

“BIN LADEN, CIVIL SOCIETY AND GLOBALISATION”

Speech delivered at the Central European University, Budapest to the Reshaping Globalisation: Multilateral Dialogues and New Policy Initiatives Workshop on “September 11th – Impact on the Effectiveness of Civil Society’s Engagement in Issues of Global Concern”

17th October 2001

What do the events of recent weeks mean for the debate on globalisation? Are these events all about America or are they about all of us? Let me start, as other speakers have done, by recalling my own experience on September 11th. As befits our global world, I was talking on the telephone to a Samoan friend in Washington DC who runs Counterpart, an ngo active in sixty countries. Half way through our conversation he was told that a plane had hit the World Trade Center. My telephone rang a moment later. It was American friend in Atlanta distraught that “America was under attack”. I made some consoling and superior remarks about Europe being used to terrorist attacks. Then my wife called from London and sent me to the television. Only then did the cold, calculated horror of what was happening begin to sink in. This was an iconic attack, a televised public execution of thousands of people in circumstances designed to invite the watching world to put itself in the horror of their situation. It was brilliantly planned public relations and a public affairs coup de théâtre. It was not accidental or irrational. It was designed to be one of those moments after which the world sees itself differently. It was designed to provoke a reaction, designed to create a chain of events leading to the radicalisation of the Arab world.

Walden Bello spoke this morning of the care which Osama bin Laden takes in shaping his image in the Islamic world as a latter day Robin Hood. We should recall that, in the story, Robin Hood was not a peasant. He was Robin of Locksley, a dispossessed nobleman. He took to the forest to live a simple life far away from luxury. After injustice he fought for the poor and for freedom. He took to life in caves because the legitimate representative of the state, King Richard I – Richard the Lionheart – was absent, imprisoned after crusading. The king’s shadow brother, John, was abusing the state in his absence. Without pushing the parallel too far, we should remember that it was the struggle of King John against the Barons, which eventually produced the Magna Carta, the foundation of human rights in England. I have always been rather ambivalent about Robin Hood as my grandfather was Sheriff of Nottingham!

Walden’s remark took me straight back to a moment when my view of the world changed. I was an eight year-old in Nottinghamshire in 1956, experiencing the twin political crises of Suez and the Hungarian Revolution. I recall to this day my strong awareness that the British imperium was drawing to a close, at American insistence, by the Suez Canal. My sense of Europe was forever changed by listening to the appeals for help from the doomed radio station in Budapest. There are moments when the world changes. Good can come out of a time of troubles. There have been similar moments in our lifetimes – 1968 in Czechoslovakia and 1989 in Berlin. 2001 will certainly rank with these other turning points. It has already changed American perceptions of the world; changed the context of the debate about globalisation and, at least potentially, offered us a way forward to a new order in the world.

Let us first consider America. The attacks of September 11th were the first act of foreign, symbolic, political violence on American soil since the British burnt the White House in 1814. There has already been a loss of innocence and an end to the American sense of invulnerability. We are seeing an end to a unique twelve-year period of politics without the ever-present fear of death, which is the traditional human experience. Republican advocates of the minimal state have turned over night into the proponents of big government. Former unilateralists now understand that the situation demands co-operation on intelligence gathering, on banking and money laundering, on diplomacy and the fighting

of the war against terrorism. I would sum it up by saying that America has rejoined the human race. It may or may not mark the beginning of the end of the American imperium. What is likely however is that US attitudes to global governance will no longer be a zero sum game, in which every advance for global governance is seen as a defeat for American sovereignty. Such a change holds out at least the possibility of a global governance with more players, more structure, more substance and with a stronger ethical base.

What do these momentous changes mean for the debate about globalisation? Before September 11th it was already possible to see the outlines of a new synthesis on globalisation. Few any longer believed in the thesis of globalisation as purely beneficial and majestically irreversible. Equally few believed any more in the pure milk of the anti-globalisers' case. Any new synthesis must seek to place economic globalisation within a political and democratic framework. There must be a return to connectedness and a recognition that the governance of globalisation must be legitimate, transparent and accountable. I believe that this will mean the involvement of parliamentarians and the attempt to create at least an "analogue" democracy in the supra-national and global space.

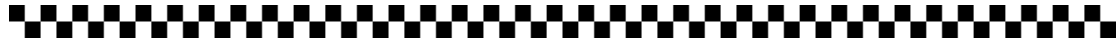
One of the advantages of being a smoker in a non-smoking venue is that you occasionally go outside into the real world. Earlier today I sat on the steps of the Cathedral and marvelled at the recovery of Budapest. My reverie was interrupted by an old lady taking her doberman for a walk. As the doberman lunged towards me it occurred to me that maybe it was the doberman who was taking the old lady for a walk. Luckily for my calf the doberman was restrained in time. I found myself looking into the eyes of a very determined Hungarian grandmother, who had survived the traumas of the twentieth century. It is open to doubt whether the grandmother democracy is strong enough to control the doberman of globalisation. However looking into the stern eyes of my new Hungarian friend, I choose to see a sign that democracy is up to the challenge!

This conference workshop is devoted to examining the impact of September 11th on civil society and the argument about globalisation. It is my view that the conditions which gave birth and vigour to the anti-capitalist movement between Seattle and Genoa have now fundamentally changed. I am indebted to Professor Tamas for his observation that the anti-globalisation movement was "an exercise in revolutionary theatre with reformist aims". Let us examine the elements that gave the Seattle coalition its strength. It had the attention of the world's media, but the war on terror now produces better pictures than anti-globalisation and the media find themselves attacked as part of the greatest press story for years. The assorted anarchists, nationalists and skinheads, who brought a frisson of violence to the demonstrations, now find themselves dwarfed by the cynical violence of bin Laden. The old Left will continue, but it has now lost the cover of the broad coalition within which they organised. The campaigning anti-globalisation NGOs now find themselves competing for attention with old peace campaigners, and may well be divided amongst themselves into their American, European and Southern elements. The non-campaigning NGOs, who were content for the anti-globalisers to raise their issues up the political agenda, must now be reviewing their options, as must the opportunistically protectionist trades union elements of the anti-capitalist movement.

What are the options for Professor Tamas's "independent, non-communist Left", whom he accused of having a distaste for dirtying their hands in bourgeois electoral politics and of endlessly playing around with new concepts. Power becomes real in a war situation. The state has returned with a vengeance. Surely these liberal, cosmopolitan intellectuals must now turn their attention to the creation of effective and functioning global institutions and away from the luxury of criticism and opposition. They, we, are charged with an historic responsibility. It is a responsibility bathed in a harsh light by the rediscovery that this is not a purely secular world. The liberal elites and the leadership of the faith communities now find a political spotlight turned on their most fundamental beliefs. Osama bin Laden is not ashamed to put his faith and spirituality into action, however detestable we may find its outcome.

The best analysis that I have seen of his motivation stems neither from his dislike of globalisation, nor only from his dislike of America. His actions flow from a sense that his religion is under attack from a dominant cultural paradigm that is as much represented by Europe as it is by America. His video-tapes speak of the destruction of the Ottoman Empire and of the Caliphate and of eighty years of humiliation for the Arabs. This humiliation, like the crusades themselves, was led by the French and the English. We deceive ourselves if we believe that Europe can somehow stand on the sidelines, immune from bin Laden's attempt to trigger a clash of civilisations aimed at the radicalisation and re-organisation of the Arab world. Hans-Peter Duerr spoke movingly of the connectedness of all things and our duty to seek

the paradigm of life. Let us hope that out of this time of troubles comes a renewed determination by all the Peoples of the Book to seek a new approach, not just to our relationships to each other, but to our relationship with nature.



© Tom Spencer