

Badly Needed: A World Authority that Distributes Resources Fairly

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"That sooner or later
humanity receives an
organisation of a socialist aspect … is, so to
speak, the only chance that God has
left it."

"The day
human beings will cease being cowards, the world will
make a leap forward"

- Robert
Musil, The
Man Without Qualities[1]

PROLOGUE:

I- NOTES ON THE
SPIRITUAL AND PROPHETIC DIMENSIONS: IS GOD
SOCIALIST?

Is Musil a prophet? Can The Man Without Qualities, an impressive opus of some 1,800 pages, be described as a prophetic book? Musil worked on it for more than twenty years, but when he died suddenly, in 1942, in Geneva, poor and abandoned, at age 62, what is now considered one of the masterpieces of the first half of the 20th Century was still unfinished. That certainly explains that the book's last 500 pages or so are made up of 'fragments' which Musil would certainly have rewritten before publication. It is perhaps inevitable that a work of such gigantic proportions, which is viewed as one of the greatest philosophical and intellectual novels of the last century, should be of unequal quality, but at its best it rises to dizzying heights. In the twenty or so essays that I have posted on the Net in the last three years or so, I must have quoted passages from Musil's The Man Without Qualities more than half dozen times. I believe that the two quotes above are tremendously important for reasons that I shall try to explain at some length in the two or so pages below.

In the first quote, Musil establishes a direct connection, or relationship, between God and socialism. God appears to have a sympathy or preference for socialism. As opposed to what? capitalism obviously. Metaphorically speaking, socialism is the child of capitalism. Nonetheless, the connection is problematic: religious fundamentalists may consider it

blasphemous; secularists, on the other hand, may see it as a Trojan horse introduced into the fortress of the separation of State and Church. Certainly, nobody can be sure about a relationship between God and socialism, but I tend to agree with Musil that there is, and this is why: all great religions -- monotheistic or not -- ultimately accept that God is the Creator of all things in the Universe, and that His principal attribute is Love. Ergo: the proposition that God loves humanity and cares about it is reasonable. And that, I believe, is the origin, or the source, of socialism.

In fact, the connection between God and socialism is a very old idea: small communities existed in the Antiquity that believed in such a direct relationship between God and socialism -- for example, the Essenes in Palestine who lived between the second century BC and the first century AD. True: the modern forms of socialism developed after the Industrial Revolution were "Godless". Their "founding fathers" and main theoreticians regarded socialism and religion as incompatible because they saw the latter as an ally of the "bourgeoisie" that was badly exploiting the "proletariat". However, Marx & Co. may have made a big mistake putting God and the Church -- or faith and religion -- in the same basket. The Church is a human institution which by definition cannot escape human weaknesses, such as: ambition, pretentiousness and arrogance; and a desire for power, status and wealth. Thus, one can be against the Church -- or anticlerical, as Voltaire was -- and still believe in God. Musil understands that. What really counts is the direct relationship between man and God, the intermediaries or go-betweens are secondary.

So, given the religious nature of most men, manifested in their need to believe in a Supreme Being (or superior force), it is not enough to focus on ethical and moral dimensions, spiritual and prophetic dimensions too must, most categorically, be brought into the picture. Democratic socialism cannot, and will not, have a good chance of planetary success unless a convincing case can be made that God has a sympathy or preference for socialism.

II- AND WHAT DOES COURAGE HAVE TO DO WITH IT?

Musil's second quote above seems at first to be even more puzzling than the first because while men have been, in the past, and with respect to socialism, accused of being greedy, selfish, cruel, hypocritical, and so on, rarely, if ever, they have been called cowardly. But here too, after giving the matter some thought, one has to acknowledge that Musil is right: it indeed takes courage, in an effort to try to build a better and sustainable world, to engage in battle (or "go to the mat" as used to say an old professor friend of mine, at UC, Berkeley) with some very ruthless, very powerful and very resourceful opponents whose overriding concern is preserving their countries' national interests, and their own disproportionate privileges. Despite lip service to the contrary, these "leaders" believe that this is the "natural" order of things, and that the absurdly unjust and unequal distribution of resources in the world must be accepted. So the relevant big question is, again: what can be done, and by whom, to convince these people that they have to act -- or get out of the way?

INTRODUCTION:

ON THE LIKELIHOOD THAT CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE CAMPAIGNS WILL BE INDISPENSABLE

This short essay is a distillation, or a synthesis, of the various conclusions that I have reached in the some twenty essays mentioned above that I have written on the global themes of what is wrong with the world and what needs to be done to build a better and sustainable world.² Today any sensible and fairly well-informed person can see that the world teeters at the brink of a precipice; a catastrophe of apocalyptic dimensions is about to fall upon humanity. I am persuaded that we have little time left -- perhaps ten years, perhaps even less -- not only to make the right decisions, but also to very seriously begin implementing them. If we don't, it will be too late, and the planet and all of its inhabitants will suffer terrible consequences (we tend to forget, in our unfathomable presumption, that the human species is but one of the myriads of living species that populate the planet).

Like the proverbial three monkeys that close their eyes, ears and mouth, the powers that be of the rich and powerful world appear to be unable, or unwilling, or both, to do what it takes to save the world. It follows that they must be (kicking and screaming if necessary) forced into making those painful decisions. By whom? Who is strong enough to impose these decisions on them? In democratic societies there is only one acceptable candidate: the people or, to be more specific, civil society organisations. The CSOs have already done a lot -- held discussions at the World Social Forum; demonstrated and protested against the World Economic Forum; worked on human rights at the United Nations; organized conferences and wrote papers which they posted in thousands websites on the Net -- but I believe that it is not enough to do the job. Instinctively, or relying on my intuitive intelligence,³ I am persuaded that serious civil disobedience campaigns are needed to convince these "leaders" that this time "we the people" really mean business. Certainly, acting decisively in such manner is risky -- things can go wrong, and they probably will, and the cost could be high, but in view of stakes that are incomparably higher, the next ten years could make or break human civilization, I feel civil society has no other choice.

THE "GREAT REAR-END COLLISION"

The misdistribution of the world's natural and energetic resources has created a world that is seriously out of balance and unsustainable. James G. Thurber has put it best when he wrote that "Man is moving too fast for a world that is round. Soon he will catch up with himself in a great rear-end collision, and he will never know that what hit him from behind was man." That is exactly what is happening: a "great rear-end collision" is about to occur in the near future: ecologically, we now know that global warming will cause tremendous damage, even if we take on time the serious measures that are indispensable; socially, the wealth and income distribution is totally out of control: a small minority enjoys absurd and grotesque privileges, living in unbelievable luxury; while the majority lives in poverty and, for a significant minority, in extreme poverty; squeezed in between is a middle class unsure of its future, shrinking in some

countries and expanding in others.

There is no sense, or logic (not to speak of wisdom) in the way the world's resources (including income and wealth) are distributed today, both at national and individual levels. Two factors play a determinant role in that distribution: power and luck. Power is wielded by the rich and powerful countries through structural and institutional control and domination whose main instruments are: neo-liberal globalisation, market fundamentalism, technological and military superiority, false and misleading propaganda, large multinational corporations, the World Trade Organisation, and so on. Luck operates through the randomness of the geographic distribution of the natural and energetic resources: just because they happen to sit on massive reserves of oil and gas, some countries receive grotesque and indecent amounts of money – trillions (thousands of billions) dollars in every year -- when, at the other end of the spectrum, perhaps fifty per cent of the world's population makes less than three dollars a day. At the individual level the situation is even worse: the gap between the extremely rich, the billionaires, and the extremely poor, the 'wretched of the world', who make less than a dollar a day, is preposterous and rapidly widening exponentially.

Needless to say, all this is neither acceptable, nor sustainable, and must be stopped. An International Authority needs to be created that will distribute resources fairly and in a sustainable manner. And limits will have to be established on both maximum and minimum income and wealth. There has always been in the world, and there will always be, rich and poor people. But the distance between the two should be understandable and acceptable in human terms. Today, it is not. It is neither understandable nor acceptable. It is shameful, indecent and unhealthy, and creates hatred and despair.

THE TEMPTATION

That humanity is threatened by two great dangers: global warming and nuclear war; is generally acknowledged. Of the two, I believe that, despite the possibly terrible consequences of the former, the latter is far more dangerous. Here is why – in the form of an extreme but possible scenario:

1. under the prevailing system of limitless quantitative economic growth, soon – perhaps in ten, fifteen years -- there will emerge serious shortages of natural and energetic resources;

2. in the last few years, China's economy has grown at the break-neck speed of 10 per cent a year; India's and Russia's, at 7 per cent a year; Brazil's and Turkey's 5 per cent or more a year;

3. there is no way the very high American and Western European living standards can be duplicated in the CRIB countries (China, Russia, India and Brazil) -- to mention only those;

So, given all the above, what can, or will, happen? Basically there are two possible sorts of answers: those which involve a peaceful solution; those which involve a violent solution.

Two hypothetical (or theoretically possible) answers of the former are: one, the U.S. and Europe will accept that their very high living standards will have to go down significantly; two, the CRIB countries (and the rest of the world) will accept that their standards of living will not rise beyond a certain level. It seems to me that neither answer can be seen as realistic: the U.S. will never agree to a lowering of its very high living standards; and the CRIB countries will never accept a cap to their rise.

The extreme form of the answer that involves a violent solution is war. Here is in a nutshell what could happen.

The greatest American asset these days is neither its economy, whose relative importance in the world is shrinking, nor its technological prowess which remains great – China and Russia are catching up fast, and are potential equals –; but its overwhelming military superiority. So, as the American supremacy in the world diminishes, the only way the U.S. can preserve its very high living standards is to go to war. Against whom? Western Europe being out of the question, the only possible candidates are Russia and China. I think we can safely predict that the U.S. will avoid ‘messing’ with Russia. That leaves China. Will the Americans give in to the temptation, which will be great, of attacking China ? Probably not because it would be a crazy and ultimately self-defeating thing to do. But that does not mean that that possibility can be safely and entirely disregarded. The other nations of the world would do well to be extremely vigilant in that respect, and make it very clear to the U.S. that such an ‘option’ is totally and absolutely out of the question.

THE SOLUTION

There were in the U.S., in the 1930s, two major national emergencies: the Great Depression and World War Two. To ‘deal’ with the first, the American government led by Franklin D. Roosevelt established stringent controls on the distribution and use of national resources. Among the instruments employed for that control were: the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the Civilian Conservation Corps, the National Recovery Administration, the Tennessee Valley Authority, and the Works Projects Administration. The challenge was met and the U.S. came out of the Great Depression. To ‘deal’ with the second national emergency, similar measures were taken to prepare the nation for war: the

country's economy was switched from a peace footing to a war footing by a massive reallocation of resources.

Also, let us not forget that the European Union started as a Coal and Steel Community among its six founding-members (France, Germany, Italy, and the Benelux countries of Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg).

Coal and steel, viewed as essential resources, were distributed fairly, that is: at reasonable prices, and taking into account the needs and productive capacities of each country. In due time, the Coal and Steel Community evolved into a common market, the European Economic Community, and into the European Union, which is – slowly it is true – becoming a political entity.

Building on that example, a World Authority to distribute resources fairly could begin with oil and gas – as I write these lines oil prices have reached the unbelievable price of \$ 100 a barrel! Sharing these two resources at reasonable prices could represent the beginning of the building of a better and sustainable world, the maturation of which would require – not necessarily in this order – the following radical reforms:

a- the acceptance by the rich and powerful countries, through the adoption of more frugal lifestyles, of lower standards of living;

b- a massive transfer of resources to the poor and developing countries so that they can achieve decent living standards;

c- a significant narrowing of the gap between the extremely rich and the extremely poor people, which means limits to personal wealth and income;

d- the eradication of extreme poverty;

e- the replacement of the culture of war under which the world lives presently by a culture of peace;

f- the teaching of spiritual, ethical and moral values at an early age in the homes and nursery schools;

g- a much higher participation by women in world affairs -- politics, economics, development, etc.; and that at all -- international, national and local -- levels.

NOTES

1.
Translated by the author from P. Jaccottet's magisterial French translation: 'Que tôt ou tard l'humanité reçoive une organisation d'aspect socialiste ... est, en quelque sorte, la dernière chance que lui a laissée Dieu' and : 'Le jour où les hommes auront cessé d'être lâches, la terre fera un bond en avant.'
Cf. Robert Musil, 'L'homme sans Qualités' (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1956) Tome II, pp. 736 and 997. The original title in German is: Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften.

2. All these essays were posted on the Internet by CSOs such as: Share the World's Resources, Global Marshall Plan Initiative and Media for Freedom. See: www.stwr.net, www.globalmarshallplan.org and www.mediaforfreedom.com.

3. I think Nietzsche has a point: Life at bottom is Instinct / Drive and Folly / and Lack of Reason.

4. We could easily have, in ten years' time, one billion people -- 500 million in China; and 500 million in India, Russia, Brazil, Turkey, etc. -- demanding standards of living comparable to those in the U.S. and Western Europe.

5. For a detailed presentation of the items on this list, see the relevant essays mentioned in Note 2 above.

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