

Spreading Protest against Neoliberalism In The Digital Age

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As the debate rumbles on about India opening its doors further to powerful transnational companies, the question to be asked is just what is there in fact left to discuss?

The neoliberal agenda of the US via the policies of various institutions, such as the World Bank and World Trade Organisation, has generally negatively impacted local economies, democracy and people's rights across the globe, while fuelling inequality and lining the pockets of the rich.

Too ideological a standpoint? Not really, especially if you take into account the rising inequalities in India, the price increases and the reduced subsidies, as well as the conflicts over mineral resources, land grabs for property deals and issues pertaining to the nuclear power industry.

It's for good reason that protests are taking place and credible alternatives are being forwarded or implemented both in India and elsewhere in the world, such as in Venezuela and Bolivia via popular movements or democratically elected governments. In the US and Europe as well, people are protesting and offering plausible agendas for change.

But what about the 'don't know's', 'don't care's' or 'can't be bothered' who comprise part of the '99 per cent' - how can the apolitical be galvanised into action?

On a recent train trip from Chennai to Delhi, a student told me that many of his affluent friends at college are uninterested in politics or the enormous problems facing India and the world at large. They were more taken with the marvels of the latest life changing i-pod, world shattering laptop or revolutionary smart phone to hit the shelves. For such students, a college degree would be their passport to a nice job, nice car and a never ending stream of consumer products - everything a 'model citizen' could ever dream of. Politicians have known for a long time that if economic prosperity could be guaranteed, then key sections of the population could be bought off and passive 'model citizenship' assured. And with eight to nine per cent GDP growth in recent years, a certain section of the population in India has been doing very well indeed.

It's the same compliant consumerist mindset that is prevalent among many in Western countries too, even as they watch others taking to the streets to protest against corporate capitalism, job losses and attacks on the public sector and welfare provision.

Certain people only have the luxury of not caring, however, because others who went before them did care. And because they cared, they struggled for access to education, workers' rights and equal rights for women, etc. It was a long and hard battle to ensure things like

decent wages, housing and healthcare that the 'not-my-problem' set now take for granted.

Today, as people are struggling to obtain or maintain hard won freedoms and rights, many who were given them courtesy of others or previous generations of activists look around and say, "Not my problem, leave me alone."

The problem is that many have been softened up to accept the 'benefits' of neoliberalism and consumerism. Giant corporations, courtesy of their political lapdogs, have been able to prescribe attitudes, habits and emotional reactions, which bind the consumers to their products and thus the perceived legitimacy of the free market system.

Even almost 50 years ago, Herbert Marcuse could see then that consumer products had the function of corrupting and manipulating. They promoted a false consciousness, which was immune against its falsehood. He had his finger firmly on the pulse as far back as 1964, when he argued that corporate capitalism had succeeded in tying people aggressively to the commodity form via the need for possessing, consuming and constantly renewing the gadgets and devices offered to and imposed upon them.

And politics has come to mirror the mindset of the marketplace. Think of some meaningless political slogan such as 'We are change' or some ad slogan that states 'Cola is life', even though it should actually read 'is death' for those Indian farmers whose water supply has been contaminated or depleted near the local bottling plant. Nobody really knows what these slogans mean and perhaps nobody really cares. After all, it's that feel-good, knee-jerk emotional factor that counts. That's what the market is. That's what politics has become.

Noam Chomsky once said that neoliberalism reduces the population to mouthing empty phrases and patriotic slogans and watching gladiatorial contests between politicians who are little more than models designed for them by the PR industry. He is of course correct because, as long as politics and people are in the shadow of big business, any belief that we have genuine democracy is illusory. As long as people acquiesce to corporate capitalism's consumerist hegemony, they will continue to 'not care' - that is until they themselves lose their jobs or are baton charged or tear-gassed.

In the meantime, this neoliberalism, this passivity, this neocolonialism, by means of propaganda and garbled logic is passed off as constituting freedom. And because it's freedom, so the lie goes, it is also democracy. So we must have more of it. And the more we have of it, the better.

How to reach out

The core of the issue is how to reach out to people, the apolitical or depoliticised, in order to shake them from their slumber and make them aware of the links between 'globalisation' and, among other things, imperialism, conflict, the corporate control of health, food and agriculture, media disinformation, the corruption of democracy, the bogus 'war on terror' and rising inequality. How can we move beyond preaching to the already 'converted'? How can we reach out to and galvanise a wider audience?

It's already happening via the internet. Unfortunately, it's not fast enough.

From Montreal-based Global Research to Countercurrents based in Kerala, scores of websites are disseminating information and encouraging people to organise and agitate.

Whereas in the past, social and political movements may have published booklets and pamphlets to try to achieve radical change, the internet is now the main focus of communication. And, unlike before, the messages are beamed right into the living room in an instant.

The internet has allowed the 'alternative' media to mushroom and communicate messages without the distorting effects of intermediaries, such as corporate advertisers. This form of media has taken off in a big way in the US, but in places like India, it is still very much in its infancy.

Binu Mathew, from the Countercurrents website, says that whereas established writers like Noam Chomsky, Chris Hedges or Naomi Klein publish their writings on 'alternative' websites, this is not the case in India. There, established writers, even from the political left, opt to publish in the mainstream media, which they criticise publicly so much.

Mathew says the predicament is that we have too little time to tackle the challenges our ecosystem and humanity face. Corrective measures have to take place immediately. As a result, we must use all means possible in order to get our messages across, reach out and ultimately organise.

And that means we should at least try to use the mainstream media as a means for getting messages across. All available channels must be used to communicate, including mainstream print and broadcasting outlets, wherever and whenever possible, as well as Facebook and Twitter.

Whether in the US, India or elsewhere, people must have access to the radical messages being put forward. Good ideas not only catch fire, but in this digital day and age can spread like fire:

“It is for those who want to nurture these alternative communication channels to spread the word, tell the world about these avenues. ‘Each One Reach One, Each One Teach One’ can be a good way to sum up.” – Binu Mathew

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