

Toward the Integration of
Urban Social Movements
at the World Scale

Dialogue with W. Warren Wagar's
"Toward a Praxis of World Integration"

By Patrick Bond and Mzwanele Mayekiso

contact:

Patrick Bond

10 First Avenue

Westdene 2092 * Johannesburg

Phone: 2711-673-7872

6395

e-mail: PBOND@WN.APC.ORG

National Institute for Economic Policy

P.O. Box 32848 * Braamfontein 2017

Phone: 2711-403-3009 * Fax: 2711-339-

Mzwanele Mayekiso

sancodri@wn.apc.org

(Bond studied geography at Johns Hopkins and is based at the National Institute for Economic Policy in Johannesburg, and Mayekiso is international representative of South Africa's urban social movement, the SA National Civic Organisation. We expand on these arguments and locate their SA roots in the forthcoming Socialist Register 1996, London: Merlin and New York: Monthly Review, as well as in Mayekiso's new book, *Township Politics: Civic Struggles for a New South Africa*, New York: Monthly Review.)

Copyright 1996 by Patrick Bond and Mzwanele Mayekiso.

[Page 1]

Journal of World-Systems Research

Wagar is correct to heap scorn on the notion that "any movement in any degree of opposition to the capitalist world-system and/or its colluding dominant national states is somehow, almost mystically, a comrade-movement of all the others... The great question... is whether antisystemic movements are really antisystemic."

That is indeed a great question, which we want to address

[Page 1]

forthrightly by describing ways the urban component of South Africa's semi-victorious liberation movement might resonate with what's happening elsewhere. That way, we confront Wagar's charge that too many protest movements, even those based in Third World mega-cities, represent little more than a "slender and wobbly reed, at all odds little inclined to collaborate."

What nuances would we insist upon, initially? We find, from years of sometimes inspiring, more often bitter experiences struggling with the meaning of "development" -- the discursive terrain in which these movements must usually operate -- that distinctions between and within social movements, CBOs (community-based organisations) and both indigenous and international NGOs (non-governmental organisations) of various ideological predispositions are now becoming as crucial as the practical and political distinction between market-oriented development and "people-centred development."

The latter -- which the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO, made up of township civic associations or "civics") took as a motto at its 1992 launch, and lobbied for during the subsequent era -- is, no doubt, vulnerable to manipulation by neoliberals and populist demagogues alike. But in its strongest, most organic form, the struggle for people-centred development

[Page 2]

Journal of World-Systems Research

highlights basic needs as entitlements, financed and delivered in a non-commodified form, through a "strong but slim" state (the phrase that has emerged here) capable of capturing and redistributing the social surplus, complemented with additional resources for building the organisational capacity of popular, non-profit, community-controlled institutions.

Another of Wagar's "half measures and red herrings"? This is, perhaps, as close as an urban social movement will get to advocating an explicitly socialist ideology -- and such movements will certainly not, given the international balance of forces at

[Page 2] *Journal of World-Systems Research*

present, give priority to "the building of socialist world government" out of that motley, incompetent but formidable collection of imperial institutions (IMF, IBRD, IDA, IFC, WTO, UN, BIS, etc) now amassed against them. Yet struggles for people-centred development will take them far in the anti-capitalist struggle, particularly given the conditions thrown up by the market, namely combined and uneven development.

Few analysts have discussed the combination of contradictions in the realms of production and reproduction with as much commitment as James Petras and Morris Morley:

The power of these new social movements comes from the fact that they draw on the vast heterogeneous labour force that populates the main thoroughfares and the alleyways; the marketplaces and street corners; the interstices of the economy and the nerve centres of production; the exchange and finance centres; the university plazas, railway stations and the wharves -- all are brought together in complex localized

structures which feed into tumultuous homogenizing

[Page 3]

Journal of World-Systems Research

national movements. (*US Hegemony Under Siege: Class, Politics and Development in Latin America*, London: Verso, 1990, p.53.)

The main structural factor forging the unity of the urban poor and the formal working-class, Petras and Morley continue, is capitalist crisis. "The great flows of capital disintegrate the immobile isolated household units, driving millions into the vortex of production and circulation of commodities; this moment of wrenching dislocation and relocation is silently, individually experienced by the mass of people, who struggle to find their place, disciplined by the struggle for basic needs and by the absolute reign of ascending capital." Under such conditions, the social base for urban movements is continually recreated at the

[Page 3]

point that the limits to both commodity production and consumption become evident.

Why *urban* movements, though? Because surviving capitalist urbanisation is becoming increasingly difficult for people of Third World cities as a result of what seems to be a shift in the scalar strategy of international capital and aid agencies. In contrast to the traditional modernisationist fixation with the nation-state as the prime unit of the polity, it appears now that the mega-city is becoming the preferred unit of analysis, control and implementation for the purpose of more efficiently imposing structural adjustment policies (especially in the wake of the destruction of many nation-state capacities).

To illustrate, one senior advisor to the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, Shlomo Angel, argues (in the UN journal *Countdown to Istanbul*, 1, 1995) that the 1996 Habitat conference should be about "creating a level playing field for

[Page 4]

Journal of World-Systems Research

competition among cities, particularly across national borders; on understanding how cities get ahead in this competition; on global capital transfers, the new economic order and the weakening of the nation-state..." This is only one of the more vulgar articulations of an increasingly familiar theme (as expressed again by Angel): "The city is not a community, but a conglomerate of firms, institutions, organisations and individuals with contractual agreements among them."

From such principles an entire neoliberal edifice can be constructed. The focus here is not merely on limiting public financing of social services to those deemed to add value (though this is one of the more obvious effects of structural adjustment, and the catalyst for many an IMF riot). Just as importantly, the World Bank's "New Urban Management Programme" also highlights the productivity of urban capital as it flows through urban land markets (now enhanced by titles and registration), through

[Page 4] Journal of World-Systems Research

housing finance systems (featuring solely private sector delivery and an end to state subsidies), through the much-celebrated (but extremely exploitative) informal economy, through (often newly - privatised) urban services such as transport, sewage, water and even primary health care services (via intensified cost - recovery), and the like. Come visit Johannesburg (and Alexandra township) and you'll quickly get the point.

And we are now coming to the larger point. Wagar worries that "the initial response of the disempowered and the marginalized to our crisis everywhere has been flight." True? If you have already fled the rural crisis to confront urban degradation, another option emerges: organisation. In this, we exercise the same sort of caution as many classical Marxists when the phrase "civil society" is raised. Again, it is of crucial importance to

[Page 5]

Journal of World-Systems Research

highlight the organisational instruments of poor and working people. These we term "working-class civil society" in order to distinguish them from bourgeois non-governmental institutions (as well as from government and firms) and hence from pervasive depoliticized notions of "civil society" (the real goal of which boils down to reducing the scope of social services provided by states).

And as Wagar would point out, there are plenty of urban development organisations which do accept the neoliberal premise that the citizenry must not make demands for state services as entitlements. Across the world, pliant NGOs are now considered to be an integral component of the modernisation process by virtue of their efficiency and flexibility, corresponding with the desire of the international agencies to shrink Third World states as part of the overall effort to lower the social wage. Even indigenous NGOs and some CBOs have been drawn into the process, which highlights long-standing distinctions between technicist, apolitical development interventions and the people-centred strategies (and militant tactics) of either small-scale

[Page 5]

CBOs or mass-based social movements of the oppressed.

In South Africa and everywhere else, it is now crucial to recognise the ideological lacunae and diversions represented within the many new development organisations that have emerged in response to the broader failure of capitalist modernisation and of the state. In dozens of wretched Third World cities (including Los Angeles) where organisation and democratic traditions of struggle are simply lacking, matters quickly degenerate into desperate IMF riots. In many other situations, the opposite -- petty-bourgeois professionalisation -- has taken hold. Given the class groundings, the often patriarchal form and

[Page 6]

Journal of World-Systems Research

the occasionally imperialist sponsorship of some Third World (and many First World) organisations engaged in development work, it should not be surprising that upon closer examination their progressive rhetoric is merely rhetoric and their practices quite consistent with neoliberalism. Drawing out their relationships to establishment actors (foundations, aid agencies, development banks, consultants and lawyers, construction and civil engineering capital, etc) becomes more and more important at levels of both micro-implementation and macro-policy advocacy. Recognising this helps us move beyond "reconciling the members of our squabbling so-called family of antisystemic movements" and into more durable alliances.

What about "the third path of partnership, of mutualist multiculturalism"? Wagar rejects this outright, but we feel it worthwhile to bring aboard the concerns of Arturo Escobar and his allies -- such as Vandana Shiva, Ashish Nandy, Shiv Visvanathan, Gustavo Esteva, and the journals David y Goliath and Neueva Sociedad -- who stress common anti-modern themes in exploring (generally rural-situated) social movements which resist development, in part because their "processes of identity construction were more flexible, modest, and mobile [than those of previous political strategies], relying on tactical

[Page 6] *Journal of World-Systems Research*

articulations arising out of the conditions and practices of daily life. To this extent, these struggles were fundamentally cultural." (Here, some echoes of Frank and Fuentes in Transforming the Revolution.) And as for alternatives, "Out of hybrid or minority cultural situations might emerge other ways of building economies, of dealing with basic needs, of coming together into social groups" (Escobar, Encountering Development, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp.216,225). The operative word, of course, is "might," and we

[Page 7]

Journal of World-Systems Research

do not believe that "modernity" is the fundamental problem. Yet so much damage has been done by pseudo-modernising, populist-developmental states run by nationalist political parties, sometimes even in the name of a "Marxist-Leninist" tradition (we simply look north and east, to Zimbabwe and Mozambique), that it is incumbent upon us to conceptualise the struggle differently, beyond the goal of state "power," more directly with respect to the self-actualisation of poor and working-class people.

As Marx explains in the context of the Paris Commune (from which, incidentally, South Africa's mid-1980s urban "ungovernability" and "dual power" campaigns drew direct inspiration, and invited comparisons), it was the process of self-emancipation from the dictates of capital, not the outcome, that was most important.

The working class did not expect miracles from the Commune. They have no ready-made utopias to introduce par decret du peuple. They know that in order to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending by its own economical agencies, they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men. They have no ideals to realise, but to set free the elements of the new society with

[Page 7]

which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant. (The Civil War in France)

Again, skepticism from Wagar that we might ever realise anything more than the Commune in One City: "Antisystemic movements must work together, forging alliances and resisting processes that

[Page 8]

Journal of World-Systems Research

lead to their ghettoization. Perhaps. Yet is there really any hope that this can happen?" From the South African experience, we do believe that social movements are capable of being tightly networked, and that their immediate territorial base can be expanded regionally, nationally or even internationally. As this happens, movements cement their common norms, practices and collective strategies and tactics, in order to advance both local agendas and larger political campaigns. This experience is still ahead, of course, but not too far off if institutions such as the World Bank remain such inviting targets. (In this, the international anti-apartheid movement provides inspiration, but also important lessons about the dangers of demobilisation.)

A brief elaboration may be in order. Efforts are underway among

diverse progressive forces to link up and amplify existing grassroots social movement challenges to GATT and the Bank. In the latter struggle, an important obstacle has emerged in the form of surprisingly resilient reformist (as opposed to non-reformist) reformism within the radical petty-bourgeois intelligentsia. This class (to which we also belong) has more than its share of dilettantes, is sometimes politically capricious, and often wavers at key conjunctures which can be crucial for progress towards a broader internationalism. One significant result is that for reasons relating largely to its own "insider" technocratic positionality, many intellectual and strategic campaigners within these international movements argue for reform, not defunding, of the World Bank. (Oxfam has been particularly disappointing of late.) In contrast, increasing numbers of other organisations are coming to the conclusion that

[Page 8] Journal of World-Systems Research

a vigorous and potentially decisive campaign to shut down the Bank -- for example, through divestment (of Bank securities purchased by government, pension and university funds) in the

[Page 9]

Journal of World-Systems Research

North and popular boycotts in the South -- is eminently feasible (Global Exchange in San Francisco is leading the way here: globalexch@igc.apc.org).

It remains to be seen whether in coming months and years, the "50 Years Is Enough" network comprising Northern groups and dozens of excellent grassroots social movements which have fought and sometimes won struggles against the Bank -- from Costa Rica, Haiti, India, Mexico, Nepal, Nicaragua, Papua New Guinea, and the Philippines, to name a few sites of intense recent activism -- can reach a consensus and cohere as an international movement.

If this does occur -- if, in other words, those local and national social movements with a more explicitly anti-capitalist development ideology do begin thinking globally and acting locally_and_globally -- then there is a real opportunity for "popular movements [to] join forces across borders (and continents) to have their respective state officials abrogate those relations of the interstate system through which the pressure is conveyed," as suggested so eloquently by Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein (*Anti-Systemic Movements*, London, Verso, 1989, p.74).

For we may ultimately agree with Vicente Navarro that "The mass struggle carried out in its many different forms needs to be carried out in the area of representative politics as well as by instruments such as political parties which need to present and articulate the demands made by these movements" ("The Nature of Democracy in the Core Capitalist Countries: Meanings and Implications for Class Struggle," *The Insurgent Sociologist*,

10, 1, 1980, p.12). But until the terrain is better prepared for representative politics to emerge at the world scale, or until

[Page 9]

[Page 10]

Journal of World-Systems Research

wider cracks open in the present hegemony that neoliberal institutions maintain over nation-states, it is our sense that broad-based social movement activism grounded in struggles against both capitalist production and reproduction is where the most portentous political challenges to the international system lie. It is hence our personal hope and expectation that comrades around the world will gain most inspiration from the South African struggle, and will most effectively contribute to its deepening over the coming difficult period, by recognising the parallels through which urban (and so many other) social movements have contested uneven capitalist development.

So far as we can see, Wagar makes just one concession to our vision of globally-cohesive working-class civil society (a rather different "community of communities" than that which the communitarian Etzioni imagines): "An obvious shortcoming of this [Short History of the Future] scenario is that I say nothing about sister movements that might have aided the work of the World Party." We would put the challenge the other way 'round, and are grateful for the opportunity to open up dialogue about why, and perhaps how.

[Page 11]

Journal of World-Systems Research