
From every minority beginning to speak to every majority that needs to listen

The last edition of the Labour Bulletin, 27 (6), began to explore the notion of social movements as part of an attempt to kickstart some debate around this issue. Peter Waterman responds to an article written by Michael Sachs on his views of the role played by social movements.

Michael Sachs has recently written two pieces on non-governmental organisations and social movements in the *South African Labour Bulletin* (Sachs 2002, 2003). Sachs, an official of the African National Congress – writing in his personal capacity – represents the most sophisticated ANC critic of the existing newest social movements.

Unlike other critics identified with the politics of the Old Left (the Left of National-Industrial-Colonial/Anti-Colonial Capitalism), Sachs avoids the customary binary oppositions – State v Civil Society, Party v Movement, North v South, Europe v South Africa. Rather would he like to see these oppositions transcended by some kind of synthesis – one functional to the capitalist, liberal-democratic and developmentalist order in South Africa.

The main thrust of Sachs' efforts is, however, to discredit South African expressions of something that is calling itself, internationally, either the 'Global Justice and Solidarity Movement' (GJ&SM) or the 'Other Globalisation

Movement'. His main argument seems to be that this movement is opposed to both the system and to popular identification with parliamentary democracy in South Africa. Sachs claims: 'Notwithstanding their celebrity status in the media, I think that there are two factors which will undermine their ability to meaningfully contribute to social transformation. The first is the legitimacy of the vote in South Africa since the franchise remains an effective instrument to realise the interests of the poor. The second is the national character of changes underway in South Africa.' (2002:25).

Sachs here poses himself as a defender of Liberal Democracy, of the Nation – and a critic of an irresponsible – possibly oppositional – media. There are, however, significant lapses in his argument. Capitalism is invisible. Social movements are dissociated from their historical relationship with social emancipation. Yet, if the ANC and its alliance partners (including the South African Communist Party and the Congress of South African Trade

Unions) stand in the shadow of previous social movements, it is this new movement that stands on the shoulders of those earlier ones – at least in their emancipatory moments or aspects.

Liberal democracy is in crisis in South Africa, for similar reasons that it is in crisis internationally. It can no longer deliver significant reforms – never mind social emancipation. So its reformism and developmentalism carries decreasing conviction. Capitalist globalisation – to which South Africa, France, China and Brazil all literally pay tribute – increasingly reduces the autonomy of the state-defined-nation. It is not the newest social movements that are responsible for the crisis of representative democracy in South Africa (or elsewhere). It is the other way round.

A South African minister, replying to criticism of the AIDS Policy (the No-AIDS-Policy) of the ANC on BBC World Service in late 2003, said something to the effect that the criticism did not matter since the population would

anyway vote for the ANC in the coming national elections. This is representative democracy understood as an instrument of mystification, demobilisation and control. This minister speaks the language of modern (quasi)-liberal democracies, from the US to Brazil. The radical-democratic social movements simply make this explicit.

There are other characteristics of radical-democratic social movements unrecognised in the Sachs account. One is that they occur in historical waves (the 19th century labour movement, the 20th century national liberation movements, the 21st century global justice and solidarity movement). These are always provoked by the conservative, exploitative, militarist, divisive, repressive nature of the existing system – or, more specifically, by dramatic increases of such, and a growing gap between the words of the official ideologists and the worlds of the people.

These major social movements always represent more than 'things' or even 'processes'. They carry with them a view of the world (an implicit model of the state of the world) and a world view (a philosophy or discourse). With the labour movement it was Socialism, with the national-independence movement Nationalism etc. The GJ&SM has, or is energetically working out, both of these. Whilst Sachs concerns himself with balancing a system, the movement concerns itself with re-inventing social emancipation. No significant new movement can be understood by an old emancipatory social theory – whether Liberalism or Socialism. That's why it needs to invent – and is inventing – its own.

A third characteristic is the new movement's ability to communicate. This represents not only its impact on the dominant media (the Sachs

bugbear) looking for a good story or picture, but the movement's understanding of the potentially liberating nature of the electronic media and the internet. This new movement is living, in other words, within – and against – a globalised, informalised and networked capitalism. Increasingly this

'The National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM)... is... an attempt towards building a people's political force, outside the electoral politics, that can counter the forces of destruction, inequality and exploitation and realise the values of equity, justice, peace and non-violence.'



movement (ecologists, human-rights activists, feminists, labour, indigenous and community movements) sees the world as one of structural injustice, destructive competition and violence.

Increasingly it argues, not against democracy, as Sachs suggests, but for its deepening and spreading. As the Latin American feminists say: 'Democracy in the state and democracy in the bed'. Now they are increasingly involved with this Southern-Western-Eastern movement which is demanding the radical-democratisation of the global. The National Alliance of People's Movements in India (not notably Western) characterises itself as follows:

With Gandhian, Marxist and Ambedkarian perspectives brought together, the people's movements in India have been shaping up a new and acceptable norm or ideology on the basis of their struggles and constructive work on alternatives. This new ideology strives for the radical changes in the production processes and technologies along with social-individual consumption patterns. Further, for it, the economic growth, democratic values and sustainability are equivalent and inevitable components of development. The NAPM has tried to follow an ideological framework that strengthens the struggles for life and

livelihood by every member of the oppressed. Ambedkar was the historical leader of the dalits (untouchables) during and after the end of colonialism in India. The NAPM, of course, is dismissed or criticised, by the Indian state, capital and the traditional Left, in much the same language as that of Sachs.

Sachs may not like those who he claims are opposed to representative democracy, who are 'demagogues', who do not treat The Nation as the final frontier of justice, identity or solidarity. But, then, he occupies an unfortunate 'subject position' from which to make such criticism. This is that of Capital (or at least its modernising wing), the State-defined-Nation, the Dominant Party, the Power Elite. The privileged place to make such criticisms, or to discuss the problems of the movement, is from inside the movement. Some of us spend much of our energy, within our movement, criticising it for its failure to free itself from the Old Politicking!

There are, within this movement, internationally, those who share the opinions of Sachs. Where they differ from him is in a recognition that the force and space for civilising society has shifted from where he stands to where they stand - within the global justice and solidarity movement and such spaces as the World Social Forums (WSF). This is why major forces of the traditional Left in India, some of the Communist parties and their fronts, were energetically involved in the recent WSF in Mumbai.

Repeating what I stated earlier (Waterman 2002, 2003) what Sachs has called the 'Seattle Movement' (2002) has its most dramatic current manifestation in the Southern-initiated and Southern-based WSFs (Brazil 2001-3, India 2004). It has spawned numerous other expressions in autonomous Asian, European and even

an African Social Forum. And, it has its popular expression in major protests in Chiapas, Mexico, in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in Quito, Ecuador, in provincial Arequipa and Tambo Grande, Peru (to confine myself to Latin American cases).

Powerfully suggestive of the nature and relationships of such new movements internationally, have been the Mexican Zapatistas and their international solidarity network. Here is the Zapatista leader, personifying the opposition to contemporary capitalist exploitation and alienation:

Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, a Mayan Indian in the streets of San Cristobal, a Jew in Germany, a Gypsy in Poland, a Mohawk in Quebec, a pacifist in Bosnia, a single woman on the metro at 10pm, a peasant without land, a gang member in the slums, an unemployed worker, an unhappy student, and, of course, a Zapatista in the mountains. Marcos is all the exploited, marginalised, oppressed minorities resisting and saying 'ENOUGH' He is every minority who is now beginning to speak and every majority that must shut up and listen. He is every untolerated group searching for a way to speak.

Everything that makes power and the good consciences of those in power uncomfortable - this is Marcos.

And here is the pluralistic vision of emancipation offered by the Zapatistas: One no and many yeses. And this is their vision of a world of peace, justice and variety: We want a world in which there are many worlds, a world in which our world, and the worlds of others will fit: a world in which we are heard, but as one of many voices. Is this demagogy? I don't think so. This is the rhetoric of human emancipation - something we know

from Nelson Mandela but no more hear from his successors, whose rhetoric is that of control.

As for the newest international left inspired by/supporting the Zapatistas, Thomas Olesen (forthcoming) says: 'What seems to be emerging is a transnational Left that is not a coalition centred around a leader and with clearly defined goals and strategies, nor an unrelated and disconnected mass of activists. Rather it may be described as a network of networks that constantly expands, diffuses, and contracts in response to specific events and problems ... These networks make their influence felt in a more traditional way by influencing politicians and officials in national institutions and intergovernmental organisations... but also on a cultural level by contributing new ideas and discourses to society.'

Waterman has been associated with the South African Labour Bulletin almost since its foundation. He is co-editor of The World Social Forum: Challenging Empires, due out with Viveka, New Delhi, before WSF4, Mumbai, India, January 2004. Waterman can be contacted at waterman@antenna.nl

References

- Olesen, Thomas. Forthcoming. *International Zapatismo: The Construction of Solidarity in the Age of Globalisation*. London: Zed
- Sachs, Michael. 2002. 'From Seattle to Johannesburg'. SALB, 26 (4).
- Sachs, Michael. 2003. 'We Don't Want the Fucking Vote': Social Movements and Demagogues in...South Africa's Young Democracy'. SALB, 27 (6): 23-7
- Waterman, Peter. 2002. 'On Not Trashing the NGOs and the New Global Solidarity Movements'. http://groups.yahoo.com/group/GloSoDia/files/NA_TERNANIA/
- Waterman, Peter. 2003. 'The International Call of Social Movements', SALB, 27 (6): 28-30