Social Actors and the vitality of Europe's choices

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SOCIAL ACTORS AND THE VITALITY OF EUROPE'S CHOICES

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I.   Social Actors Today: Continuity and Change

On the European scene. several factors have contributed to the visibility of new social actors. Their coming of age is, at the same time. in continuity with expressions of communal aspirations of the peoples who have shaped history on this continent and in rupture with past experiences and forms of organisation.

There are plenty of reasons for that. Let me mention the most obvious ones. For the first time in modern history Europe is unable to cope with basic problems of survival for its own people. The very concept of production is undergoing a major change. As a consequence. unemployment – and the structural system denying to many the right to work and to earn their own living – is no longer a mere cyclical problem. The bell now tolls for the epoch of linear expectations and projections. We are at the end of a period in history. Economics has become like a dead language. With its old concepts and methods it can no longer represent what reality is about. We need new paradigms. new economics.

But that is not all. For the first time in history, Europe. which gave birth to industrial civilisation and to the scientific mode of thinking that provoked and sustained it. is no longer in the forefront of science and technology. Moreover, new cultural forms are permeating life on this continent. and the consequences of technical achievements unthinkable 30 years ago are now influencing the daily life of Europeans: militarism. media revolution. consumerism. And yet most institutions continue down the same well-trodden paths they have followed in the whole post-war period.

The phenomenon of the social actors must be set in the context of such facts. Europe discovers that the global problems of our time are its problems too. There is uneasiness. perplexity. naïveté and scepticism on this continent. But there is also experimentation. assertiveness. invention.

The social movements (either in rather large organisations or in what Alain Touraine has called "the minuscule revolutions") are not, however, a radically new expression of Europe's capacity for self-organisation. They appear as a result of the cumulative effect of our recent history:

a)   growing uneasiness about current forms of democracy which are perceived more and more as marginalising people and as alien procedures in relation to our diverse cultures and modes of inter-relatedness; not by accident has the Council of Europe been studying for several years the socio-cultural ingredients which might lead to new forms of democracy;

b)   the paralysis expressing the end of the industrial revolution in the forms inherited from the 19th century;

c)   the failure of popular political movements and the inability to understand, describe and conceptualise the new type of society that has emerged in the last 15 years in a few countries, and which was later crushed by the dominant forces (eg Portugal, Poland);

d)   the nostalgia for the élan of the May 68 spirit, which conveyed a radical challenge to ways of life and to attitudes prevailing in society;

e)   more recently, the proliferation of small groups who express a new awareness of the wholeness of the human person (maybe under influence from the East) and who tend to be less concerned with society and more with the individual person;

f)   last but not least, the movements which emerged and gained momentum in the early '70s: – the women's movement; the peace movement; the ecological movement. Though many of their goals have become part of the political agenda and mainstream institutions, they retain the potential capacity for much more impact. Their difficulty is, at present, the redefinition of their own goals.

Side by side with these (new) social actors, there are the longstanding groups/organisations/movements:

a) the socio-professional groups which still suffer from the specialisation in society and which tend to get too involved in corporate problems;

b) the trade-unions which are deeply affected by the evolution of the economic and political situation, and which in most European countries are too dependent on political forces, scarcely challenging the system of production and its goals;

c) the groups based on religious beliefs which so far have not evolved a contextual theology emerging from the specific situation of Europe. They tend either to "import" liberation theology from Latin America or to withdraw into a fundamentalism that denies the historically developed complexity of culture and institutions;

d) many small groups scattered all over Europe who have been in the forefront of human rights, of liberation movements, of development aid to countries and peoples in the Southern hemisphere.

Unlike the social movements of the 60s and early 70s, the new social actors in Europe are neither focussed on a "new society" nor rallying around idealistic causes. In the words of a group of social scientists: "The crucial point is that, despite their great diversity, contemporary social movements are all responding to a future that is seen as threatening."[1]

They are made up of parts - individuals/small groups/networks who want to learn to achieve, to evolve or to grow - which are purposeful systems, their purpose being to deal with survival at all levels, including the values which can guide and dynamise from within the society in which we live. They are themselves part of larger social systems which are also purposeful.[2] In this resides part of their interest, as they compel the surrounding society to set out or clarify its goals.

New social actors are gathering around issues. They do so on two levels: one is their own identity (as during the first stage of the women's movements), the other is the commitment to a specific set of problems within society (maybe peace movements in their present form).

31

Whenever social actors focus only on one of these two levels, they are doomed to withdraw from the social scene. If they become exclusively involved with a set of 'external' problems, they will lack the firm sense of identity necessary to review goals and issues according to the evolution of society itself. If they concentrate excessively on their own specific identity, the result will be a fatal implosion: they lose sight of what they stand for, and little by little become a shadow of what they intended to be.

Moreover, issue-oriented movements have to come to grips with the scale effect or, in other words, with the necessary critical mass. If they are confined to a given territory (either too small or with a population that is too homogeneous and conformist) social actors may lack scope for relevant intervention. Mere "coordination" across national or even regional boundaries is not enough for social actors to gain scope or perspective. A new tool is necessary. They must be sustained by "transnational bonding", by "transcultural connectedness". Then they are able to stretch out to a wider horizon. Thus they gain the necessary strength for their social mobilisation and intervention.

The life-span of issue-oriented social actors is fluid and limited. They may open up to new issues, new forms, new participants or new groups. Most organisations and groups are far from well-defined. If definition exists, it is sought from within and is linked with the social environment.

II.   Political Connections

Social actors who centre themselves around basic and specific issues may represent a breakthrough in the way citizens participate in the development process of society. Even so, this also harbours a danger, as has been frequently remarked: the formulation of issues by the social actors can be sloganised and appropriated by the establishment.

However, it also happens that international actions started within the frame of the establishment at the international level, have somehow "obliged" national political powers to follow suit. This is the case for the women's movement with the declarations of the "Tribune" and "Forum" at Mexico, Copenhagen and Nairobi, which have led national authorities to take steps that otherwise they would not have taken. The same can be said about the ecological movement, which has acquired a new legitimacy in the eyes of national administrations with

32

the Brundtland report. Its issues have been taken up to a great extent in the formulation of public policies. In recent years, national mechanisms have mushroomed and, in some cases (toxic wastes, degradation of the environment), have already had some effect.

Once issues they are concerned with become part of recognised policies and of national programmes, social actors have to go further and deeper. They must respond to the challenge of always being prophetic: moving ahead with the times, seeing new openings and pushing forward on the implications of issues which are central for them.

In some situations, social actors are equated with non-party political formations. This seems to be the case in India, according to Rajni Kothari. However, this is not the general case. Rather, most new social actors see themselves as political because their perspective leads them to reaffirm the political dimensions of every action and of everyday life. By doing so, they question and challenge professionalised politics.

But their significance goes further. They give clear evidence that "right" or "left" are no longer abstract categories defined in relation to each other, with a set of dogmas on each side, and in isolation from concrete situations. Rather, social actors help to shape the "right" or the "left" according to the answers they give to particular crucial issues. Instead of "majorities" being fashioned from a rapport de forces, they contribute to the emergence of flexible "majorities of ideas".

Thus they make an important contribution to the renewal of the political scene and of political theory. It would be useful to have an empirical study of statements and actions of social actors. It is very likely that such a study would lead to a tentative synthesis of the emerging values that could underpin a "right" and a "left" more directly connected with the vital issues of our time.

Sometimes the State encourages what some call "surface" participation which results from elasticity in the tissue of the political establishment. Such participation appears to open political and legal space for social actors. This is of considerable importance as the recurring problem for social actors has been the demarcation of the political space in which they can act. When I ran for presidential office in my country as an independent, on a joint platform with most of Portugal's social actors, ranging from the cooperative movement to the open

theatre, it did seem to all of us that there was an empty space in which something new could be achieved. In spite of the results of those elections, the opening up of the political space was very important for the social actors.

The path usually followed is that, while social movements are formed around one issue, social actors want to mobilise other people around it, and this leads them to want to give their public intervention a strategic character, and so to influence political power.

These ingredients lead to several questions about the nature of social actors:

- are they just a way to mobilise public opinion?

- are they pressure groups whose activity is seen and acknowledged through their insistent action?

- are they lobbies intervening in a hidden way?

- what is their relation with existing power structures?

Some of these groups are convinced that all possibilities for intervention and influence have to be used. The difficulty of such a position is clear: social actors can easily become constants concerned with super-structural action. They are, so to speak, "sucked up" by the continuous upheavals and small "stories" of political life. The tremendous attraction of political power then provokes a change in the nature of the activities of the social actors. They become just a re-action to what is happening on the conventional political stage. Moreover, the possibility of individual access to power often contributes to the dismantling of the social actors as a group.

Other groups reject totally the possibility of direct intervention in political life as it is. For them, as a matter of principle, participation in traditional power is out of the question. They want another way of life. They are convinced that their witness will shake something in society and that in the long run it will contribute to the solution of the issue with which they are concerned.3/ Certain authors go so far as saying, from direct experience and its evaluation, that the "over-all consequences of state intervention are generally anti-participatory". This is why some social actors are looking for new forms of organised power structure.

Some do it by resistance to the strongest violations of the basic values they stand for, that is, capacity for survival in society: arms race, violation of human rights, ignoring ecological constraints, depriving a people of its resources by waste or corruption. Others systematically denounce every single mistake related to their central issue. Still others address themselves, by their life-style, to the core of political power. Thus the women's movement has been challenging the current mode of governance, indicating clearly that it is not only at the top that attitudes and decisions matter but at all levels of social organisation, and in all institutions. Hierarchy, bureaucracy, power, are present in all forms of organised social life and, as such, must be changed.

The way politics are evolving makes it even more difficult for social actors to enter into a feasible coalition with those in political power. Indeed, over the last ten years we have seen the replacement of concrete political proposals by a kind of politics-show. The most obvious symptom of such a replacement is the marketing approach which has gradually seized all those aspiring to political office. No less important is the subtle promiscuity between the media and those having or aspiring to political power.

Such a change in politics does not open up new possibilities for a serious and consistent intervention. On the contrary, it paralyses social actors, whose intervention is on a totally different wave-length from the one used by the new political "actors". Sustained action becomes impossible, as political power has been replaced by its perverse deformations. The social actors are relegated to the wings, whilst the political leaders and candidates have spotlights on their smallest gesture.

All this suggests that there is an urgent need for more research on the role of the media in the social and political process. It is no longer merely a question of moralising about the media's professionals. A strong new factor is operating in society, which (as McBride used to say) "produces mental programmes"4/ and changes the interplay of all the other factors. Social actors face a new question: are they ready to use the media, "to plot" as it were with the media, to develop a strategy of which the media are an integral part?

35

Several social actors are already answering that "information is power"; hence (maybe) the proliferation of free radio all over Europe. But they will have to go further: their potential partners are reachable through the media. They have to find ways to reinforce the connections.

Social actors are both a threat and a challenge to the existing political power structure. The simple political alternation without alternative, with its brutal power struggle which is increasingly determining political options in Europe, is no answer to the demands of issue-oriented policies. The more social actors become aware of the limitations of political alternation, the more they will have to rely on themselves. The issues become clearer. As a consequence, the political power holders find themselves obliged somehow to respond to the challenge – always provided the necessary civil and political liberties are guaranteed. Social actors can exercise a subtle influence upon political power. They can help again and again to focus on the key questions with which society needs to cope. They can function to correct a distorted political order, theory and practice all together. They can function as the conscience of society. The main question remains: can this be done without falling into the trap of trying to replace those in power?

III.   Economic Inter-relation

If most social actors around the world are not primarily centred on reshaping state power, but are instead deeply involved in issues connected with justice and peace, a different question emerges: once reasonable progress has been made on the issue of justice in society, is not the next goal automatically that of reshaping the economic order, not only at the national but also at the international level? Many social actors who represent new forms of organisation are deeply concerned with the international disorder in the economic field. Protectionism in trade, arbitrariness in fixing commodity prices, the instability of the US interest rate, are all elements of an impossible situation which has devastating results.

Everywhere, social actors are facing the economic dimension of life. Yet they are often still using economic concepts which, in their popular form, are outdated. Such concepts no longer correspond to the type of society in which we are living. Thus the battle still raging in the political arena of some European countries concerning privatisation or nationalisation is not related to the vital question being addressed by social actors. In contrast, there are today networks

pleading for "Another Development" which are not heard. I also ask myself if they are in touch with the – so often isolated and locally oriented – social actors whose main foci are development issues.

The acknowledged international economic disorder has to be brought to the fore and fought at all levels. Many of us here are involved in "development aid". I shall not discuss now the subtle domination exercised through some types of development aid, such as food assistance, nor the disorganised and often corrupt channels at the receiving end. Instead, I would like to focus on an issue to which reference has already been made several times in this meeting: external debt.

There is still a naïve conviction about: that the debt question is an issue for the underdeveloped countries. Very few social actors in Europe have brought to the fore the fact that the so-called debt question is a global problem. In March '87 several leaders of the five major religions of the world, together with representatives of the InterAction Council of Former Heads of Government, stated unanimously:

> "the debt crisis and its ominous consequences must be resolved with a sense of urgency. Debt servicing cannot be met at the price of suffocating a country's economy and no government can morally demand of its people privations incompatible with human dignity. All parties involved must make a tangible contribution and honour the moral principle of burden-sharing".5/

The implications of this perspective go very deep and very far. If we analyse, in such a context of joint responsibility, the present social conditions of many debtor countries, we will realise that development and democracy are two aspects of the same process. In April '87 in Manila I met at great length with the Minister of Economy of the Philippines. In that country the external debt represents 90% of GNP. There was no way out. The difficulties which the Philippines has to face are related to that issue. Democracy is at stake whenever development is not adequately met – not only by those directly concerned at the

37

national level but also by those who bear some responsibility over the terms of development around the world. This is why I must repeat what was said in April '87 by the Interaction Council:

> "the international community must be aware that unless urgent support is given to debtor countries to preserve their economic and social fabric and to promote development, we may see the destruction of the painful and successful efforts made in recent years to re-establish democracy and economic freedom."6/

Indeed, it is time that politicians and governments understand that human rights, whether in their civic and political expressions or in their social, economic and cultural demands, are intertwined in such a way that democracy today deals necessarily with both sets of rights. Thus it is imperative for development to incorporate a struggle against all that represents a massive violation of human dignity. So much so that all the agents of development must be able to state that "we are in solidarity with all those of any race, nationality, religion, who lack the satisfaction of their basic human needs, including the opportunity for family life, for pleasure and for contemplation".7/

I hope that the social actors in Europe who are concerned with development will see the structural implications of the issues to which they are committed. Besides direct aid to those in need, social actors have a unique role in Europe. After all, together with the USA and Japan, Europe is responsible for the present state of affairs in the world economy and particularly for the disarray seen in the production of agricultural goods.

> "The United States, the European Community and Japan subsidise agricultural production to an unacceptable extent, thereby jeopardising the development prospects and debt repayment capacity of numerous debtor countries. Fundamental changes in agricultural policies in a market-oriented direction are required. Any delay will have grave repercussions."8/

The split between the action for development of social activists and their influence on the political and economic structures of society mirrors another split which exists at the level of political structures themselves. In most European countries development is still regarded as something for external use. It is rare

that concepts of development are applied to Europe as such. We lack in this continent societal goals which will encompass all choices and decisions. Moreover, whenever development is tackled in terms applicable to Europe itself it is often seen as a kind of extra in relation to the programme of a political party or government. Development does not permeate thinking about public policies. Yet when social actors attempt to address global societal issues concretely, they are regarded as trouble-makers by the political establishment. The goal, the perspective without which politics is mere day-to-day management, then runs the risk of being dismissed as "revolutionary", "idealistic" or "utopian".

IV. Social Relevance

The significance of the social actors may acquire visible recognition, which is a very important step in the development of their identity. Social actors could be seen as legitimate social partners. Until recently (and even in the revision of the Treaty of Rome) social partners have been seen only as linked with the process of production.

When responsible for the government of my country, I invited other social partners to discuss policy issues such as the establishment of true prices, priorities in production or in welfare programmes. Since then I have been wrestling with the idea that the concept of social partners may be a logical step if social actors are to be involved in the social, economic and political process of decision-making. A pre-condition for this would be the formation of connections, coalitions or common platforms among social actors concerned with similar issues; without that it would not be possible to acquire the strength and impact of a critical mass.

When social actors acquire the status of social partners it will be an expression of their capacity to occupy a specific political space. It will also be a step towards the participation of citizens in the making of decisions which concern them. One example: if education is indeed becoming a life-long process (as we are proclaiming in all official documents), and if it is the key to development, then there is all the more reason for the "school" to act as a social actor and to be taken up as a social partner. It is neither the rights of the teacher that are at stake here, nor the management of schools, nor the curricula in the school system. Rather, it is the vital linkage between the school as a whole and the society which surrounds it.

39

Such an understanding represents a move towards a more global approach to issues. In Europe very often there seems to be a split between the institutional framework of one's own professional life and the militancy and activism which is gaining momentum in the groups, organisations or movements I have been calling social actors. Alternative ways of life may not necessarily imply a withdrawal from existing professional structures, but represent another way to live with them. They may help to reshape such structures and hence to reshape society.

Many of the issues around which social actors gather are consequences of scientific and technological choices at the macro-society level. This is clearly true with regard to security, in its links with the proportion of the public budget invested in military research and in the military industrial complex. It is also true of the technological processes which take no account of the consequences on life-supporting systems in nature.

Few social actors are addressing these questions at their source, namely, at the point at which so-called "technological progress" goes beyond its own capacity to correct its own ill effects. This is clearly seen in the revision of the Treaty of Rome, where the ecological question is dealt with in terms of the principle "pollutor/contributor" – as if some of the ecological disasters could be repaired by "paying"!

At the dawn of the information society now reaching Europe (perhaps more as the expression of a consumption attitude than as a real cultural element) new zones of ignorance are spreading quickly through the social fabric of European society. People know how to use the new devices: seldom do they know what is at stake or why things are as they are. So far, not many social actors have gathered around the issue of the "information society". And yet, it seems to provide a basic new context for a conceptual reformation of development.

Finally, while some sociologists have raised the alarm to say that we are in danger of going beyond frontiers where the ultimate sacred value of life is threatened (or that we have already done so), we remained enthralled by the myth of the unlimited progress of science, and of its intrinsic goodness. Perhaps the reason is a hidden fear that any stand will be interpreted as being "against science".

V.   Local/Global

As I have addressed these various connections, I have referred constantly to Europe. And yet I would like to go beyond it, both in terms of Europe's relation to the Southern hemisphere and in global terms. We are, in fact, dealing with what has been called a "planetary agenda". The official international agencies, especially the UN system, have for four decades and in spite of their bureaucracy, put before us issues as vital and universal as human rights, the quality of the environment, population control, food sufficiency, strategies for natural resource management, disarmament and the status of women. The acceleration of history in the 80s has given a broader framework to all those questions.

Local groups, organisations or movements tend to address themselves to the local manifestations of global, wider problems. All the processes of consciousness-raising have led to the awareness that individual, even private claims are interwoven with public issues, and that these are part and parcel of more global issues.

The new social actors are, to different degrees, attempting to fight against the destructive forces at work among mankind. By linking local and global issues, to an extent they transcend the boundaries of the Nation-State. This does not make them rootless, but rather aware of being interconnected through the same issues of survival, even though there may be many distinct local forms.

While the typical European model of understanding the organisation of society through representational structures continues to be central, there is a growing trend towards a direct interrelatedness of people and issues. At stake here is the view taken by popular sovereignty. In the words of some American authors: "there are incredible possibilities of citizen participation in post-industrial surroundings, computer technology enabling a much more consultative pattern of popular sovereignty to be enacted in real life".9/ In Europe we remain far removed from such possibilities. Until now the new technologies seem to accentuate isolation and narcissism.

Direct democracy may be a disturbing element for those who want to be passive and to let others decide in their name. But it is a way of organising decision-making that enables people to have a voice in issues affecting their lives..It is in

41

practice almost the only way for the average citizen to exercise his or her sovereignty in the realm of preservation of natural resources, as well as in the realm of protecting people from video-pollution... Local government provides a good place for such action to happen. In turn, local power can only be sustained by those who, in different ways, are involved locally with every relevant issue.

Most social actors who are concerned with these vital issues stress the importance of creating a value-system through which goals can influence the means to reach them. Direct democracy, if it is to have any meaning, requires that social actors act openly and with trust in their everyday lives, at the workplace and in the home.

Indeed, activists are not isolated in society, though often they appear as such. In the first stage of their social intervention they seem to be "deviants" – they are away from, not just opposed to the surrounding order. They speak differently. They address themselves to different issues. In that they carry in them the possibility for something new in society. Newness springs forth in that space of deviance where freedom has no limit. Their code of behaviour is different. Values, acts and interventions are born from that same code, which is distinct from the codes which guide the politician, the scholar or the technician, with each following a logic of their own. Until recently those codes were totally independent and almost untranslatable into each other.

The complexity of modern life and the urgency for survival have led to the utilisation of different codes at different moments. In other words, transdisciplinarity is needed. But that requires more than just getting different representatives of each branch to sit around the same table: it requires going beyond each sphere and code. We want people who move from one sphere to the other, who take advantage of a longer life-span for doing different types of activities at different periods and having different connections with society. Certainly those people will not run the risk of being born sceptics towards anything they try to achieve, because they will be transcending their own limits, by grappling with situations where they have still to learn the code. Most of all, they will be opening themselves to new paradigms.

Earlier this afternoon Iglesias said: "we are naked". The basic paradigm in European culture gives to this statement a symbolic meaning. Believers or not, we are all heirs of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the story of creation God tells man and woman: "Do not eat from the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil". In a moral context today this sentence acquires a new meaning. We have eaten from the fruit with Physics, we are doing it with Biology. And what have we done? We are destroying nature, we have opened the way for thousands of genetic and radioactive processes for which we have no capacity to control. This is why we feel naked. This is why perhaps we feel ashamed. We had the responsibility to be good stewards of this planet and we failed. This is why social actors are speaking up today.

Notes

1. Saul Mendlovitz and R. B. Walker (eds.), 1982, **Towards a Just World Peace (Perspectives from Social Movements)**, Butterworths, London.

2. Jamshid Gharajedaghi and Russell L. Xckoff, "Mechanisms, organisms and social systems", unpublished article.

3. UNU, 1983, "Alternative life-styles in Europe".

4. Unesco, 1980, "Many Voices, One World".

5. InterAction Council, March 1987, "Des chefs spirituals reconstrent des chefs politiques", la Quilta Catholica.

6. Interaction Council, April 1987, "Final Statement", Kuala Lumpur.

7. Richard Falk, in "Toward a just world peace".

8. InterAction Council, April 1987, "Final Statement", Kuala Lumpur.

9. Richard Falk, in "Toward a just world peace".