

Introduction: forty years of solitude and the novelty of the World Social Forum

The final thirty or forty years of the last century may be considered years of degenerative crisis in global left thinking and practice. To be sure, there were crises before, but not only were they not global – restricted as they were to the Eurocentric world, what nowadays we call the Global North, and compensated for, from the 1950s on, by the successful struggles for the liberation of the colonies – but they were mainly experienced as casualties in a history whose trajectory and rationality suggested that the victory of the left (revolution, socialism, communism) was certain. This is how the division of the workers' movement at the beginning of the First World War was experienced, as well as the defeat of the German revolution (1918–23), and then Nazism, fascism, *Franquismo* (1939–75) and *salazarismo* (1926–74), the Moscow processes (1936–38), the civil war in Greece (1944–49), and even the invasion of Hungary (1956). This kind of crisis is well characterized in the works of Trotsky in exile. Trotsky was very early on aware of the seriousness of Stalin's deviations from the revolution, to the point of refusing to lead an opposition, as proposed to him by Zinoviev and Kamenev in 1926. But he never for one moment doubted that history went along with the revolution, just as the true revolutionaries went along with history. The author who, to my mind, most brilliantly portrays the increasingly Sisyphean effort to safeguard the historical meaning of the revolution before the morasses of the Moscow processes is Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Humanisme et terreur* (1947).

The crises of left thinking and practice of the last thirty or forty years are of a different kind. On the one hand, they are global, even though they occur in different countries for specific reasons: the assassination of Lumumba (1961); the failure of Che in Bolivia and his assassination (1966); the May 1968 student movement in Europe and the Americas and its neutralization; the invasion of Czechoslovakia (1968); the response of American imperialism to the Cuban revolution; the assassination of Allende (1973) and the military dictatorships in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s; Suharto's brutal repression of the left in Indonesia (1965–67); the degradation or liquidation of the nationalist, developmentalist and socialist regimes of sub-Saharan

Africa that came out of independence (1980s); the emergence of a new/old militant and expansionist right, with Ronald Reagan in the USA and Margaret Thatcher in the UK (1980s); the globalization of the most retrograde form of capitalism, neo-liberalism, imposed by the Washington Consensus (1989); the plot against Nicaragua (1980s); the crisis of the Congress Party in India and the rise of political Hinduism (communalism) (1990s); the collapse of the regimes of central and eastern Europe, symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989); the conversion of Chinese communism to the most savage kind of capitalism, market Stalinism (starting with Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s); and finally, in the 1990s, the parallel rise of political Islam and political Christianity, both fundamentalist and confrontational.

Furthermore, the crisis of left thinking and practice of the last thirty or forty years appears to be degenerative: the failures seem to be the result of history's mortal exhaustion, whether because history no longer has meaning or rationality, or because the meaning and rationality of history finally opted for the permanent consolidation of capitalism, the latter transformed into a literal translation of immutable human nature. Revolution, socialism, communism and even reformism seem to be hidden away in the top drawers of history's closet, where only collectors of misfortunes reach. The world is made, and well made at that, the neo-liberal argument goes; the future finally has arrived in the present to stay. This agreement on ends is the uncontested fund of liberalism, on whose basis it is possible to respect the diversity of opinions about means. Since means are political only when they are at the service of different ends, the differences concerning social change are technical or juridical and, therefore, can and must be discussed regardless of the cleavage between left and right.

But the alleged degenerative crisis of the left is grounded in three other factors. The first concerns the concept of a more just and truly human future society, where humanism – the human being for the human being – is no longer a mystification, and rather becomes an experience of concrete life for every human being. This concept, however vague, was consistent enough to serve as an evaluation criterion of the life conditions of the working class, excluded social groups and victims of discrimination. On the basis of this alternative vision and the credible possibility of fulfilling it, it would be possible to consider the present as violent, intolerable and morally repugnant. The strength of Marxism resides in this unique capacity to link the alternative future with the oppositional way of living the present. In the last decades, however, neo-liberal conservatism became so dominant that the left

split into two fields, none of them, paradoxically, on the left. On the one hand, there were those who took the eradication of the idea of an alternative society to be such a devastating defeat that there would be space left only for the centrism dominated by the 'more enlightened' right; on the other were those who in the absence of an alternative saw a victory, capable of encouraging a new centrism, this time dominated by the left (the Labour Third Way and its developments in Latin America). These two ways of announcing the death of the left ended up being not easily distinguishable. They both missed something: without a concept of an alternative society and without the politically organized struggle to bring it about, the present, however violent and intolerable, would be depoliticized and, as a consequence, would stop being a source of mobilization for revolt and opposition. This fact has certainly not escaped the right, quite the opposite. Bearing it in mind, the right has based its government, since the 1980s, not on the consensus of the victims, but on their resignation.

The second factor of the left crisis concerns the way the left renounced violence. Not the fact that it renounced violence, I insist, but the way it renounced it. Left thinking always started from the idea that democratic liberal capitalist societies are based on a violent foundational act. Indeed, there is first the original violence of colonization (from genocide to epistemicide, from pillage of natural resources to slavery and forced labour). Second, there is the imposition, on the victims of wage labour exploitation, of a social order in which equality before the law is merely the device that legitimizes substantive inequality, just as civil society is the acting space of an anti-social individual, for whom others are no more than an obstacle to the exercise of the individual's freedom. Negation of the humanity of the colonized peoples, proclamation of formal equality among citizens and the concept of civil society contributed to making violence disappear from the principles, formal procedures and political philosophy, but violence ended up, none the less, being exerted in the real lives of the large majority of the population in a social form (unemployment, unjust salary, social exclusion, racial and sexual discrimination). During a good part of the twentieth century, this foundational violence was taken seriously by the left, so much so that one of the most important divisions among the left had to do with the political consequences of such a realization. Part of the left (the revolutionary left) considered it right to use violence in the struggle against liberal society, whenever political conditions prevented non-violent struggle. That would be legitimate violence, mainly because, unlike liberal violence, it aimed to construct

a society without violence, as regards both principles and practices, a truly inter-human society. Another part of the left (the reformist left) considered foundational violence to be such a basic contradiction in capitalist society that the latter would not survive a political practice consistently grounded in the non-violent principles and laws that it proclaimed. The Weberian idea of the state's legitimate violence can be interpreted in this light: while recognizing the existence of illegitimate violence in society, it strictly limits the exercise of liberal power. The revolutionary left inspired many of the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles in the Global South, whereas the reformist left prevailed in Europe, especially after the failure of the German revolution.

The crisis of the last decades, although apparently implying a victory for the reformist left, actually implied a defeat both for the revolutionary and the reformist left. This defeat came about because the left, having also accepted the impossibility of an alternative society, accepted as normal or inevitable the violence of the democratic liberal capitalist societies. In fact, it stopped recognizing violence as violence. The discrepancy between principles and practices stopped being an irreducible contradiction to become an organizational dysfunction, susceptible of solution. In such conditions, it became unthinkable that, whatever the circumstances, violence might be legitimate as a political tactic: given the agreement on ends, the diversity of opinions on means must be kept as such, as a mere civilized diversity of opinions. Thus, not only did the left abandon the practice of violence – which is fully justified under the circumstances – but it also stopped having a theory of violence – which incapacitated it politically in confronting the new or renewed manifestations of violence: terrorism and state terrorism; immolation of individual life as a manifestation of extreme loyalty to a collective cause; an increase in criminal violence as a depoliticized form of resistance against the structural violence of capitalist social relations; recourse to the violence of the war of aggression to impose ideas of non-violence, be they democracy, human rights or freedom; intensification of states of emergency and the rise of a new state of exception, in which the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence seems to collapse.

This theoretical disarming of the left is related to the third factor in the crisis of the past four decades. I mean the rise, in the countries of the Global South, of movements of resistance, both violent and non-violent, against oppression, marginalization and exclusion, whose ideological bases have nothing to do with those that were the references of the left during the twentieth century (Marxism, social-

ism, developmentalism, anti-imperialist nationalism). Rather they are grounded in multi-secular cultural and historical identities, and/or religious militancy. It is not surprising, therefore, that such struggles cannot be defined according to the cleavage between left and right. What is actually surprising is that the left as a whole does not have theoretical and analytical tools to position itself in relation to them, and that it does not think it a priority to do so. Without trying to be exhaustive, I mention three such movements, of very distinct political meanings: the indigenous movements, particularly in Latin America; the 'new' rise of traditionalism in Africa; and the Islamic insurgency. In spite of the huge differences between them what these movements have in common is that they all start out from cultural and political references that are non-Western, even if constituted by the resistance to Western domination. The difficulties of political evaluation experienced by the left derive, on the one hand, from not envisioning a future society as alternative to the capitalist liberal society and, on the other, from the North-centric or Eurocentric cultural and epistemological universe that has dominated the left.

In view of this, it is more appropriate to speak of a global crisis of the left than of a crisis of the global left. It is possible to speak of a global crisis, to the extent that we are facing the impact of the globalization of neo-liberal capitalism and the ideology that sustains it on left thinking and practice in different regions of the world. But it is not possible to speak of a global left. On the one hand, because there is no left thinking or ways of thinking capable of accounting for the world diversity of reasons, means and ends of resistance to hegemonic globalization, and capable of deciding what or who is or is not left; on the other, because the organizational unities and the institutional targets or interlocutors are still national or local, the transnational and translocal articulations being too tenuous to allow one to speak of a global left.

If this were the whole story, the existence of this book would not be justified. Enough has been said already about the crisis of the left, and part of what has been said has worked as self-fulfilling prophecy. The mortal fatigue of history is the mortal fatigue of the women and men who make it in their daily lives. The fatigue increases when the habit of thinking that history is with us inclines us, when it is questioned, to think that history is irremediably against us. History does not know better than we do where it is headed, nor does it use the women and men to fulfil its ends. So, we cannot trust history more than we trust ourselves. To be sure, trusting ourselves is not a subjective act, decontextualized from the world. For the past few decades, the political and

cultural hegemony of neo-liberalism gave rise to a conception of the world that shows it as being either too made, and well made at that, to allow for the introduction of any consequent novelty, or too fragmentary to allow for whatever we do to have consequences capable of making up for the risks taken.

The other side of this hegemony, however, was the hegemonic practices that for the past decades have intensified exclusion, oppression, destruction of the means of subsistence and discrimination of large numbers of people, leading them to situations where inaction or conformism would mean death. Such situations convert the contingency of history into the necessity to change it. The acts of resistance into which these situations were translated, together with the revolution in information and communication technologies that took place simultaneously, permitted the making of alliances in distant places of the world and the articulation of struggles through local/global linkages. Thus an alternative globalization was gradually constructed – alternative to neo-liberal globalization, a counter-hegemonic globalization, a globalization from below. The 1994 Zapatista uprising is an important moment in this construction, precisely because it targets a tool of neo-liberal globalization, the North American Free Trade Agreement, and because it aims to articulate different scales of struggle, from local to national to global, from the Chiapas mountains to Mexico City to the solidary world, resorting to new discursive and political strategies, and to the new information and communication technologies available. In November 1999, the protesters in Seattle managed to paralyse the World Trade Organization (WTO) ministerial meeting, and later many other meetings of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the WTO and the G8 were affected by the protests of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and social movements intent on denouncing the hypocrisy and destructiveness of the new world disorder. In January 2001, the World Social Forum (WSF) met for the first time in Porto Alegre (Brazil), and many others followed: global, regional, thematic, national, sub-national and local forums. The WSF may be said to represent today, in organizational terms, the most consistent manifestation of counter-hegemonic globalization. As such, the WSF provides the most favourable context within which to enquire to what extent a new left is emerging through these initiatives – a truly global left, having the tools to overcome the degenerative crisis that has been beleaguering the left for the past forty years. This is the enquiry I propose to undertake in this book.

The WSF is the set of initiatives of transnational exchange among

social movements, NGOs and their practices and knowledges of local, national or global social struggles carried out in compliance with the Porto Alegre Charter of Principles against the forms of exclusion and inclusion, discrimination and equality, universalism and particularism, cultural imposition and relativism, brought about or made possible by the current phase of capitalism known as neo-liberal globalization.

The WSF is a new social and political phenomenon. The fact that it does have antecedents does not diminish its newness, quite the opposite. The WSF is not an event. Nor is it a mere succession of events, although it does try to dramatize the formal meetings it promotes. It is not a scholarly conference, although the contributions of many scholars converge in it. It is not a party or an international association of parties, although militants and activists from many parties all over the world take part in it. It is not an NGO or a confederation of NGOs, even though its conception and organization owe a great deal to NGOs. It is not a social movement, even though it often designates itself as the movement of movements. Although it presents itself as an agent of social change, the WSF rejects the concept of a historical subject and confers no priority on any specific social actor in this process of social change. It holds no clearly defined ideology, in defining either what it rejects or what it asserts. Given that the WSF conceives of itself as a struggle against neo-liberal globalization, is it a struggle against a form of capitalism or against capitalism in general? Given that it sees itself as a struggle against discrimination, exclusion and oppression, does the success of its struggle presuppose a post-capitalist, socialist, anarchist horizon, or, on the contrary, does it presuppose that no horizon is clearly defined at all? Given that the vast majority of people taking part in the WSF identify themselves with a politics of the left, how many definitions of 'the left' fit the WSF? And what about those who refuse to be defined because they believe that the left/right dichotomy is a North-centric or West-centric particularism, and look for alternative political definitions? The social struggles that find expression in the WSF do not adequately fit either of the ways of social change sanctioned by Western modernity: reform and revolution. Aside from the consensus on non-violence, its modes of struggle are extremely diverse and appear to be spread over a continuum between the poles of institutionality and insurgency. Even the concept of non-violence is open to widely disparate interpretations. Finally, the WSF is not structured according to any of the models of modern political organization, be they democratic centralism, representative democracy or participatory democracy. Nobody represents it or is allowed to speak

in its name, let alone make decisions, even though it sees itself as a forum that facilitates the decisions of the movements and organizations that take part in it.¹

These features are arguably not new, as they are associated with what is conventionally called 'new social movements'. The truth is, however, that these movements, be they local, national or global, are thematic. Themes, while fields of concrete political confrontation, compel definition – hence polarization – whether regarding strategies or tactics, whether regarding organizational forms or forms of struggle. Themes work, therefore, both as attraction and repulsion. Now, what is new about the WSF is the fact that it is inclusive, both as concerns its scale and its thematics. What is new is the whole it constitutes, not its constitutive parts. The WSF is global in its harbouring of local, national and global movements, and in its inter-thematic and even trans-thematic nature. That is to say, since the conventional factors of attraction and repulsion do not work as far as the WSF is concerned, either it develops other strong factors of attraction and repulsion or does without them, and may even derive its strength from their non-existence. In other words, the 'movement of movements' is not one more movement. It is a different kind of movement.

The problem with new social movements is that, in order to do them justice, a new social theory and new analytical concepts are called for. Since neither the one nor the others emerge easily from the inertia of the disciplines, the risk that they may be under-theorized and undervalued is considerable.² This risk is all the more serious as the WSF, given its scope and internal diversity, not only challenges dominant political theories and the various disciplines of the conventional social sciences, but challenges as well scientific knowledge as sole producer of social and political rationality. To put it another way, the WSF raises not only analytical and theoretical questions, but also epistemological questions. This much is expressed in the idea, widely shared by WSF participants, that there will be no global social justice without global cognitive justice. But the challenge posed by the WSF has one more dimension still. Beyond the theoretical, analytical and epistemological questions, it raises a new political issue: it aims to fulfil utopia in a world devoid of utopias. This utopian will is expressed in the slogan 'another world is possible'. At stake is less a utopian world than a world that allows for utopia. In this book, I deal with the WSF as critical utopia, epistemology of the South and expression of insurgent cosmopolitan politics.

Notes

1 For a better understanding of the political character and goals of the World Social Forum, see the Charter of Principles, available at <www.forumsocialmundial.org.br>.

2 One of the most paradigmatic examples is the poverty – conceptual hubris coupled with bloodless narrow positivism – of the mainstream US sociology of social movements (McAdam et al. 2001).