

PEOPLES' SPACETIMES IN GLOBAL PROCESSES: THE RESPONSE OF THE LOCAL*

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FROM MALAISE TO UNCERTAINTY

The great American sociologist C. Wright Mills noted in 1959 that “in our time the problems of Western societies are almost inevitably universal problems” (Mills 1959:164-180). He already spoke of “postmodernity” and pointed his finger to one of the foremost characteristics of contemporary globalisation: the tension between Reason and Liberty. According to Mills, this tension caused malaise and a certain indifference that led to the formation of a “happy robot” in contrast to the Enlightenment model of a creative human being.

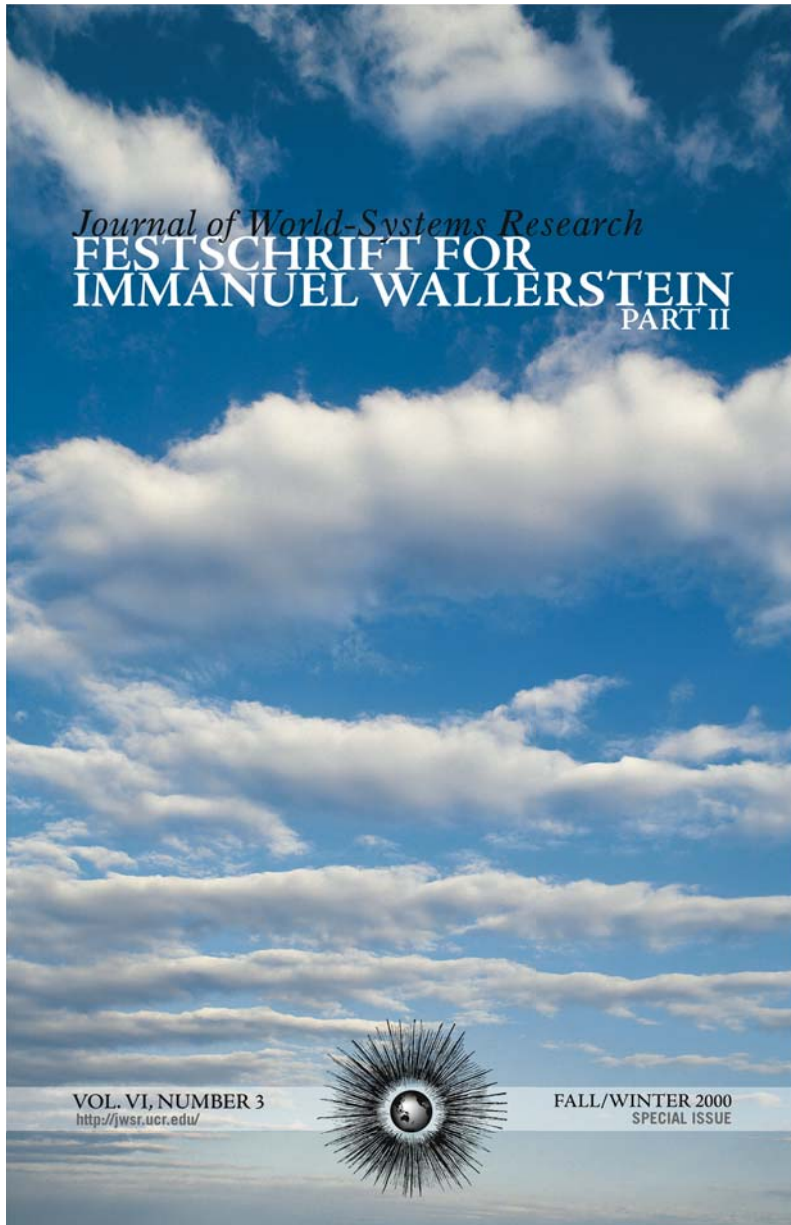
Since his time, of course, much has been learned about global processes. Globalisation is seen as a composite of linked economic, political and cultural processes, the fulcrum of which is in Western-American society (Eurocentered). It tends to homogenise, control and subvert those different ways of social organisation with which global elements come into contact. Corporate power, armed might and technological advances originated or established in the West are arrowheads for such expansion.

In the South of the world, where intense and destructive global processes have taken or are taking place, we usually expect more than rational,

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technical messages and actions because our collective spirit is strongly rooted in animism, mythology, mysticism and esoteric religions. The main culprits of the material and spiritual annihilation that is so apparent in the southern societies of Latin America, Africa and Asia are well known. Since the 16th century, culture bearers from Europe have imposed Christian beliefs and capitalist principles that in most regions were counterproductive or destructive to the local. This bifrontal good-and-evil legacy created what Wallerstein defined as “our modern world-system.” The secret of the stability of this system, according to him, is threefold: (1) its ability to permit the endless accumulation of capital; (2) to foster an ever-widening class polarisation; and (3) the willingness of the world population to tolerate the anomalies (Wallerstein 1998:46,59).

Colonial cruelties and advantages were later transmogrified as “universalist modernity” or “modernising development,” presented as goals to be pursued and practices to be followed by the peoples of the South. Another folly was that “development” turned out to be a rapacious accumulation of wealth by the well-positioned few, such as multinational corporations and their national consuls, as well as a breeder of misery for the majorities in the “target populations” (Sachs 1992). Many “targets” decided later that they do not want such “development,” and that they prefer to have at least a romantic or humanist recognition of general responsibility for the management of the world, with consequent actions to defend the natural resources, which are full of life-meanings for us in the South.

The resulting situation has induced qualms of conscience because Mills’s Western malaise has given way to a world-encompassing ethos of uncertainty. It has to be understood in space-and-time terms, or SpaceTimes as proposed by Wallerstein (1998), in order to grasp the complexity of the matter starting from its historical roots. Contemporary uncertainty originated in a nasty and brutish reign of violence, vice, consumerism, hunger and poverty imposed on the world on an increasing scale since the wars of the 50’s, accelerated by the dismantling of the welfare state and protective tariffs, and the spread of neoliberal policies. The main victims have been the young (angry and desperate for the lack of future), senior citizens (left aside by the system), women (still frustrated by patriarchy), and destitute groups (open to delinquency). In general, not knowing where we are going and how we are doing makes us uneasy and anxious, hence the uncertainty. Much

institutional hypocrisy and policy inconsistencies have resulted therefrom.

Northern qualms of conscience for their part in originating this uncertainty are answered in the South by conscious or unconscious appeals to the local, the particular, and the cultural, and to a respectful recovery of common people’s knowledge. Participatory methodologies of action and research (PAR), originated in the South but disseminated throughout the world, have been developing for these purposes (Fals Borda and Rahman 1991,1998). Global economic activities and “trickle down effects” instigated by “modernising development” have called for southern struggles to defend traditional ways of livelihood, specific natural contours, and spiritual expressions. Then the special, the diverse, the strange or the surprising (to Westerners’ eyes) crop up as they do not fit the imposed, authoritarian or homogenising global processes, and the positivist/Cartesian approaches in social and economic research. Many such cases are cited in PAR publications.

Much is left to curtail the consequent decomposition, corruption, unemployment and the disruption of the social fabric of the South. But in the meantime the South has also moved in various forms into the North. Thus, we are all more and more enmeshed in the same problems. This calls for combined efforts and resources to fill human spaces and needs in time, especially those of the common peoples who have been the main victims.

THE ROLE OF POVERTY

There would have been progress, were it not for the fact that the class polarisation induced by capitalists and neoliberals feeds on poverty and creates unemployment. This is dangerous to all peoples, including the rich, because poverty is an active element of entropy in social systems: societies are becoming self-destructive, as economic “development” steadily demolishes the very resources (natural, social, cultural, human) on which it feeds.

Poverty is measured in terms of per-capita income, but Rahnama (1992:161) calls for our attention to certain qualitative elements that are meaningful and helpful in checking entropy: they are “moral forms of poverty,” those which resist the Calvinist view that poverty reflects personal inadequacy. To counterbalance the destructive effects of greed there appears an ethical reaction to redefine poverty, destitution and ignorance as motors for change. To be poor may not mean to be cheap nor to lead a vulgar life.

But of course there is more. If destructive global practices can be fought with adequate global treatments, then we can look into some hopeful signs in the creation of people's SpaceTimes in the South that would alleviate critical conditions even beyond poverty.

FILLING PEOPLE'S SPACETIMES

For our purposes, people's SpaceTimes are concrete social configurations where diversity is part of normality, and "where people weave the present into their particular thread of history" (Sachs 1992:112). Local affirmation, collective memory, and traditional practices are fundamental in such SpaceTimes. Here life and cultural identities, mutual aid and cooperative institutions are formed, personality is shaped, and collective rights have priority over individual rights. Hence it is not surprising that many of the mechanisms used in SpaceTimes by the common people to defend themselves are those to which they have had recourse throughout the centuries, mechanisms and practices which they know best for survival in basic struggles such as those for land, power, and culture.

There is one big difference now: Local people are willing and able to articulate assistance from trusted outsiders as their efforts widen in response to the threat of capitalist globalisation as such. Important activities like social movements are then born which leave aside traditional party apparatus and prejudices, and which open the gate to global forces different from those of the greedy economic establishment. They are those forces or initiatives which are expected to support social and economic justice and to foster social well-being, especially among the poor. Let us consider some of these trends and possibilities.

The *struggles for territory and natural resources* are effective mechanisms in the South for filling such dynamic SpaceTimes with positive potential. They respond to destructive global processes with people's power built from the bottom up, often with success. They have advanced in the defence of the local environment. But a number of them, those of peasant origin, are now against a wall. In searching for new territory to plant, peasants may fail for the agricultural frontier has stretched to the limit with the impending end of forests which they were compelled to slash and burn. One likely countertrend may be to reverse the urbanization trend and induce a return to the land from overcrowded cities—but this time to occupy territory to

contest actual landowners, or in new renditions of agrarian reform, in order to increase the production of much needed food.

Social and political movements may grow from the grassroots to macro levels, or mature from protest to proposal by articulating a rather new ecological worldview. For example: in Papua New Guinea, 95 per cent of the population rose to defend their collective lands when the government and others tried to open the gate to privatization. In Uttar Pradesh (India) organised peasant groups won control of forest land. Gaia or Mother Earth is a prime mover for native groups like the U'wa of eastern Colombia. To defend her by heroic acts was the only way to stop the inroads of oil multinationals. The U'Wa readily obtained the help of northern NGO's which were alert to what was going on.

The successful U'wa event stimulated Indian movements elsewhere, perhaps through Internet connections. In Chile, the Mapuche have noisily gone on a rampage against a foreign energy company that is affecting their lands. In the Amazon, native communities assailed by biologists looking for medicinal plants from which to derive valuable genetic materials and patents are also rising to their defence. The natives count on the help of convergent naturalist groups from the North.

Lumber exploitation furnishes another case for successful popular organisation in TimeSpace. For decades the forests on the Pacific coast of Colombia have been in the hands of destructive national and international companies. Not so much now. People's space is being provided through an amendment introduced by intellectuals in the National Constitution (1991) for the creation of autonomous Black communities with collective titles to land and forest. The first decision of these communities has been to take effective control of local councils. The companies receded from these areas, as happened in India with the Chipko movement and in Luzon (Philippines) at Bukidnon.

Among the largest organised peasant movements active in the South are those of the tribals of India, and of the Landless of Brazil (Movimento dos Sem Terra). While successive Brazilian governments played with industrial concerns and established gigantic enterprises with global ties, peasants moved in to invade landed estates to grow food, not without considerable casualties. Similar movements for new and old territories have arisen in Zimbabwe, New Zealand, and Australia.

The *struggles for political power* are other important mechanisms in the South to gain SpaceTime. The historical contribution of Mahatma Gandhi in these respects should be remembered. Bloody conflicts linked to international armamentism often thrive. People's SpaceTimes are filled then with weapons and with a culture of death. Narcotics production and trade erase national boundaries and build autonomous power structures and/or territorial units. Agents of death multiply in these circumstances as well as in others where exploitation weakens communal life. Horrendous mass displacements may take place. But even in such adverse circumstances the common people are able to defend themselves with cooperative practices and they succeed in building countervailing forces. Experiments of direct, libertarian or anarchist participatory democracy are tried in those new territorial units, owing to the power vacuum left by the State or the illegitimate violence of government agents sent out to fill it sporadically.

The best known case of such conflict today is in Chiapas (Mexico) where charismatic leaders have been able to articulate a program of reforms with the unusual motto, "Let us lead by obeying." With this mandate and intense Internet support, they undermine NAFTA economic claims and create a critical mass of national and international democratic groups. The Zapatista movement punishes local vested interests, reaches other parts of the country and recruits middle class members with its insistence on social values. Similar cases of people's movements challenging power structures with direct democracy can be observed in Indonesia, South Africa and Mozambique.

The *struggles for cultural recognition* seek alternative definitions of "good life" as well as people's affirmation of identities within geocultural boundaries. In this way the people counteract homogenising global processes (Esteva and Prakash 1997:285). An interesting case from this standpoint is the young Australian Aborigines who have used music to fight alienation and alcoholism, and regain their human dignity. By combining rock rhythms and recovered native songs and instruments, the youngsters have produced a special fine music that went beyond the local and received national and international awards. Colombians at present suffer daily doses of violence; we bear them by dancing "paseos" and "salsa," and our mass meetings are always enlivened by popular music. Socialism may still be saved by the songs composed and sung by the young generation of revolutionary Cuban bal-

laders. Art produces the emotional strength necessary for continuing the struggle.

Mass demonstrations in Ecuador have been rooted in the renewed value of cultural traits such as native dress, language and food. The recovery through PAR techniques of historical figures of popular origin (among them great women leaders), usually forgotten by official history, have proven to be basic in feeding rebellions in several regions.

When well motivated, educators are bearers of messages that resonate in people's TimeSpace. Their recent innovations have been supported by three idea-forces: (1) awareness-building on social realities (from Brazil); (2) action learning to link the schools with local communities (from Australia); and (3) training of teachers as researchers (from England). This intellectual tripod has been tremendously effective in the South, though with painful human losses caused by repression and paramilitarism. Today some of the largest social movements and trade unions are formed by active teachers.

Religious beliefs are acknowledged to combat anguish and uncertainty. The results vary from the activism of Christian Base Communities, as in Brazil, Haiti and the Philippines, to the passive otherworldliness of some evangelical sects. Hindus and Buddhists have shown both accommodating and bellicose attitudes regarding people's movements in Asia. Islamic and African expressions likewise. Yet cultural/political symbols like Father Camilo Torres and Cardinal Helder Cámara, in spite of papal bulls, are still alive and remembered for their sacrifices in taking the side of the poor. Doubtless the weight of the religious factor as culture builder is fundamental for cementing necessary changes as we have seen in the resulting movements.

REASON AND HEART

With the brief presentation of these three classical but renovated types of people's struggles—for territory and natural resources, for political power, and for cultural defence and recognition, some deductions can be made about global social mechanisms and actors for filling people's SpaceTimes.

In the first place, there is some mounting assistance from North to South by converging antisystemic forces of NGO's, political parties, think tanks, some governments, and critical institutions. This is significant for it

demonstrates unexpected global or international countermovements to the negative global trends imposed by corporate abuses and capitalist practices worldwide. Such corrective trends appear to be increasing, which makes us feel that globalisation is becoming a differentiated social system. It should be qualified theoretically to specify both its evident negative effects as well as possible positive aspects it may be assuming for the sake of common people's progress, though these aspects are presently less visible.

Secondly, modern traits introduced in southern communities may not be rejected in toto by the people. As just suggested, outside elements and allies may be felt necessary to improve local conditions and to stop shared enemies like nuclear plants, dams, and harmful installations (e.g. Bhopal, India). There is an assimilative process of the novel with indigenous cultures and knowledges. This is a process now called "hybridity" but it is nothing new as it appears to form part of local defence tricks since the times of the first European expansion. It is one reason for the amazing centuries-old survival of our persecuted cultures. This is confirmed, for example, by the adoption of the video camera by the Kayapos of Brazil, an Amazonian tribe that has succeeded in establishing strong relations throughout the world for the protection of biodiversity and environmental conditions threatened by gold miners.

The extended use of electronic information networks in the South—which cover a great variety of activities—also proves the openness to adopt favorable technical novelties. International ties and support have proven positive for local struggles such as those at the Narmada dam in India.

Thirdly, flexible concepts such as "participation, modernity and development" (even with their adjectives: sustainable, participatory, integral, etc.) have to be deconstructed in order to distill from them those negative ideological characteristics which make them alien and damaging to the southern peoples (Escobar 1995). There has been "maldevelopment" favoring only the best-positioned minorities. Care should be taken for blind imitations of incongruent ideas originated in institutions and practices of advanced countries; popular resistance in the South hinges often on the impact of such practical incongruences at the local level. Besides, although we know better how to induce people's empowerment and self-reliance through participatory techniques, there is also the danger of cooptation of the concept "participation" to replace the discredited "development" on the part of dominant

agencies and regional governments which instead may be attempting "incorporation or manipulation" (Fals Borda and Rahman 1991).

Fourthly, hybridity fortunately may not affect southern views of spirituality, cosmology, imagery and mythical traditions. Magic and myth are still resilient, as in the use of shamans' practices to aid land take-overs. This is extended to music, wit and humour, something that staid Western researchers or activists may often miss. In short, these heart-felt elements represent an effective counterhegemonic force to balance the materialism and instrumental reason carried along by destructive global agencies.

As a general conclusion, affective responses of the local people of the South to the inroads of globalisation are rooted in equally cosmic phenomena linked to the reproduction of life and culture in their infinite specific expressions. This is a human survival problem. If global winds are unstoppable because of power manipulation and communication techniques, there still can be room for those winds which favor the vital defence of the particular and the diverse.

Therefore the most successful ways to fill people's SpaceTimes in the South at present, are those which convert cultural elements into political and economic actions. Culture coupled with spirituality are good starters to overcome the present ethos of uncertainty. Despite the heavy assault from globalisation, local reserves of common sociability and solidarity fortunately continue to exist and show resistance in grassroots communities, villages, hamlets and slums. Specific or local cultural expressions still have the capacity to resist and to subvert the axioms of capitalism and modernity, as well as to value economic needs and opportunities in terms other than the tyranny of the profit motive and the market principle.

For these reasons the least that one could expect from corporations and other exploiters (in the South as well as in the North) is that they should stop irrational and/or usurious accumulation—this is a self-defeating crime against man and nature that is already showing the entropic fatigue of dominant capitalism. Exploiters should exercise fair play in their enterprises, in the sharing of wealth, in the payment of wages, and in offering satisfactory work conditions so that people's SpaceTimes would not be filled by hate, resentment and violence as is the case today in countries where savage capitalism and neoliberalism rule.

But is it possible to see such economic flesh-eating tigers willingly con-

verting to vegetarianism? Can globalisation reconcile with diverse interests and incline toward the good for the collectivity? Virtual projection might foresee societies with enough abundance for all, as it is technically feasible. Yet there would be a period in which coercion for justice might be necessary, so that confiscatory measures or world taxes could be imposed on corporations and billionaires who defy the healthy principle of parsimony. An acute sense of justice and ethics from dominant groups and institutions is indispensable for creating stable better living conditions in the South as well as a better world for everyone.

As for pertinent methodological aspects, studies presented at the 1997 PAR World Convergence Congress showed solutions in at least three significant directions: (1) to recognise the role of combining people's knowledge and academic knowledge in popular struggle and in other activities, which may furnish the basis for a new and useful scientific paradigm; (2) to practice in such a way that it gives a moral and humanist orientation to the work of the activist/researcher; and (3) to gain a sense of personal commitment that combines the logic of action and the logic of research. In short, an urgent need to resurrect altruism and solidarity as dominant ways of life was felt in the South as well as in the North, and to build a new brand of ethnogenesis to provide for greater happiness (Fals Borda 1998: 218-219).

Survival for the pursuit of Liberty and Happiness involves less inconsistencies, less arrogance, and more than instrumental reason. Generosity and a political will are also needed. The situation calls for the heart as much as for the head of the rich and poor. Hands and minds should move in tandem in a new world alliance to reconstruct societies through humane globalising initiatives.

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