

Bandung: The Event

Professorial Lecture by Walden Bello

This essay is a distillation of thoughts triggered by various requests to consider the significance of the Bandung Conference during the 60th anniversary of the historic event in 2015.

Bandung in 1955 was a momentous historic event in the sense that the French philosopher Alain Badiou defines an “event”: a moment, a particular conjunction of forces and developments that illuminates the horizon of possibilities for social liberation.¹

PROMISE

Bandung, which saw the Third World or Global South get together for the first time, with iconic leaders like Chou En Lai, Nasser, Sukarno, and Nehru, had the same significance as the French Revolution of 1789 and the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. It was a historic distillation of the scores of national independence and national liberation struggles that had occurred till then and that were still going to take place in the Global South. It pointed to a reality seeking to emerge from the internal and international structures oppression and exploitation: to a new era of freedom and equality among nations and within nations. Thus, Bandung represented the reality as well as the potential and the horizon of possibilities of global political and economic liberation.

The wave of liberation represented in Bandung carried forward to the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and Algerian independence in 1962, and reached its apogee in 1973–1975 with the triumph of national liberation movements in Mozambique, Angola, Guinea Bissau, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

COUNTERREVOLUTION

However, like the French Revolution and the Bolshevik Revolution, that glimpse of the horizon of possibilities offered by Bandung was succeeded by setbacks, by counterrevolutions inspired by imperialism.

There were the bloody coups against Sukarno in Indonesia in 1965 and against Allende in Chile in 1973.

Then there was structural adjustment and neoliberal structuring that accompanied corporate driven globalization, whose main successes were the neoliberal transformation of the Indian economy beginning in the early 1990s, the capitalist transformation of China from 1984 on, and, of course, the collapse of actually existing socialism in Eastern Europe. Like the Congress of Vienna in relation to the French Revolution after 1815, and the fascist and Nazi counterrevolutions in relation to the Bolshevik Revolution, the aim of the US-led imperial reaction and the neoliberal globalization to kill the glimpse of the future offered by Bandung.

Yet it was not only imperialism and global capitalism that propelled the retreat of the vision of Bandung. Factors internal to progressive forces were also at work, the most prominent being the prolonged deterioration and collapse of the centralized socialist regimes in 1989–1992, and the ossification of many anti-colonial movements into personalist, party, or bureaucratic regimes. This lapse into political formations that were the opposite of the Bandung vision—where the state became the property of a person, a party, or a social group, instead of becoming an instrument of popular liberation—was one of the factors that contributed to the siren song of neoliberal restructuring in the 1980s and 1990s.

The clouding of the horizon of possibilities offered by the event that was Bandung led to many intellectuals abandoning the promise of Bandung, some lapsing into cynicism, invoking its rhetoric but abandoning its substance, some embracing neoliberalism outright. Others remained mechanically faithful to Bandung, refusing to acknowledge the deviations or internal lapses of progressive movements. Others maintained their fidelity to Bandung but also adopted a self-critical attitude, asking the question, where did we go wrong?

WHERE DID WE GO WRONG?

I am mainly interested in the response of this third group, this self-critical response that has kept faith in the Bandung vision, that did not attribute the retreat of that vision to the power of imperialism and capitalism alone. There have been four institutions, associated with progressive movements at the time of Bandung, institutions

that were seen as the instruments of liberation and equality, that have been subjected to critical dissection: socialism, the state, democracy, and the party.

Socialism. Coming out of Bandung were different variants of socialism, to which many countries emerging from colonialism were generally sympathetic: Marxist-Leninist socialism, African socialism, Arab socialism, among others. The dominant version that dominated in the 40 years after Bandung was a top-down socialism wherein the state controlled the means of production, bureaucrats managed the economy via central planning, and there was little or no genuine democratic participation either in politics or economic management. This created a deadly combination of inefficiency in production and political dispossession that made the populations of the decolonized and socialist worlds vulnerable to the blandishments of imperialism and capitalism, and culminated in the collapse of the socialist governments in Eastern Europe and the reintroduction of capitalism in China, Vietnam, and many other post-colonial societies from the 1990s on.

State. In the visions of development that came out of Bandung, whether the national developmental vision or the socialist vision, the state was seen as the institution that would tame the market and corporations, serve as the engine of development, express the general will and realize the common good. In fact, in many instances, the state came to exercise the monopoly of coercion, political power, and economic resources by a new elite based on political party affiliation, ethnic affiliation, and intellectual/educational privileges. In many cases, behind the rhetoric of national development or socialist development, the state became the engine of accumulation of a new bourgeoisie.

Democracy. Allegiance to democracy was a common feature of many of the decolonized nations that emerged in the global South, but the reality was, in many cases, very far from democratic. Some had electoral democracies where elites competed for political power but united to maintain unequal socio-economic systems. Some developed Bonapartist democracies where populist leaders discouraged institutionalization of democratic rules in favor of a kind of direct connection between them and the masses through mass mobilizations. Some were so-called democratic regimes that were actually party dictatorships justified in the name of preventing counterrevolutionaries from destabilizing society.

The party. Even where they were not socialist or communist in orientation, many post-colonial regimes emulated the democratic centralist model of a disciplined vanguard leading the revolution from above and monopolizing decision-making since it was in the best position to understand the dynamics of national and class struggle. This led to many abuses, including the domination of the government by a parallel party system, the actual rule of middle class intelligentsia over peasants, workers, and other marginalized groups, and the denial of human rights to groups and individuals that did not belong to the classes privileged by the party. The genocidal policies of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia from 1975 to 1978 was a tragic lesson of how a progressive political elite could go radically wrong, giving ammunition to the right-wing claim that the three moments of social liberation—the French Revolution, the Bolshevik Revolution, and the Bandung vision—were the deadly panaceas of alienated free-floating intellectuals.²

CIVIL SOCIETY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Despite the setbacks suffered by these institutions of liberation, however, the masses throughout the South largely kept faith with the vision of liberation, equality among societies, and equality within societies offered by Bandung, many of them spontaneously, not even aware of the historic event that was Bandung. From the 1990s on, a major new actor reinvigorated the struggle for liberation and equality: civil society. Civil society is that complex of social sectors, social institutions, and social organizations that lies outside both the state and market but interacts with them. Civil society is diverse, being composed of communities, functional groups, professional groups, and pressure groups. In the national liberation or national independence models of change, civil society organizations were often seen mainly as passive actors to be harnessed to the objectives of the state and political parties.

But even as governments and parties were drastically weakened by neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s, the inevitable social crises triggered the emergence of dynamic civil society groups that addressed the environmental, gender, social, and political inequalities. Civil society formations stemming from women's struggle for equality, indigenous people's drive for liberation, and the desire to protect the

planet from devastation were a key new source of dynamism and creativity in the struggle to realize the vision of Bandung. Progressive civil society formations were united by a common stand against neoliberal policies. They drew their strength from their decentralized operations, their participatory and non-hierarchical decision-making structures, and their ability to organize across borders, features which were celebrated in Hardt and Negri's book *Empire*.³

These civil society networks have had an ambivalent relation to governments. On the one hand, the power of 50,000 people in the streets of Seattle combined with the resistance of developing country governments brought down the Third Ministerial of the WTO. On the other hand, governments, even progressive ones, have often been threatened by their activities, especially by their upholding of participatory democracy as a means of decision-making at all levels of social organization.

These civil society networks have also had an ambivalent relationship to the traditional political parties of the left. Despite these differences, however, they have worked together, the best example being the World Social Forum. Perhaps a compelling reason for the *modus vivendi* of the old and new movements was the realization that they needed one another in the struggle against global capitalism, and that the strength of the fledgling global movement lay in a strategy of non-hierarchical networking that rested not on the doctrinal belief that one class was destined to lead the struggle, but on the reality of the common marginalization of practically all subordinate classes, strata, and groups under the reign of global capital.

The Anti-Globalization Movement and its successor the Occupy Movement showed both the dynamism of transnational civil society networks and their limitations. The strengths of these networks were oftentimes also their weaknesses: their decentralized character, their dislike of hierarchy and representative systems of decision-making, and their being averse to institutionalizing processes. A key problem has been the ambivalence of civil society networks to power. It is, however, necessary to deal with power and to use it instead of just resisting its use. As Hugo Chavez asked us during the 2006 WSF meeting in Caracas, civil society activists had no choice but to address the question of power: "We must have a strategy of 'counter-power.' We, the social movements and political movements, must be able to move into spaces of power at the local, national, and regional level."⁴

This political disarmament may have its roots in a theoretical disarmament occasioned by the ambivalence of the concept of civil society towards capitalism. As the late Ellen Meiksins Wood noted, we are so used to thinking about civil society as the realm of freedom vis-à-vis the state that we forget the coercions of the institutions of the market and Capital that are also part of civil society. Let me quote her at length since summarizing her would not do justice to her thought:

“Civil society” has given private property and its possessors a command over people and their daily lives, a power accountable to no one, which many an old tyrannical state would have envied. Those activities and experiences which fall outside the immediate command structure of the capitalist enterprise, or outside the political power of capital, are regulated by the dictates of the market, the necessities of competition and profitability.

Even when the market is not, as it commonly is in advanced capitalist societies, merely an instrument of power for giant conglomerates and multinational corporations, it is still a coercive force, capable of subjecting all human values, activities, and relationships to its imperatives. No ancient despot could have hoped to penetrate the personal lives of his subjects—their choices, preferences, and relationships—in the same comprehensive and minute detail, not only in the workplace but in every corner of their lives.

Coercion, in other words, has been not just a disorder of “civil society” but one of its constitutive principles. This historical reality tends to undermine the neat distinctions required by current theories which ask us to treat civil society as, at least in principle, the sphere of freedom and voluntary action, the antithesis of the irreducibly coercive principle which intrinsically belongs to the state.

What tends to disappear from view, again, is the relations of exploitation and domination which irreducibly constitute civil society, not just as some alien and correctible disorder but as its very essence, the particular structure of domination and coercion that is specific to capitalism as a systemic totality.⁵

CAPITAL

This brings me to my final point: the need to overcome or transcend capitalism as an imperative of social and political liberation. When the Bandung Conference took place, capitalism was in the first decade of its long post-World War II boom. Transformed by Keynesian reforms, capitalism was dynamic, expansive, and ideologically compelling, owing to its perceived ability to deliver higher living standards to the masses in the Global North. Even among many of the governments present in Bandung, developmental capitalism was the road to travel.

Today, capitalism has delivered two crises which have severely eroded its attractiveness as a way to organize economic life. One is the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, which is rooted in the contradictions at the level of the relations of production. This crisis, which broke out in 2008, is deepening. The third phase of the global financial crisis, following the Wall Street crash and Europe's sovereign debt crisis, has been the lapse of the so-called BRICS into stagnation. The deflationary collapse of commodity prices along with a downturn in production and growing inequality all around make it unlikely that a reinvigoration of global capitalism similar to that induced eight decades earlier by Keynesianism is on the horizon.

The other crisis fostered by capitalism is even more fundamental, one at the level of its appropriation of nature. This has tremendous implications for the realization of the vision of Bandung. As Jason Moore writes, "At stake is an interpretation of global crisis appropriate to our times, and relevant to our era's movements for liberation. It is an open question as to whether we are facing a *developmental crisis* of capitalism—one open to resolution—through new rounds of primitive accumulation and commodification—or an *epochal crisis*, one marked by an irreversible decline in capital's capacity to restructure its way of out great crises."⁶ Capitalism's relation to Nature has reached a boiling point, for "the appropriation of Cheap Nature has not only compelled capital to seek out new sources of labor power, food, energy, and raw materials, but to enclose the atmosphere as a gigantic dumping ground for greenhouse gases. This enclosure . . . is today generating barriers to capital accumulation that are unprecedented, especially in agriculture."⁷

BANDUNG AND BARBARISM

Amidst this overdetermined crisis of Capital, the vision of Bandung remains valid and inspiring, but to realize that glimpse of human liberation it offered requires a more fundamental confrontation with capitalism, one that embraces its transcendence, and a deepening of the creative rethinking, reconfiguration, and rearticulation of the institutions or mechanisms of liberation that the progressive movement has developed as its main instruments for change: the state, the party, democracy, and civil society.

This rethinking of means and ends in the face of the epochal crisis of capitalism is in progress today. The end, I submit, must be a post-capitalist society, whatever one calls it, whether “socialism,” “democratic socialism,” or “economic democracy.” As I have argued elsewhere, contrary to the opinion of some, I think that the lessons of the collapse of centralized socialism coupled with innovative alternative thinking in alternative economics, feminist economics, and ecological economics over the last forty years have yielded the broad principles of such a post-capitalist order, principles that need to be specified to the particularities, rhythms, and values of different societies. The point I want to emphasize here is this revolutionary theoretical and practical challenge to those of us who remain faithful to the Bandung moment is urgent and momentous.

Our failure to meet this challenge could be catastrophic. In this regard, let me just share a disturbing insight that came out of my investigation of the background of the two young people who carried out the massacre at the French publication *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015, Cherif and Said Hoachi, one that brought home Rosa Luxemburg’s dramatic posing of the alternatives as either “socialism or barbarism.” These two were offspring of Algerian immigrants to France, but their conditions of existence were very much like young people now growing up in the slums of cities in large parts of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. With the ossification of progressive secular politics, ethnic, cultural, national, and racial themes came to dominate public debate in their world. For the youth of the slums, the vacuum created by the absence of the left had critical consequences. As one scholar put it, “the traditional character of the left-wing activist supporting the population’s collective protest is disappearing behind the religious figure embodying the alternative route for a dignified and moral life in a city ‘outside the real world,’

in a community protected from a society perceived as being impure.” Reading accounts of their trajectory, one cannot but entertain the possibility that in other circumstances, Cherif and Said Kouachi would probably have been ripe for recruitment into a progressive movement. But with no figure on the secular left to provide guidance to their feelings of injustice and their idealism, that vacuum, in the case of Cherif, was filled by a devout jihadist of Algerian descent who tirelessly held discussion groups with impressionable young men, encouraging them to join jihad and setting up, according to one investigative report, a pipeline for young Muslims to travel to join Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s Al Qaeda’s network in Iraq.

It is said that nature abhors a vacuum. If the forces that value the vision of Bandung, that continue to be faithful to it, do not fill the vacuum by making it again inspiring to today and tomorrow’s youth, others will. Liberation is not inevitable. It is contingent. I thank you.

NOTES

- 1 Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis* (London: Verso, 2015).
- 2 See Paul Johnson, *Intellectuals* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), and *Modern Times* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984).
- 3 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).
- 4 See Walden Bello and Marylou Malig, “The 6th WSF in Caracas: A Shot in the Arm for Global Civil Society,” *Transnational Institute and Focus on the Global South*, Feb. 4, 2006, <https://www.tni.org/en/archives/act/561>.
- 5 Ellen Meiksins Wood, “The Retreat of the Intellectuals,” *Jacobin*, Jan. 19, 2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/01/ellen-meiksins-wood-gramsci-socialism-capitalism-intellectuals-postmodernism-identity/>.
- 6 Jason Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (London: Verso, 2015), p. 27.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 8 See Walden Bello, *Food Wars* (London: Verso, 2009).
- 9 Walden Bello, “How the Left Failed France’s Muslims,” *The Nation*, Feb. 6, 2015, <http://www.thenation.com/article/how-left-failed-frances-muslims/>.

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