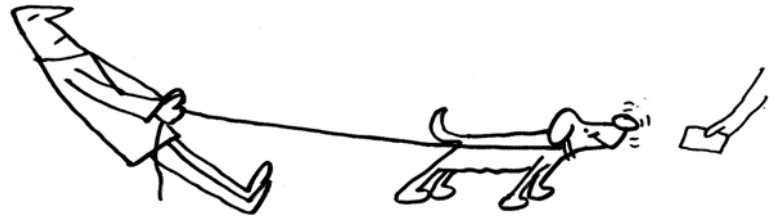
The fourth and most recent variant has been the so-called anti-globalization movements – a designation applied not so much by these movements themselves as by their opponents.

Following Seattle, the continuing series of demonstrations around the world against inter-governmental meetings inspired by the neoliberal agenda led, in turn, to the construction of the World Social Forum, whose initial meetings have been held in Porto Alegre.

The characteristics of this new claimant for the role of antisystemic movement are rather different from those of earlier attempts.

First of all, the WSF seeks to bring together all the previous types and a common respect for each other's immediate priorities. Importantly, the WSF seeks to bring together movements from the North and the South within a single framework.

The only slogan, as yet, is 'Another World is Possible'.

Even more strangely, the WSF seeks to do this without creating an overall superstructure. At the moment, it has only an international coordinating committee, some fifty-strong, representing a variety of movements and geographic locations.

While there has been some grumbling from Old Left movements that the WSF is a reformist façade, thus far the complaints have been quite minimal. The grumblers question; they do not yet denounce.

A period of transition

I have argued elsewhere that *the modern world-system is in structural crisis, and we have entered an **'age of transition' – a period of bifurcation and chaos*** – then it is clear that the issues confronting antisystemic movements pose themselves in a very different fashion than those of the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries.

Such a period of transition has two characteristics that dominate the very idea of an antisystemic strategy. The first is that *those in power* will no longer be trying to preserve the existing system (doomed as it is to
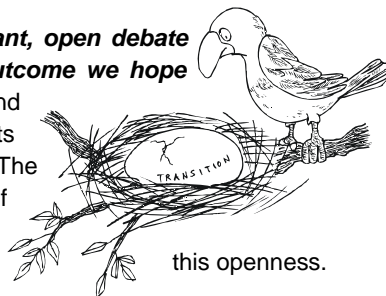
self-destruction); rather, they *will try to ensure that the transition leads to the construction of a new system that will **replicate the worst features of the existing one – its hierarchy, privilege and inequalities**.* They may not yet be using language that reflects the demise of existing structures, but they are implementing a strategy based on such assumptions.

The second fundamental characteristic is that *a period of systemic transition is one of deep uncertainty, in which it is **impossible to know** what **the outcome** will be.* History is on no one's side. Each of us can affect the future, but we do not and cannot know how others will act to affect it, too. The basic framework of the WSF reflects this dilemma, and underlines it.

Strategic considerations

A strategy for the period of transition ought therefore to include four components – all of them easier said than done.

The first is a process of constant, open debate about the transition and the outcome we hope for. This has never been easy, and the historic antisystemic movements were never very good at it. The structure of the WSF has lent itself to encouraging this debate; we shall see if it is able to maintain this openness.

The second component should be self-evident: an antisystemic movement cannot neglect short-term defensive action, including electoral action. The world's populations live in the present, and their immediate needs have to be addressed. Any movement that neglects them is bound to lose the widespread passive support that is essential for its long-term success.

The third component has to be the establishment of interim, middle-range goals that seem to move in the right direction. I would suggest that one of the most useful—substantively, politically, psychologically—is the attempt to move towards selective, but ever-widening, decommodification. It means we should create structures, operating in the market, whose objective is performance and survival rather than profit. This can be done, as we know, from the history of universities or hospitals—not all, but the best. Why is such a logic impossible for steel factories threatened with delocalization?

Finally, we need to develop the substantive meaning of our long-term emphases, which I take to be a world that is relatively democratic and relatively egalitarian. I say 'relatively' because that is realistic. There will always be gaps—but there is no reason why they should be wide, encrusted or hereditary. Is this what used to be called socialism, or even communism? Perhaps, but perhaps not.

That brings us back to the issue of debate.

> We need to stop assuming what the better (not the perfect) society will be like. We need to discuss it, outline it, experiment with alternative structures to realize it; and we need to do this at the same time as we carry out the first three parts of our programme for a chaotic world in systemic transition.

And if this programme is insufficient, and it probably is, then this very insufficiency ought to be part of the debate which is Point One of the programme.