A New World Order - For Whom?

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As we approach the end of the 20th century humanity is faced with four conditions of its own making, so serious in terms of their present destruction of life and risks for the future that they warrant a description as 'four holocausts'.

The first holocaust is that of war and militarisation. A year after the gulf war it is clear that, far from preparing the way for world peace, that conflict has unleashed a new global arms race in weapons whose brutal effectiveness was so clearly demonstrated in Iraq. The second holocaust is that of human oppression, the violent denial by governments of the basic personal, civil, political and economic rights of their citizens, which routinely persists in a majority of countries of the world. The third holocaust is that of economic destitution, the mass poverty of a fifth of the world's population, leading to endemic malnutrition, disease and death. The fourth holocaust is that of environmental destruction, which is rendering the planet uninhabitable, as witnessed by the growing millions of environmental refugees whose bankrupt ecosystems can no longer support them.

None of these circumstances is entirely new to our age. War, repression, destitution and ecological degradation have often been part of the human condition. What is new about the current situation is its global nature. All humanity is now at risk. And it is all humanity which must be party to a response, if it is to be successful.

Against this background, several new developments stand out. First, and most recent, is the collapse of communism. Second, there are the twin trends of economic globalisation and interdependence of economic and environmental impacts. This is the context for any discussion of 'a new world order', first proclaimed by President Gorbachev in the UN in 1990, and then envisaged by President Bush. What did these two men mean? What kind of new world order? For whom?

Broadly, there are three kinds of new world order on offer. The real world is almost certainly going to be a mixture of all three, but the balance between them will be crucial in deciding whether we will successfully manage to face, and overcome, the holocausts raging among us.

A 'neoliberal' new world order

The 'neoliberal' new world order is the kind envisaged by George Bush. Its most important component is the untrammeled operation of what he would call the global 'free market'. At once we must qualify this by noting that the freedom bestowed on someone by the market is in direct proportion to the amount of property owned by that person. In a free market, those who own the means of production are free to produce what, when and where they want and largely to determine the conditions of production. Those who own the means of consumption can similarly scour the world for products to satisfy their wants. This 'freedom' is far from universal as shown by the fact that 23 per cent of the world's population, control 85 per cent of the income. Ownership of the means of production is more concentrated still. The neoliberal world order thus represents a good deal for perhaps a quarter of the world's population but has little to offer the rest.

A 'social democratic' new world order

The 'social democratic' new world order is roughly that advocated in the 1970s by the proponents of a New International Economic Order, and later by the Brandt reports. It still envisages the operation of global market forces but demands that they be framed by international institutions to promote global economic stability, greater distributive justice between nations and 'development' of low-income countries. One of the best examples of such institutions is the social chapter of the new European Treaty signed at Maastricht in 1991, which explicitly seeks to provide for minimum workers' conditions in the European Single Market. Globally, the institution marked for this role is the United Nations, which provides the central focus of this new world order. Unlike that of the neoliberals, the 'social democratic' new world order is supposed to promote the welfare of all the world's people.

These two new world orders are clearly different but they also share several characteristics which are more significant than their differences. First, they are explicitly Western-orientated and homogenising. They view the world through the eyes of Western science and Western culture, simultaneously devaluing the knowledge and accumulated wisdom of the great majority of humankind. The paradigm society, towards which all others are supposed to be developing or aspiring to, is the United States.

Second, both these world orders are economistic. Human progress and development to them means economic development, still usually measured by the
level and growth of GNP per person. No social or cultural tradition or aspiration is allowed to stand in the way of this 'development'. Third, both world views envisage top-down decision-making for administration and control. For the neoliberal the dominant influence is exercised by the owners and managers of transnational capital. For the social democrats their influence is balanced by the interventions of international and national bureaucrats. Neither world order places great store on consultation with, let alone decision-making by, ordinary people in their communities.

A 'grassroots' new world order

In contrast to these two new world orders, it is possible to posit a third, here called the 'grassroots' new world order, which takes as its principal focus neither the market nor the state (national or international), but civil society, the networks of family, community and voluntary association acting for social reproduction, reconstruction or reform. This new world order has characteristics diametrically opposed to those shared by the first two discussed. Its impulse derives explicitly from the bottom-up, drawing on the capability and creativity of those united by shared values and interests, at the local level or in wider networks. Their world-view is one of cultural diversity, of one world comprised of many different villages, rather than a homogeneous global village modelled on the US. They perceive human development to be holistic, with the economic dimension integrated with, or embedded in, a broader social, ethical and ecological reality. And they proceed from an ethical basis that strives for ecological sustainability, social justice in distribution and broad participation in cultural, political and economic life.

After this thumb-nail sketch of these three views of different dominant global processes, one can ask which of them or, more realistically, what balance between them, will be best able to put an end to the four holocausts tormenting humanity. There is only one convincing answer: the dominant thrust must be towards the grassroots new world order. There are several reasons for this. Most obviously, it is indisputable that it is the forces of the market and the state that have not only failed to douse, but have actually fanned the flames of all four holocausts.

For the social democrats their interventions are responsible for the great majority of violence and repression against ordinary people. It is states, often supported by multilateral governmental organisations such as the World Bank and IMF, that have in the so-called Third World intervened massively in the subsistence, largely non-market economies of the people, and redistributed their resources, redefining their very rights to property, in favour of industrialisation and market exchange. But these enhanced markets have then spectacularly failed to provide alternative subsistence for those dispossessed, leaving millions of them impoverished, marginalised and destitute. Moreover, this process has set in train two great engines of environmental destruction: industrialisation itself, with its toxic pollution, soil erosion, water and ozone depletion and climate destabilisation; and the depredations of the rural dispossessed, forced into forests or onto marginal land, deforesting, making deserts, extinguishing species and multiplying in numbers in their desperate efforts to stay alive.

In contrast, it is civil society that has mobilised explicitly against the four holocausts. The great social movements of our time are those for peace and human rights, for justice and development, and for environmental conservation. It is independent, non-violent associations of civil society that have sought explicitly to address these issues, meeting at best indifference from organisations of the market and the state, at worst outright hostility.

This is not at all to say that the market and state are irremediable, or that they have no role in combating the four holocausts of destruction. On the contrary, they each have a vital contribution to make but, in order to make it, each must first be transformed. The market failures caused by great concentration of wealth and power, ubiquitous externalities, the tyranny of small decisions and positional goods, can only be resolved by determined and democratic state action. But most governments are not democratic. On the contrary most are unrepresentative and self-serving, many are vicious and corrupt. And the only force that can democratise them is that of civil mobilisation and organisation.

Viewing the immense power of today's concentrations of wealth, and the remoteness of most governments from their people, one may feel despair at the prospect of civil society being able to harness these forces to the common good. And indeed there is no certainty that they will be thus harnessed. The four holocausts may simply run their awful course. But since 1989, at least, there is proof positive in the peaceful revolutions in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union that civil society can overturn seemingly omnipotent despotic structures. All over the world, the various movements for peace, justice and the environment are organising for human survival. The stakes have never been so high and the outcome is uncertain; but there are legitimate, and inspiring, grounds for hope.

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