

VALUES OF A NEW CIVILIZATION

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On the following pages, we propose a few possible themes for the debate on the question: “Principles and values of a new society”. These are not axioms, but working hypotheses and suggestions for reflection.

We, of the World Social Forum, believe in certain values, which guide and illuminate our project of social transformation and inspire our vision of a possible new world. The people gathered at Davos - bankers, executives and heads of State, who direct neoliberal globalization (or *globocolonization*) - also uphold values. We must not underestimate them, as they hold dear three great values and are willing to fight with any and all means to safeguard them – even by war, if need be. These three important values are at the heart of western capitalist civilization in its current form. The three great values of the Davos creed are the dollar, the euro and the yen. Although these three do themselves come into contradiction, together they constitute the globalized, neoliberal scale of values.

The main common characteristic of these three values is their strictly *quantitative* nature: they know no good nor evil, fair or unfair. They know only quantities, numbers, amounts: one, a hundred, a thousand, a million, a billion. Whoever has a billion – dollars, euros or yens – is worth more than whoever has only a million, and much more than those who have only a thousand. It goes without saying that whoever has nothing, or almost nothing, is worth nothing on the Davos scale of values. It is as if the person never existed. She or he is out of the market and, therefore, out of the civilized world.

Together, these three values constitute one of the divinities of liberal economic religion: it is known as Currency or, in Aramaic, Mammon. The other two divinities are The Market and Capital. These are fetishes or idols, objects of a fanatical and exclusive, intolerant and dogmatic cult. This fetishism of the commodity, according to Marx, or idolatry of the market (to use the expression of the liberation theologians Hugo Assmann and Franz Hinkelammert) and of money and capital, is a cult that has its churches (the Stock Markets), its Holy Offices (IMF, WTO, etc.), and persecutes heretics (all of us who believe in other values). These idols, like the Canaanite gods Moloch or Baal, demand terrible human sacrifices: the victims of the structural adjustment plans in the Third World, men, women and children sacrificed upon the altar of the World Market fetish and the Foreign Debt fetish.

An impressive body of canonical rules and orthodox principles serve to legitimize and sanctify these sacrificial rituals. A vast clergy of specialists and managers expound on the dogmas of the cult to the heathen multitudes, maintaining heretical opinions far from the public sphere. The ethical rules of this religion were already established, two centuries ago, by the economic theologian, Sir Adam Smith: that each individual seek, in the most implacable manner possible, her or his selfish interest, with disregard for their fellow men and women, and the invisible hand of the Market-God shall care for the rest, bringing harmony and prosperity to the entire nation.

This civilization of money and capital transforms everything - land, water, air, life, feelings, convictions - into merchandise, to be sold for the highest price. Even people become secondary in importance to merchandise, as it subverts the humanitarian person-commodity-person relationship. I put on a cotton shirt, which is merchandise, to humanize my social relations, as it would indeed be strange if I were to appear at work or a meeting of friends without a shirt. Now, the predominant relation is commodity-person-commodity. The brand of the shirt I wear is what denotes my value. In other words, if I come to your house by bus or by bike, I have a value of Z. If I arrive in a BMW, I have a value of A. I am the same person, yet, the merchandise that I use is what assigns me more or less value, thus reifying me.

As far back as the 19th Century, a critic of political economy had foreseen today’s world with prophetic clarity: “At last, the time has come in which all that human beings had considered as inalienable has become the object of exchange, of traffic, and may be alienated. It is a time when the same things

virtue, love, opinion, science, conscience etc. – when, in short, everything has finally become tradable. It is a time of generalized corruption, universal venality or, to speak in terms of political economy, the time when anything, moral or physical, once into a venal value, may be taken to market to be appraised for its appropriate value”.^{1[1]}

Qualitative values

Against the backdrop of this civilization of universal marketization, which drowns all human relations in the “cold waters of selfish calculation”,^{2[2]} the World Social Forum represents, firstly, a refusal: “the world is not a commodity”! That is, nature, life, human rights, freedom, love, culture, are not merchandise. Furthermore, the WSF embodies the aspiration to another type of civilization, based on other values that are neither money nor capital. These two projects of civilization and two scales of values confront each other, as completely irreconcilable antagonists, at the entrance to the 21st Century.

What values inspire this alternative project? They are *qualitative*, ethical and political, social and cultural values that are not reducible to monetary quantification; values that are common to the better part of the groups and networks that constitute the great world movement against neoliberal globalization.

We may start with the three values that inspired the French Revolution of 1789 - Liberty, Equality and Fraternity - that have been present ever since in all the social emancipation movements of modern history. As Ernst Bloch points out in his book, *Natural Right and Human Dignity* (1961), these principles engraved by the dominant class on the fronts of public buildings in France were never achieved. In practice, as Marx wrote, they were often replaced by Cavalry, Infantry and Artillery... They are part of the subversive tradition of the unfinished, the as-yet non-existent, the promises left unfulfilled. They possess a concrete utopian force, that “goes far beyond the bourgeois horizon”, a force of human dignity that points to the future, to the “march with heads held high” of humanity towards socialism.^{3[3]} If we examine these values more closely, from the standpoint of the victims of the system, we discover their explosive potential and pertinence to the current struggle against the marketization of the world.

What does “liberty” mean? First and foremost, freedom of expression, organization, thought, criticism, protest – hard won through centuries of struggles against absolutism, fascism and dictators. More importantly - and now more so than ever - it means freedom from another form of absolutism: the dictatorship of financial markets and the elite bankers and multinational businessmen who impose their interests on the whole of the planet. This is an imperial dictatorship – under the economic, political and military hegemony of the only remaining global superpower, the United States – which hides behind the anonymous, blind “laws of the market”, and whose world power is far superior to that of the Roman Empire or the colonial empires of the past. This dictatorship is wielded by the logic of capital itself, but which imposes itself with the aid of profoundly antidemocratic institutions, such as the IMF or WTO, and under threat of its armed wing (NATO). The concept of “national liberation” is insufficient to express the current meaning of freedom, which is, at the same time, local, national and worldwide, as the profoundly original and innovative Zapatista movement so well demonstrates.

One of the great limitations of the French Revolution of 1789 was that it excluded women from citizenship. The republican feminist, Olympe de Gouges, who wrote the “Declaration of women’s and female citizen’s rights”, was guillotined in 1793. The modern concept of freedom cannot ignore gender oppression that afflicts half of humanity, and the prime importance of women’s struggle for liberation. Particularly significant in this struggle is women’s right to control over their own bodies.

Equality and Fraternity

What does “equality” mean? The first revolutionary constitutions guaranteed equality before the law. This is absolutely necessary – and far from existing in the reality of the world today – but it is

^{1[1]} Karl Marx, *Misère de la philosophie*, Paris, Ed. Sociales, 1947, p.33.

woefully insufficient. The deeper problem is the monstrous inequality between the North and South of our planet and, within each country, between the small elite that monopolizes economic power and the means of production, and the great majority of the population, living from the force of their labor – when not unemployed, and excluded from social life. The figures are well-known: concentrated in the hands of four citizens of the USA – Bill Gates, Paul Allen, Warren Buffett and Larry Ellyson - is a fortune equivalent to the Gross Domestic Product of 42 poor countries, with a population of 600 million inhabitants. The foreign debt system, the logic of the world market and the unlimited power of financial capital have led to an aggravation of this inequality, which has worsened significantly over the last 20 years. The demand for equality and social justice – two inseparable values – inspire the different alternative socioeconomic projects that are the order of the day. From a broader point of view, this also entails a new mode of production and distribution.

Economic inequality is not the only form of injustice in liberal capitalist society: the persecution of the “undocumented” in Europe; the exclusion of the descendents of black slaves and indigenous peoples in the Americas; the oppression of millions of individuals that belong to the castes of “untouchables” in India ; and so many other forms of racism or discrimination due to color, religion or language, are omnipresent from North to South on our planet. An egalitarian society means the radical suppression of these discriminations. It further assumes a different relation between men and women, breaking away from the ancient system of inequality that has reigned throughout human history- the patriarchy - and which is responsible for violence against women, and their exclusion from the public sphere and from the workplace. The absolute majority of poor and unemployed people in the world are women.

What does “fraternity” mean? It is the modern translation of the old Judeo-Christian tradition: love of one’s neighbor. It means replacing the relationship of competition, fierce dispute, war of all against all – which, in current society, makes the individual a *homo homini lupus* (a wolf to other human beings) - with a relationship of cooperation, sharing, mutual helping, solidarity. This solidarity that includes not only the brothers (“frater”, in Latin), but sisters too, one that extends beyond the limits of the family, clan, tribe, ethnic group, religious community or nation to become authentically universal, worldwide, international. In other words, this solidarity is internationalist, in the sense given by whole generations of militants of the socialist, workers’ movement.

Neoliberal globalization produces and reproduces tribal and ethnic conflicts, wars of “ethnic purification”, bellicose expansionism, intolerant religious conservatism and xenophobia. These types of panic induced by the feeling of a loss of identity are the reverse side of the same coin, the inevitable complement to imperial globalization. The civilization that we dream of will be “a world that can hold many worlds” (according to the beautiful formula of the Zapatistas), a worldwide civilization of solidarity and diversity. Faced with the mercantile and quantitative homogenization of the world and with capitalist false universalism, we must now, more than ever, re-assert the wealth represented by cultural diversity, by the unique and irreplaceable contribution of each people, culture and individual.

Democracy as an indispensable value

Another value - democracy - has been inseparable from the other three since 1789. But democracy cannot be limited to the sense this political concept has in liberal-democratic discourse: the free election of representatives every so many years, which, to be honest, has been deformed and distorted by the control that economic power exercises over the media. This “representative democracy” – also the fruit of many popular struggles, and constantly threatened by the interests of the powerful, as demonstrated in the history of Latin America from 1964 to 1985 – is necessary yet insufficient. What we need are superior, more participatory forms that allow the population to exercise directly their power to decide and to oversee – as in the participatory budgets of the city of Porto Alegre and the State of Rio Grande do Sul.

The greater challenge, from the point of view of a project for an alternative society, is to extend democracy to the economic and social spheres. Why should we allow an elite to wield exclusive power in

choices, investment priorities, the fundamental orientation of production and distribution are democratically discussed and decided upon by the population itself, and not by a handful of exploiters or their supposed “market laws” or - in a variant that has proven bankrupt - by an all-powerful Political Bureau.

To these overarching values, one more must be added: respect for the environment. This product of modern revolutionary history is at the same time the oldest and the most recent. We see this value in the lifestyle of the indigenous tribes of the Americas and pre-capitalist rural communities of several continents, as well as at the heart of the modern ecological movement. Capitalist globalization – with geometric growth – is responsible for the accelerated destruction and poisoning of the environment: pollution of the land, oceans, rivers and air; the “greenhouse effect”, with its catastrophic consequences; the threat of destruction of the ozone layer, which protects us from lethal ultraviolet rays; the devastation of forests and biodiversity. A civilization based on solidarity cannot exist without being a civilization in solidarity with nature, since the human species cannot survive if the ecological balance of the planet is disrupted.

Socialism as an alternative

This list is by no means exhaustive. Each person may, based on her or his own experience and reflection, add more items. How can we sum up in a single word the set of values present, in one form or another, in the movement against capitalist globalization, in the street protests from Seattle to Genoa, and the debates of the World Social Forum? I believe that the expression, *civilization of solidarity* is an appropriate synthesis of this alternative project. It assumes not only a radically different economic and political structure, but primarily an alternative society that values the ideas of common good, public interest, universal rights, the non-profit motive.

I propose that we define this society with the term *socialism*, which for almost two centuries has summarized humankind’s aspirations for a new way of life, one with greater freedom, equality, democracy and solidarity. It is a term that – just like all the others (“liberty”, “democracy”, etc.) – has been manipulated by profoundly anti-grassroots, authoritarian interests, but which nonetheless retains its original and authentic value.

In a recent public opinion poll in Brazil, sponsored by the National Confederation of Industries (!), 55% of respondents stated that Brazil needed a socialist revolution. When asked what they understood by socialism, they answered citing certain values: “friendship”, “communion”, “sharing”, “respect”, “justice” and “solidarity”. A civilization based on solidarity is a socialist civilization.

In conclusion: another world is possible, if based on other values radically antagonistic to those that dominate the world today. We cannot forget, however, that the *future begins now*: these values are already prefigured in the initiatives that guide our movement *today*. They inspire the campaign against Third World debt and the resistance to WTO projects, the fight against genetically modified products and the proposals to tax financial speculation. They are present in social struggles, grassroots initiatives, experiences of solidarity, cooperation and participatory democracy – from the ecological struggle of peasants in India, to the participatory budget of Rio Grande do Sul; from the struggles for the right to form trade unions in South Korea, to the strikes in defense of public services in France; from the Zapatista villages of Chiapas, to the camps of the MST.

The future begins here and now, in these seeds of a new civilization, which we are planting through our struggle, and with our efforts to build new men and women from the subjective and ethical values that we have embraced in our lives as militants.

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