

The Voice of the Majority

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Ni 343

March 2002

In a world committed to universal democracy, human rights, and freedom, it should perhaps come as a surprise that the voice of the majority of the people in the world remains unheard. That voice is, of course, the faltering voice of the poor, uttering unintelligible sounds in language to which the key has been lost.

The poor are spoken *about* all the time. Politicians, businesses, humanitarian agencies invoke them ceaselessly. Who can remain unaware that 1.2 billion people live on less than a dollar a day, 3 billion on less than two dollars, and a great many more on less than five?

But those who speak in such piteous tones about, on behalf of, and for the poor are not the people themselves. These friends of the people—pious bankers, tender-hearted money-lenders, providers of such comforts and amenities as drugs, alcohol, and entertainment—stand in for the multitudes of the earth who have, it seems, been struck dumb by their own poverty and the humiliation that attends it. It is too much to expect their halting, ungrammatical efforts at self-expression to reach the heart of humanity. This is why their surrogates and well-wishers leave no stone unturned in ensuring that their plight shall be known and attended to.

It might be thought these self-appointed champions of the poor are taking on an unnecessarily onerous duty in a world made safe for democracy by the overthrow both of Communism and of the military dictatorships made necessary by the existence of that unhappy creed in a more sombre time. But political self-expression is a simple thing, requiring little more than a thumb-print or a cross

beside the name or symbol of one party or another. And politics, in every country in the world, means struggles between factions of the privileged, struggles for power among the already powerful. The role of the poor in these combats is simply to serve as electoral mercenaries, perpetual spectators of their own dispossession. Their participation is generally limited to voting for this or that victorious faction.

It is not with the *political* emancipation of the poor that their protectors are concerned, but with their *economic* liberation. And that is far too complex, technical, and difficult a subject for them to comprehend. Hence the vow of silence forced upon them in these matters; hence the deferential recognition that those more knowledgeable than they should express themselves on their behalf.

The experts and know-alls were bound to assume this task. For if the drowned-out voices of the poor were not too faint to register on the monitors of global opinion, they might tell another story. They might have proposed a different programme for the improvement of their lives. They might have demanded radical change. They are, after all, a majority; and in a democratic world, in which majorities are sacrosanct, how could their wishes be ignored? From this stems the necessary division between political freedom (readily conceded) and economic subordination (a perhaps regrettable necessity).

Suppose—just suppose—the poor were to make themselves heard on grave economic issues. Would they carry banners demanding economic growth above everything? Would they insist upon greater liberalization? Would they proclaim their zeal for free

trade? Would they clamour for intellectual property rights, for more inward investment? Would they uphold the noble endeavour of the privatization of all the common goods and services of their country? Would they throw their hats in the air in their enthusiasm for structural adjustment, and shout hurrahs over the growing inequality they see in their daily lives? Would they march through the streets of the capital city in favour of cuts in government spending that would remove wasteful subsidies from such extravagances as nutrition, health care, and the education of their children?

A likely story. Who can believe it?

The reason why the voice of the majority is not heard is not because they have no opinions. It is because these opinions run counter to the solicitous, responsible, and humanitarian intentions of those who know better. And those who know better are in the business of making money; money, which does not come from nowhere, does not fall out of the skies, but is (or “created” as the creationists say) out of the labour, the impoverishment, and the resources of the poor, over whose fate the great in the high places of the world now routinely wring their hands, express their benevolent concern, and at the same time promote seminars, meetings, and conferences in five-star hotels with the ostensible purpose of “poverty abatement,” “empowering the poor,” “cutting the numbers in abject poverty by half in 2015.”

The poor listen attentively to these interesting proposals. But their response is not on record; at least not until, goaded beyond despair by the rising price of daily necessities, cuts in ungenerous welfare expenditure, and

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the increased costs of such luxuries as transport to work or drinking water, they take to the streets in desperate protest. There, for the first time, the busy global media—for which the poor, in all other contexts, do not exist—are waiting for them, indecently denouncing their activities as “mob rule,” “anarchy on the streets,” “break-down of law and order,” “unleashing acts of violence,” “the perpetrators of senseless destruction.” Then will appear some luminaries of the BBC or CNN to tell the world what “these people” really think or do or want.

In this way, only *in extremis*, out of context of their daily witness of expropriation and loss, they are permitted to appear in the world as an inexplicable vengeful fury wreaking havoc, burning cars, breaking the windows of the shrines of merchandise in shopping malls, pillaging, and looting.

These scenes of disorder are usually admirably dealt with by riot police, the forces of order, the semi-military apparatus of control, deploying the silver fountains of their water-cannon, the mist-creating canisters of teargas, the elegant projectiles of rubber bullets and, if all else fails, the pyrotechnics of their guns.

Afterwards, the friends of the poor appear once more: not so much angry

as pained by the ingratitude, the stupidity and shocking displays of destructiveness, which cannot possibly be condoned. Even less so since the rich are only innocently going about their business of creating wealth that is the sole hope of the poor who, in their deluded folly, seem bent on wrecking everything so painstakingly built up on their behalf.

The reason for the suppression of the voice of the majority now becomes clearer. It is—as always—their destiny to appear in the great drama of globalization as the spoilers, the uncomprehending and misguided actors who protest at the necessary medicine, the healing power of the correct policies, the painful surgery and restorative cordials vital to economic health and well-being. Economic violence is called medicine; when those who suffer it resist, they are accused of assaulting the physicians.

At the same time the rich, those recent converts to the cause of the poor, the tender, heroic, dedicated creators of the wealth that will alleviate poverty, exhibit an injured innocence. They shake their heads, vow they will not be deflected from the honourable cause of fighting for the people who bite the hand that feeds them; who, like wayward children, can scarcely be

expected to have opinions of any account. And they will not flinch from acting on their behalf in the future, will continue to speak up for them in the counsels of the world, will pledge themselves once more to the making of money, which alone will offer some long-term (how long?) relief to the abjection and misery of the poor.

So the riots subside. The people return to their labour in factories and fields, on plantations and in slums, in economic priority zones and industrial barracks, in shanties and barrios, in brothels and domestic prisons, and all the other enclosures of licensed global exploitation. And no more will be heard of them until the next outbreak of gratuitous and inexplicable anger.

Meanwhile, they can have their elections. They can vote freely for any candidate who represents this or that faction of the possessing classes, who proclaims his or her eagerness to help the poor majority and who will certainly ensure the policies that have proved so helpful to that same majority continue their unimpeded progress through the world.

And the poor will fall silent again, their voice reduced to the intermittent crackling on some abandoned wavelength of a broken radio in the junkshops of globalization.