

Which alter-globalism after the "end of neo-liberalism"?

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"The end of neo-liberalism"? Who dares to ask the question? Fidel Castro, Hugo Chavez? No: it's the American economist and Nobel prize-winner Joseph Stiglitz, in an article published on 7th July 2008. After attesting to the economic, social and political failure of neo-liberalism, he asserts that "neo-liberal market fundamentalism was always a political doctrine serving certain interests. It was never supported by economic theory. Nor, it should now be clear, is it supported by historical experience" ¹.

It must indeed be recognised that the current crisis of capitalism, in its neo-liberal phase, is beginning to take a systemic dimension by accruing financial, monetary, food and energy components. It is giving rise to strong contradictions both within the system and among its "elites": challenges to the hegemony of the United States and of the "Washington Consensus", especially in Latin America where progressive governments have come to power; governments as market-orientated as those of Washington and London resorting to the nationalisation of financial institutions; decline of international financial institutions; emergence of new multipolar global forces with the growing economic weight of the "BRIC" countries (Brazil, Russia, India & China); rise in power of sovereign funds; wars in the Caucasus, partly linked to competing energy ambitions and Nato's expansionist wishes; stalemates in Iraq and Afghanistan; tension about Iran; national political regimes moving towards authoritarianism in Europe, etc.

This new landscape is shaking up what could be called the "alter-globalist consensus" (in French, consensus altermondialiste) established by a variety of organisations towards the end of the 1990s. Until now, these different networks had explicitly or implicitly allied together around the identification of a common, homogenous opponent, a model of policies symbolised by and sometimes imposed by multilateral institutions (the World Bank, the IMF and

¹ <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/stiglitz101>

the WTO), applied by every government and ideologically dominant among the "elites": neo-liberalism. It is significant that, over the past decade, a large number of mass mobilisations by the alter-globalist movement were directed against these multilateral institutions. Demonstrations will certainly continue against them, but as they are experiencing a profound crisis, for reasons which are specific to each of them, in a few years this will no doubt amount to shooting at ambulances.

Consequently, we can question the relevance of a concept which is as all-inclusive as neo-liberalism. Whereas, in the 1990s, it embodied a symbiosis between different dimensions - political (governments, multilateral institutions and the "elites"), economic (market players and the banking and financial institutions), and ideological (the media) - it is now suffering from the fragmentation of capitalist unity. Paradoxically, when that relative weakness should have reinforced the "movement of movements", it is undermining it. In fact, to take up the analysis of a recent work on alter-globalism², "the crisis encountered by the Washington Consensus since the turn of the millennium has given birth to a very uneven global scenario in which a series of developments provides potential answers to some alter-globalist expectations, without necessarily inspiring the support of the totality of the movement's components ". This movement and its main players, including the Attac associations in different countries, are now confronted with existential problems. This term is not too strong insofar as the objective conditions which presided over their existence as such have been structurally changed.

Among these problems, two are particularly important:

1) The confirmation of the existence of a "forest of political rationalities" within alter-globalism itself. The plurality of the movement and of its political traditions and currents - which was its strength during its phase of critical analysis of neo-liberalism - carries the seeds of "disagreements between organisations which are stakeholders in the debate on alternatives. (They) have their origins in divergent interpretations of economic globalisation itself"³. In France and in certain other European countries, these divergences showed themselves in 2005 during the debates on the European Constitutional Treaty (ECT), when part of the movement (notably all European Attac national chapters) called for the rejection of the text, another (smaller) part called for its ratification, and a large majority abstained from taking up a position. But the ECT was not an insignificant document. It was intended to give Europe a sort of neo-liberal Constitution, no less. Here the fragility and

² François Polet, Clés de lecture de l'altermondialisme ("Keys to interpreting alter-globalism") , CETRI/Couleur livres, Charleroi, Belgium, 2008.

³ Ibid.

limits of the alter-globalist consensus is clearly seen, and it was shown, on this crucial topic, during the preparation of the European social forum at Malmö.

2) A structural difficulty in thinking through its relationship with the political sphere (parties, Parliaments, State institutions, and governments) which is confirmed on two levels. Firstly, in some national situations the movement suffers from competition from parties which are slowly reconfiguring the political field by taking their inspiration from the proposals and gains of social movements. Secondly, at international level, it shows itself to be reluctant to envisage a dynamic relationship with the concrete new experiments in questioning neo-liberalism in Latin America.

A new situation naturally calls for new reactions. Alter-globalism cannot dispense with a redefinition of its forms of existence and of the preparation of programmatic and political responses in the face of the beginning of the new historical cycle of a more diversified capitalism than was the case in the preceding period. This is the meaning of the approach that we have called "post-alter-globalist"⁴ (in French, post-altermondialiste), of which one of the core dimensions is the search for new spaces and new forms of articulation between social movements, political forces and governments leading common struggles.

A very concrete example (and the only one so far) is ALBA (Alternativa Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América), the Bolivarian Alternative for the Peoples of our America, which today brings together Bolivia, Cuba, Dominica, Honduras, Nicaragua and Venezuela and could expand in the future to include new members, particularly Ecuador and Paraguay. The ALBA's structures include not only its member governments but also a Social Movements Council with key responsibilities. Additionally, social movements of non-member countries can be associated with the ALBA. The ALBA is the first international structure derived from post-alter-globalism, even if it does not so define itself!

The case of the ALBA, which is largely unknown outside Latin America and especially in Europe (which is explained by the virulent hostility of the major media), obliges the alter-globalist movement to ask itself a question regarding strategic orientation, hitherto taboo : must it - and if so, how - win over concrete political arenas in order to transform them? Must it be satisfied with influencing this area, join it, or even contribute to its renewal?

Here the ideas of "variable geometry" or "enhanced cooperation", far from

⁴ See the contributions to the symposium on Altermondialisme et post-altermondialisme ("Alter-globalism and post-alter-globalism") held in Paris on 26th January 2008 : www.medelu.org

being in contradiction with that of "post-alter-globalism", are on the contrary variations of it. It is pure rhetoric on the part of the French trade unionist Pierre Khalfa to make them distinct alternatives to the status quo engraved in the marble of the Porto Alegre Charter of Principles, because in both cases, to use his own words, "It is about bringing changes in the political sense of the Forums. Changing the political configuration of the Forums pre-supposes a double political agreement : an agreement to ensure that this change does not call into question the fact that the Forum, as such, does not take decisions, which is a condition for the participation of all forces in it; but in return there must be a political agreement so that "enhanced cooperations" can be set up within this framework, find in it the means to exist and benefit from the necessary political visibility"⁵.

On these bases, the alter-globalism movement should begin a certain number of developments:

- The question must seriously be posed concerning its alliance with the working classes so as to participate in the construction of a new political hegemony. Until now, due to its heterogeneity, this movement has made little contribution to the concrete transformation of the social and political balance of forces in favour of these classes. As the Social Forums clearly show, it is too absent from issues which concern them on a daily basis : social protection, health care, education, unemployment. This explains part of its current "disconnection".

- This question raises another. Outside of Latin America, where should such alliances be made ? In Europe, and especially in France, notions of the State and the Nation are demonized by the economic, financial and media "elites", among the upper middle classes and part of the leadership of political parties and movements claiming to be representative of alter-globalism, all of whom are committed to a headlong "Europe right or wrong" rush. Through a panic fear of a vacuum or a supposed "national withdrawal" that no-one is proposing, these leaderships cling to the existing Europe, whereas experience shows that it can only produce neo-liberal solutions. This dread of what is national does not exist in the South, the United States or Japan.

In Europe, part of the answer is to be found in the battle for democratization of the national frameworks within which peoples organise social and political struggles, as they will for a long time to come. At the same time, it is

⁵ Pierre Khalfa, member of the Scientific Council of Attac France, spokesman for the trade union Union Syndicale Solidaires, Problèmes dans (et de) l'altermondialisme ("Problems in and of alter-globalism") (<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?auteur366&lang=fr>)

important to strengthen the construction of social mobilisation on the scale of the Continent. But to be effective and not delude the people, such a dynamic must be based on a permanent work towards delegitimization of the institutional framework of the European Union which makes any democratic and social progress impossible in European societies⁶.

- The return (the term "revenge" is sometimes used) of States on the world scene confirms the urgent need for the alter-globalist movement to get down to this kind of thinking. Failing which, the vacant spaces will be ideologically and politically occupied by conservative forces using accents of "modernism" and "protective" and "regulatory" speeches (as is already the case in France or Italy).

- At international level, another development could allow it to grow stronger: the setting-up, within the framework of a variable geometry functionality, of post-alter-globalist initiatives (international forums for assessment and actions on economic, social, democratic and ecological themes and claims) carried by the components of the alter-globalist movement, organised with progressive political and government actors. The development of the ALBA will provide an interesting source for thinking and discussion.

- These new spaces will allow the development of a dialectical relationship between social movements and institutional players, and provoke a dynamic and practical reflection around the key questions which are posed to all emancipation movements at each period of history: power, its conquest and transformation, democracy and its political, social and economic construction, etc.

These proposals are a contribution to the debates of the International Council of the World Social Forum whose next meeting will be held in Copenhagen from 22nd to 24th September, after the next ESF in Malmö.

⁶ See the book published by Mémoire des luttes and the review Utopie critique, Bernard Cassen ed., *En finir avec l'eurolibéralisme* ("Putting an end to Euroliberalism"), Editions des 1001 Nuits, Paris, 2008.