

WHY DO WE ALL AGREE THE GLOBAL MARKET IS INEVITABLE?

'Do not forget ideas are also weapons'

by Subcomandante Marcos

The purpose of this text is to fuel the debate between right and leftwing intellectuals. It does not attempt to explain relations with governments or changes in society.

I. Pay-per-view global domination

The world is not square, or so we learn at school, but on the brink of the third millennium it is not round either. I do not know which geometrical figure best represents the world in its present state but, in an era of digital communication, we could see it as a gigantic screen – one of those screens you can program to display several pictures at the same time, one inside the other. In our global world the pictures come from all over the planet – but some are missing. Not because there is not enough room on the screen but because someone up there selected these pictures rather than others.

What do the pictures show? On the American continent, we see a paramilitary group occupying the Autonomous National University of Mexico (Unam); but the men in grey uniforms are not there to study. Another frame shows an armoured column thundering through a native community in Chiapas. Beside this, we see United States police using violence to arrest a youth in a city that could be Seattle or Washington. The pictures in Europe are just as grey.

II. A memorable omission

Intellectuals have been part of society since the dawn of humanity. Their work is analytical and critical. They look at social facts and analyse the evidence, for and against, looking for anything ambiguous, that is neither one thing nor the other, revealing anything that is not obvious – sometimes even the opposite of what seems obvious.

These professional critics act as a sort of impertinent consciousness for society. They are non-conformists, disagreeing with everything – social and political forces, the state, government, media, arts, religion and so on. Activists will just say “we’ve had enough”, but sceptical intellectuals will cautiously murmur “too much” or “not

enough". Intellectuals criticise immobility, demand change and progress. They are, nevertheless, part of a society, which is the scene of endless confrontation and is split between those who use power to maintain the status quo and those who fight for change.

Intellectuals must choose between their function as intellectuals and the role that activists offer them. It is also here that we see the split between progressive and reactionary intellectuals. They all continue their work of critical analysis, but whereas the more progressive persist in criticising immobility, permanence, hegemony and homogeneity, the reactionaries focus their attacks on change, movement, rebellion and diversity. So in fact, reactionary intellectuals "forget" their true function and give up critical thought. Their memory shrinks, excluding past and future to focus only on the immediate and present. No further discussion is possible.

III. Intellectual pragmatism

Many leading rightwing intellectuals start life as progressives. But they soon attract the attention of the powerful, who deploy innumerable stratagems to buy or destroy them. Progressive intellectuals are "born" in the midst of a process of seduction and persecution. Some resist; others, convinced that the global economy is inevitable, look in their box of tricks and find reasons to legitimate the existing power structure. They are awarded with a comfortable armchair, on the right hand of the prince they once denounced.

They can find any number of excuses for this supposedly "inevitable" outcome: it is the end of history; money is everywhere and all-powerful; the police have taken the place of politics; the present is the only possible future; there is a rational explanation for social inequality; there are even "good reasons" for the unbridled exploitation of human beings and natural resources, racism, intolerance and war.

In an era marked by two new paradigms – communication and the market – rightwing intellectuals have realised that being "modern" means obeying one rule: "Adapt or go under". They are not required to be original, just to think like everyone else, taking their cue from international bodies like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund or the World Trade Organisation.

Far from indulging in original, critical thought, rightwing intellectuals become remarkably pragmatic, echoing the advertising slogans that flood the world's markets. In exchange for a place in the sun and the support of certain media and governments, they cast off their critical imagination and any form of self-criticism

and espouse the new, free market creed.

IV. Blind seers

The problem is not why the global economy is inevitable, but why almost everyone agrees that it is. Just as the economy is becoming increasingly global, so is culture and information. How are we to prevent vast media and communications companies like CNN or News Corporation, Microsoft or AT&T, from spinning their worldwide web?

In today's world economy the major corporations are essentially media enterprises, holding up a huge mirror to show us what society should be, not what it is. To paraphrase Régis Debray, what is visible is real and consequently true (1). That, by the way, is one of the tenets of rightwing dogma. Debray also explains that the centre of gravity of news has shifted from the written word to visual effects, from recorded to live broadcasts, from signs to pictures.

To retain their legitimacy, today's rightwing intellectuals must fulfil their role in a visual era, opting for what is immediate and direct, switching from signs to images, from thought to TV commentary.

V. Future past

In Mexico, leftwing intellectuals are very influential. Their crime is that they get in the way. Well, one of their crimes, because they also support the Zapatistas in their struggle: "The Zapatista uprising heralds the start of a new era in which native movements will emerge as players in the fight against the neoliberal global economy" (2). But we are neither unique nor perfect. Just look at the natives of Ecuador and Chile, and the demonstrations in Seattle, Washington, Prague – and those that will follow. We are just one of the pictures that deform the giant screen of the world economy.

The prince has consequently issued orders: "Attack them! I shall supply the army and media. You come up with the ideas". So rightwing intellectuals spend their time insulting their leftwing counterparts, and because of the Zapatista movement's international impact, they are now busy rewriting our story to suit the demands of the prince.

VI. Neoliberal fascists

In one of his books Umberto Eco provides some pointers as to why fascism is still latent (3). He starts by warning us that fascism is a diffuse form of totalitarianism, then defines its characteristics: refusal of the advance of knowledge, disregard of rational principles, distrust of culture, fear of difference, racism, individual or social frustration, xenophobia, aristocratic elitism, machismo, individual sacrifice for the benefit of the cause, televised populism and use of Newspeak with its limited words and rudimentary syntax.

These are the values that rightwing intellectuals defend. Take another look at the giant screen. All that grey is a response to disorder, reflected in demands for law and order from all around us. But is Europe once more the prey of fascism? We may well see skinheads, with their swastikas, on the screen, but the commentator is quick to reassure us that they are only minority groups, already under control. But it may also take other, more sinister forms (*see the articles by Christian Semler and Brigitte Pätzold in this issue*).

After the fall of the Berlin wall both sides of the political spectrum in Europe rushed to occupy the centre. This was all too obvious with the traditional left, but it was also the case with the far right (4). It went out of its way to acquire a new image, well removed from its violent, authoritarian past, enthusiastically espousing neoliberal dogma.

VII. Sceptically hopeful

The task of progressive thinkers – to remain sceptically hopeful – is not an easy one. They have understood how things work and, *noblesse oblige*, they must reveal what they know, dissect it, denounce it and pass it on to others. But to do this, they must also confront neoliberal dogma, backed by the media, banks, major corporations, army and police.

What is more, we live in a visual age – and so, to their considerable disadvantage, progressive thinkers must fight the power of the image with nothing but words. But their scepticism will get them out of that trap, and if they are equally sceptical in their critical analysis, they will be able to see through the virtual beauty to the real misery it conceals. So perhaps there is reason to hope.

There is a story that when Michelangelo sculpted his statue of David, he had to work on a “second-hand” piece of marble that already had holes in it. It is a mark of his talent that he was able to create a figure that took account of these limitations. The world we want to transform has already been worked on by history and is

largely hollow. We must nevertheless be inventive enough to change it and build a new world.

Take care and do not forget that ideas are also weapons.

© Le Monde diplomatique ALL RIGHTS RESERVED