

REFLECTIONS ON WAGAR'S WORLD PARTY

Albert Bergesen
Department of Sociology
University of Arizona
Tucson, Arizona 85721
520-621-3303
Email: albert@u.arizona.edu

Copyright 1996 by Albert Bergesen.

Our task is to reflect upon Wagar's idea of a world party. In my case such reflections are affected by the recent historical situation of the collapse of communism/existing socialism in 1989 and the implications this has for visions of progressive politics going into the 21st century. This event colors most political thinking, although for many the response has been that existing socialism was not real socialism, or that existing socialism was but the Stalinist deformation that, if avoided in the future, the 1917 project could again be resumed and human history and social relations remade anew. I don't see it that way. What existing socialism stood for in terms of the role of a vanguard party taking state power for the larger good is, now after the fall, I think off the board as a realistic program that can be sold to anyone. For who knows

[Page 1]

Journal of World-Systems Research

how long I don't think anyone is going to believe, or follow, or support the notion of forcefully taking control of the state and willfully transforming the institutions of civil society to create a better world. It may have been known before the fall of socialism--that it wasn't what it was supposed to be --but it certainly

seems to be the case now that seizing state power and holding it in the name of the "people" is greeted with deep suspicion.

This brings us to Wagar's notion of a world party as the next form of progressive politics. The down side of Wagar's vision is the reinstatement of the idea of the underground party with all the infiltration and deception ("smuggling its agents into positions of responsibility in governments and corporations, which they make it their business to betray when the time is ripe" p. 14). Worse are the implications of ruthlessness that reminds of the past and scares as much as encourages. Wagar speaks of world leaders being of use to the world party "only if the national leaders concerned swear a solemn oath to build a socialist world-government...[and]..if national leaders cannot make that commitment, they are of no use to us, or ultimately, to themselves" p. 16. Strong stuff. What is the consequence of people who are of no use to the party and not even of any use to themselves. They sound dispensable to me. Swear

the world party oath, or be of no historical use. Somehow this all reminds of earlier party programs and decisions that classes, peoples, elites, sexual persuasions, and religious or ethnic affiliations were of no use to the party or even to themselves. Maybe we are all a little gun shy about turning things over to the party, but then maybe we were all a little too acquiescent in going along with things that were done for the supposed greater good. Maybe being a little suspicious of such talk is not all that bad. While Wagar can be seen as an exercise in fantasy politics -- reliving the old seize state power program -- except now on a world scale (an idea that sent one observer into peals of derision

[Page 2]

Journal of World-Systems Research

and laughter on the WSN), there are any number of real issues here. Someone observed that the time wasn't right, and by that I presumed he meant that there wasn't anything like a world state structure that could/should be seized. The argument seemed less bothered by the late twentieth century angst about the party, and more concerned with a correct understanding of the historical conditions necessary for such a seizing operation.

This raises a real question: if seizing power in the name of creating a better world seems off the board of practical progressive politics for quite a while, what form does such politics take if one wants to think of politics on a world scale? For that question there

isn't at present a good answer, or at least no consensus. Much of the left is still reeling from the collapse of existing socialism and

offering solutions from the Sweden model (a floor but no ceiling) to what seems a denialist position of claiming socialism's demise was a product of Stalinist bureaucratic deformation, and that all that is necessary is to do it again, but this time do it right.

There is

also the radical democracy notion, where with the collapse of the economic as a meaningful explanatory variable in late 20th century social theory, some theorists (Laclau, Mouffe, etc.) have turned to democracy as a goal, and I would presume democratizing the means of production, which if that means the state, or the state under the control of the party, then we are back to square one of the radical vision that has been with the West since the French Revolution.

Wagar's world party idea, then, is part past, part future. The future is the addressing of politics at the distinctly global level and

speaking of a political organization/framework/party that addresses itself to global issues. The past is the vision of THE party and of seizing political power. That both scares, and given the absence of a world state, raises the question of exactly what it is that is to be

seized. Interestingly the establishment of a world state, with world

control now completely centralized in one central political structure, may not be the end of world politics/struggles, but the very beginning, for now political control would be absolute. While it is true capital couldn't escape to cheaper labor, it is also true that

the change and innovation that comes from this would also be eliminated. I could imagine all of us in some medieval world complaining that serfs and capital (such that it was) were running off to emerging cities/towns. Would the progressive move then be to halt capital flight from feudal estate to city? The answer has been that in the centralization/control of capital lies better lives for

all. But this remains a vision, held interestingly by the intellectuals

of the capitalist west, those areas where the change/capital flight has been the greatest. Given a world party, world politics, and world state -- while the end of international war and capital flight

--

the shift in progressive theory may go from Marx to Weber. Certainly the world means of production would now be under the control of the single state and as such Weberian questions of world bureaucracy, power, control, totalitarianism, etc. would be the issues of the day. Rome on a world scale, making decentralization, loss of control, freedom of capital flight, all new potentially

radical

goals, the opposite of today's multicentric world were one party, one state, and one set of controls seems the progressive goal against the competition and violence of the multistate capitalist world system. But this too is fantasy utopianism. Kaiser and Drass in an article in the *American Sociological Review* noted that utopian literatures tend to increase during periods of hegemonic decline, and from that empirical observation the Wagar world party idea may be an intellectual byproduct of American hegemonic decline. Certainly, a hoped for world party and some kind of world order, given the breakup of American hegemony, is the kind of political utopianism one would expect. But this, while perhaps true, is also true of what I write here, so to avoid the

postmodernist

do loop of infinite regress and decentring, let us assume that the issues are real and not an ideological product of hegemonic decline.

If "smuggling agents into positions of responsibility . . . to betray when the time is ripe" (p. 14) sounds like fantasy politics, what are some real issues for a potential world platform of a world party? There are no doubt many and other commentators in this issue will I am sure comment upon them. Let me, though, speak

from a position of my own interests and highlight the importance of having an ecological aspect to any new political movement that seeks a world wide audience. Let me begin with an observation. It seems that in today's world one of the, if not the, most obvious sources of political and moral energy comes from environmental issues of all sorts. Issues of justice today have, along with the long held human component, a distinctly ecological or environmental aspect. People seem upset about the environment and that should be taken as an important issue in the formulation of any global political agenda. At the ASA meeting where Wagar presented this paper we are all commenting upon, someone in the audience observed that something like a world political organization already existed in the form of the international environmental organization Greenpeace. This may or may not be true, but it does seem that environmental issues are a common ground around the globe upon which there is some degree of unity, hence an important issue for any world political project. As a corollary the environmental issue allows a respecification of the material in social theory and thereby helps deliver us from the idealism and moral relativism that is postmodernism. The environment is the true base and social formations, including the means of production, are the true superstructure. A political agenda of global scope can/should start here with environmental issues that, by definition, touch all humans.

[Page 5]

Journal of World-Systems Research

Second, any new party/political movement will need to widen its base of moral concerns to include non-human living things. This is the Deep Ecology assumption, which when applied to politics implies, among other things, a widening of the moral order to include the environment as a moral sentient being. This is controversial, and resisted by many social activists as placing animals before people, or worse plants, rocks, and mountains before people. Equal, though, is not before, but the resistance of the social mind to growing ideas of eco-equality is understood, for in positing equality there is a tremendous drop in human status from its previous omnipotent position. But human salvation cannot be separated from the salvation of the planet, a position that

will have to be included in any new world political agenda.

What this all means is that the old agenda of humans first -- even with Wagar all humans in an all world political movement -- will not be enough. Political salvation of humans without including other species and forms of life will be morally inadequate in the 21st century and limit the success of any new movement in attracting adherents. While it can easily be argued that placing the rights of animals on equal footing with those of humans may scare away as many as it hopes to attract, a revitalization of political theory that includes a Deep Ecology component will be necessary.

That I don't have more to say is perhaps a sign of the times.

My

two clear convictions are that (1) the idea of THE party and centralized management seems a very hard sell, and (2) that any global movement will have to, if not be green, have a very clear and central green component. Other than this, I am not all that sure of the direction/meaning of the prospects for a global political party.

[Page 6]

Journal of World-Systems Research