
THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM'S 'MANY ALTERNATIVES' TO GLOBALISATION

P J James

Until recently, the discourse of TINA (There Is No Alternative) has been dominant in mainstream discussions pertaining to neoliberal globalisation. But now, the enchanting catchword is TAMA (There Are Many Alternatives). The immediate context for the ascendancy of this populist slogan is the launching of the WSF and the propaganda blitz unleashed through its websites. Quite reminiscent of the utopian and Christian socialists of yesteryears, WSF is now envisioning 'many alternatives' and even 'many worlds' to globalisation. With this perspective, the WSF is reincarnating itself in continent-wise and country-wise 'editions' such as the European Social Forum, African Social Forum, Asian Social Forum, etc., and WSF-Brazil, WSF-Argentina, WSF-Palestine, WSF-India, etc. Within countries there are even attempts for regional editions of WSF such as Kerala Social Forum (KSF) where the slogan is "Another Kerala is Possible !" Meanwhile, the catchword of the Hyderabad 'event' scheduled during January, the Asian Social Forum (ASF) with an "Asian vision and content" is "Another Asia is Possible !"

Conceived by eight Brazilian civil society and left libertarian groups, the idea of the WSF drew its inspiration from a Participatory Budgeting Program, an experiment in 'civic governance' first proposed by the Union of Neighbourhood Associations of Porto Alegre (UAMPA) during the 1990s. Exactly a year before the formal launch of WSF in January 2001, an international conference, 'Real Utopias Project : Experiments in Empowered Democracy' was held at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, USA, to theorise on the empowerment dimension of the Porto Alegre participatory experiment and related experiments elsewhere. Along with the participatory municipal budgeting of Porto Alegre, the conference examined the Neighbourhood Governance Councils and Community Policing of Chicago, the Habitat Conservation Plan in the US, and the Participatory People's Plan in Kerala as 'real world utopias' or instances of 'empowered participatory governance'. The intellectual resources including the evolution of the conceptualisation culminating in the launching of

WSF with its slogans of 'many alternatives' and 'many worlds' can be traced back to this 'utopian' conference held in the USA.

The WSF and the global NGOs associated with it have produced a flood of literature on various aspects and adverse effects of neoliberal globalisation in Afro-Asian-Latin American countries. The structural analysis of poverty, hunger, oppression, state repression, environmental degradation, etc., made by specialised intellectuals belonging to the WSF have certainly enhanced the global peoples' understanding on imperialist plunder. However, despite its eloquent critique of neoliberalism and rhetoric on 'many alternatives' to globalisation, the WSF approach to the problem is an impediment to a scientific understanding of neoliberal globalisation that is firmly rooted in the logic or laws of motion of imperialist capital. It does not extend a comprehensive understanding on globalisation. In its critique on globalisation, though the WSF keeps a radical posture, its newer and newer 'editions' or re-incarnations do not appear to be focussing on the political economy behind the global operations of capital.

To be specific, the ultimate outcome of WSF's analytical or academic exercises is to deviate the anti-imperialist struggles of working class people away from the badly needed political alternative. Rather than specifying the underlying political economy of neoliberal globalisation, the innumerable WSF events — conferences, seminars, workshops — are attempting to fragment and divert the whole issue. For instance, a participant in the scheduled ASF at Hyderabad is going to get a disaggregated view of globalisation — akin to the blind man's experience of the elephant — thereby nullifying a badly needed political approach. There is no question that this fragmentation and multiplication of social reality to the extreme ultimately serves the neoliberal objective of making it difficult to comprehend the historical dynamics and global working of imperialist capital.

This is well exemplified in the WSF theme of 'many alternatives'. According to its websites, as already noted, each 'edition' or 'event' of the WSF results in a hybridisation or localisation of its own alternative to globalisation such as "another Asia", "another Africa", "another India", or even "another Kerala" and so on, ad infinitum. Though attractive, implicit in this populist approach is a de-ideologisation and de-politicisation that betrays the indispensable internationalist perspective on neoliberal globalisation. This perspective demands an anti-imperialist alternative based on the solidarity and unity of the global working classes, in which the validity of the national terrain as the launching pad of anti-globalisation struggles is fully accepted. It also brings to the fore the utmost relevance of a socialist alternative to the decaying capitalist-imperialist system.

The WSF's sole orientation on national and regional specificities as is manifested in its absolutism with country-wise alternatives in gross disregard of the anti-imperialist socialist alternatives is an ingenious move to de-ideologise and deviate working people away from a class-based political economy and proletarian internationalism. In this specific historical context — where alternatives as 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' have degenerated to national chauvinism and narrow economic nationalism — the WSF's clarion call for country-specific 'many alternatives' which conspicuously avoids an ideological and political confrontation

with global capital will have the hidden agenda of de-ideologising anti-imperialist struggles worldwide.

This position of the WSF is inseparably linked with its sectarian approach towards political movements and political parties in general. On the one hand, it says that the “WSF will always be a Forum open to pluralism and to diversity of activities and ways of engaging of organisations and movements that decide to participate in it”.¹ It also says, “Neither party representations nor military organisations shall participate in the Forum”. Thus, the WSF not only prohibits the entry of political parties in its ‘events’ but also, very revealingly, places them in the category of military organisations.

This highly illiberal and hence truly neoliberal position is not new nor an isolated one. It is a time-tested escapist attitude systematically cultivated by conservatives, and recently by the New Right, to keep the working class and its party away from mainstream discussions. Anti-communist theoreticians such as Kothari who now share common platforms with the WSF’s Hyderabad ‘event’ have long been ardent proponents of ‘a non-party process’ in their version of people’s alternatives led by what they call “motivated middle-class professionals”.

The so-called ‘pluralism’ advocated by the WSF, its close affinity to ‘new social movements’ (NSMs), and its hatred towards class movements, all have wider ideological ramifications. Their roots lie deep in the post-Marxist prognosis on the decline or disappearance of the working class as a revolutionary force and the ascendancy of NSMs and NGOs as the “new revolutionary subject of history”.

In a similar vein, the WSF Charter also speaks of its opposition “to all totalitarian and reductionist views of economy, development and history”.² To be specific, the terminology ‘totalitarian’ and ‘reductionism’ are part of the usual mudslinging carried out by imperialist think tanks and postmodernists against the class approach upheld by communists. The WSF is simply parroting this malicious slander. As is obvious now, its very orientation is at variance with the class interests of workers, peasants and other toiling masses who are bound to fight capital’s onslaught with a political orientation.

Perhaps the most debatable issue pertains to the ideological basis of the WSF itself. Its published documents reveal that the WSF is a forum of global civil society with a focus on NSMs and NGOs. WSF “brings together and interlinks only organisations and movements of civil society from all the countries in the world”³ and “seeks to strengthen and create new national and international links among organisations and movements of civil society”.⁴ Thus, the WSF Charter and related documents can be seen making a line of demarcation between the politically oriented ‘old movements’ and the civic oriented ‘new movements’.⁵ Obviously, the WSF’s emphasis is on civil society led by ‘new movements’ composed of voluntary organisations / NGOs, civil and community-based organisations at local, national and global levels.

Its antipathy towards political parties and ‘statist’ politics and affinity towards so-called civil society movements emanate from the post-modern conceptualisation of civil society as a counter to the State. This new discourse on civil society is part of a general trend that assumed prominence in neoliberal-postmodern thinking in the context of the collapse of the welfare state in the seventies.

Today, the post-modern emphasis on the centrality of civil society is used to fill the gap created by the withdrawal of the State from the sphere of development. Both post-Marxists and postmodernists visualise civil society as emerging out of the deconstruction of the political sphere and the consequent neutralisation of both the Left and the Right. Thus, the WSF's fascination with civil society is, at present, shared by a broad ideological spectrum ranging from the neoliberalists to the degenerated Left.

The conceptualisation of civil society is useful to neoliberal globalisation — not only to replace the public sector with private sector — but also to shift the burden of social service provision to the shoulders of people themselves under the garb of participatory people's alternatives. It is no wonder that the biggest votaries of civil society today are none other than the World Bank, USAID, UNDP, Ford Foundation, and so on. Regarding the idealisation of civil society, neoliberal agencies and the WSF are on the same wavelength. The World Bank defines civil society as the whole of the private sector led by NGOs and has established an executive wing called the 'World Bank / NGO Committee'. For the World Bank, market and civil society are synonymous; it defines the growth of democracy and 'good governance' in Afro-Asian-Latin American countries in terms of the degree of replacement of the traditional political sphere by civic action.

In this context, the neoliberal agencies' new-found affinity to civil society arises directly from their reluctance to recognise the existence of class society and class struggle. In contrast to this, according to working class positions firmly rooted in historical materialism, the so-called 'civil society' is a class society. Even much before the advent of Marxism, Rousseau, prophet of the French revolution, noted that the objective of all civil societies was "to stabilise and give legal status to inequalities originally based on force". Gramsci is only reiterating this when he defines civil society as the realm where the "hegemony or political power on one social group over the entire nation is exercised through subtle, intangible and invisible forms". In other words, dominant groups in civil society are always legitimised and sheltered by the State which exercises effective power through the hegemonisation of civil society. Rather than understanding state and political power as extensions of so-called civil society, post-Marxists, postmodernists and neoliberalists are placing both state and civil society in watertight compartments.

In fact, post-Marxists, postmodernists and neoliberal agencies are now resorting to a neo-Gramscian interpretation (which views Gramsci through a post-Marxist angle) on civil society as the site of radical and plural struggle against coercion by the State. They do this by negating his central emphasis on class and discarding the essentially dialectic and continuous relation between state and civil society that he stressed. A glance at WSF documents reveals the same visualisation. As the whole of the private sector including MNCs are part of civil society, there is a significant danger that even global civic action itself may reproduce the dangers of neoliberal globalisation — an aspect that the WSF cannot comprehend due to its negation of classes and of class struggles.

Of course, a number of organisations that share the WSF platform are fighting along with the organised working class and progressive forces against globalisation and IMF-WB-WTO agencies. These united moves are to be nurtured and further developed, though without any let-up on the part of progressive forces to achieve maximum possibly

solidarity among various sections fighting globalisation from different standpoints. At the same time, there must be an uncompromising ideological struggle to impart a correct orientation to such struggles, based on an objective evaluation of the underlying logic of globalisation. Here, the political struggles waged by the organised working class, peasants, and other toiling masses must form the core of the move. However, since such struggles belong to the domain of 'old movements', the WSF cannot uphold them.

In India, unprecedented anti-globalisation struggles including all-India *bandhs* [strikes] are developing in the country, led by the organised working class. At one stage, the number was a staggering figure of 45 million — the biggest ever in recorded history. Obviously, the need of the hour is to give an anti-imperialist ideological and political orientation to these ever-mounting struggles in the political sphere. At this crucial juncture, the entry of the WSF with its 'many alternatives' and utopias which, rooted in the ideology of civil society and NSMs, and which refrain from addressing the crucial political economy of neoliberalism, will not be helpful for extending this anti-imperialist orientation to them. Alternatives propounded by the WSF are bound to be utopian on account of the latter's basic incapacity to unravel the laws of motion of capital, which is the driving force behind globalisation. As such, the advent of the WSF and its reincarnations or 'editions' including its academic exercises or 'events' may also have the hidden agenda of diverting people's struggles from an anti-imperialist political orientation.

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P J James is Lecturer, St Thomas College, Pala, Kerala. He is author of Non-Governmental Organisations : The True Mission and Nehru to Rao : Neo-colonisation Process in India both published by Mass Line Publications, Kerala in 1995. He is Member and activist of CPI (ML) Red Flag.

NOTES

¹ WSF Charter of Principles, Clause 9.

² Ibid, Clause 10.

³ Ibid, Clause 5.

⁴ WSF India Policy Guidelines, Clause 18.

⁵ See ASF 2003, Hyderabad, India, Programme Note, page 9.