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Rio+20 and the Peoples' Summit

The treatment given by the major media to two events occurring during the last few weeks – the World Economic Social Forum of Davos and the Thematic Social Forum of Porto Alegre – speaks loudly of the interests presiding over world public opinion in our time. The former attracted a lot of attention, although its discussions did not contribute anything new: the same old analyses of the European crisis and the same insistent ruminations on the symptoms of the crisis while concealing its true causes. The latter was totally ignored, even though it engaged in productive discussion of the issues that most decisively condition our future: climate change, water availability, quality and quantity of food resources in view of the threat of hunger and malnutrition, environmental justice, the common goods of humankind, and the worth of grassroots, non-Eurocentric knowledges in the pursuit of environmental justice. This kind of media selectivity clearly exposes the risks we run when public opinion is reduced to publicized opinion.

The objective of the Porto Alegre Forum was to debate Rio+20, that is to say, the UN Conference on sustainable development to take place next June in Rio de Janeiro, 20 years after the first UN Conference on the same topic, which took place in Rio as well. It was a path-breaking conference in that it called attention to the environmental problems we face and the new dimensions of social injustice they bring along. The debates focused on two major issues. On the one hand, the critical analysis of the past twenty years and how it is reflected on the documents preparatory of the Conference; on

the other, the discussion of the proposals to be presented at the Peoples Summit, the conference of the civil society organizations taking place alongside the UN intergovernmental conference. Let us ponder each one of them in turn.

Rio+20: The critique

20 years ago, the UN played an important role in calling attention to the dangers that human and nonhuman life runs if the myth of endless economic growth goes on dominating economic policies and if irresponsible consumerism is not curbed: the planet is finite, the vital cycles for replenishment of natural resources are being destroyed, and nature will inevitably “take revenge” in climate changes soon to become irreversible and affect, in special ways, the poorest populations, thus adding more social injustice to the one already existing. The States seemed to heed the warnings and many promises were made in conventions and protocols. The multinationals, those major agents of environmental deterioration, seemed to be on guard.

Unfortunately, this moment of reflection and hope soon disappeared. The USA, then the main polluter and today the main per capita polluter, refused to assume any binding commitment toward reducing the emissions that cause global warming. Instead of decreasing, the emissions increased even more. The less developed countries claimed their right to pollute until the more developed ones agreed to assume their ecological debt for having polluted so much for so long. The multinationals successfully invested in the formulation of laws and international treaties allowing them to pursue their polluting activities with a minimum of restrictions. The result is glaringly to be seen in the documents prepared by the UN for the Rio+20 Conference. There is some relevant information about innovations regarding environmental care but the proposals advanced – summed up in

the concept of green economy – are shockingly inefficient and even counterproductive: the aim is to persuade the always free, ever unrestrained markets that there are opportunities for profit in investing in the environment, accounting for environmental costs (externalities) and ascribing market value to nature. In the fantasy world in which these documents exist, the “market failures” are due exclusively to lack of information; as soon as these are overcome, there will be plenty of green investment and innovation. In other words, there is no other way for relationships among humans and with nature but the market and strife for individual profit. In sum, a neoliberal orgy in the North that seems now to be spreading to the emergent countries.

The Peoples Summit: the proposals

Alongside the UN Conference, the civil society is organizing the Peoples Summit in Rio, and here there is ground for some hope. The preparatory debates in Porto Alegre shed some light on the strong alternatives that need to be presented and pushed into the national and international political agendas.

First, the importance and defense of the common goods of humankind as a response to the mercantilization, privatization and financialization of life, which are implicit in the concept of green economy. The common goods of humankind consist of goods produced by nature or by human groups, at the local, national or global level, goods of collective property, unlike private or public (State owned), even though in the latter case the State must cooperate in protecting the common good. The first woman to win the Noble Prize for Economics, Elinor Ostrom, has devoted all her work to studying the diversity of the means of managing the common goods, always with the proviso that the right to the common goods is the same for everybody. The common good is the counterpart of

capitalist development, rather than its appendage, as happens with the concept of sustainability. Besides the individual use of the common good, the collective use of indigenous and peasant communities is to be born in mind as well. The common goods of humankind include: the air and atmosphere, water, aquifers, rivers, oceans, lakes, communal or ancestral land, seeds, biodiversity, parks and squares, language, landscape, memory, knowledge, calendar, internet, HTML, free licensing distribution of goods, wikipedia, genetic information, open-source software, free digital zones, and so on and so forth. Common goods entail common rights and individual rights of temporary use. Some of these goods may demand or tolerate a few restrictions to equal common use, but these must be exceptional and temporary. Water has become a common good par excellence; struggles against its privatization in several countries are among the most successful, particularly when they combine peasant and urban struggles.

Second, the gradual passage from an antropocentric to a biocentric civilization, which implies recognizing the rights of nature; redefining good living and prosperity independently of infinite growth; promoting truly renewable energies (no agrofuel) that refuse to expel peasants and indigenous peoples from their territories; designing transition policies for countries whose budgets rely too much on extractivism, whether ore, oil or monoculture farming under prices controlled by large monopolist companies in the North.

Third, food sovereignty, i.e. the principle that, as much as possible, each community should have control over the foodstuffs it produces and consumes, thus bringing consumers closer to producers, supporting peasant agriculture, promoting urban, free-time agriculture, forbidding financial speculation in foodstuffs. Food sovereignty is a form of self-determination.

It entails prohibition of mass land acquisition (e.g. in Africa) by foreign countries (China, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait) or multinationals in pursuit of food reservations (cf. South Korean Daewoo's project to buy 1,3 million acres in Madagascar).

Fourth, a vast program of responsible consumption which includes a new ethics of caring and new education for caring and sharing: accountability vis-à-vis those without access to minimal consumption to guarantee survival; struggle against the artificial obsolescence of products; preference for products of social and solidary economies, based on labor rather than capital, on personal and collective flourishing rather than infinite accumulation; preference for collective and shared consumption whenever possible; wider literacy as regards the processes of production in order to allow for the boycotting of products produced at the cost of slave labor, displacement of peasants and indigenous peoples, serious water contaminations, destruction of sacred places, civil war, colonial-like occupation.

Fifth, all struggles and alternative proposals to include transversal requirements to deepen democracy and fight against sexual, racial, ethnical and religious discrimination; and against war.