

Walden Bello and "deglocalisation"

By Nicola Bullard

January 2006

Walden Bello was ready for the arrival of the anti-globalisation movement (now re-branded more positively as the global justice movement). He has been analysing, writing about and protesting US military, economic and political domination of the South since the 1970s, drawing on his experiences in the Philippines, under the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, and his study of Chile in the period of Allende and the US-backed coup which led to the installation of yet another US-friendly dictator, General Pinochet. From the early-70s, Walden was in political exile in the US. There, he studied and taught and wrote, but mainly did political work and organising among Filipinos. He wrote about the US's military and economic role in East and Southeast Asia, about the "tiger" economies of the region, and about the role of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in "rolling-back" (as Walden would say) the economies of the South in the interests of US capital.

So when the "contours" (another favourite expression) of neo-liberal globalisation started to emerge in the mid-1990s, Walden was well-prepared to join the dots and fill in the blanks, thus generating a compelling and explanatory narrative which not only described what was happening, but reached back into history far enough to show that US imperialism and global capitalism didn't arrive out of the blue, and that the politics that we are living today are the result of deliberate policies and powerful interests.

MULTIPLE PLATFORMS, SINGLE MESSAGE

Walden's essential character is that of an activist although he operates in many arenas: as an academic teaching sociology and political economy; as the honorary president of the Philippines parliamentary party Akbayan, (Citizen's Action Party), as executive director of Focus on the Global South, and as a columnist and author. There is no schizophrenia in this: each provides a different platform from which to act.

The power of Walden's writing is that he offers compelling arguments, written in simple language, that educate us, and incite us to act. The power of Walden the person is that he is pugilistic and angry when necessary (for example, when debating James Wolfensohn at the Prague Castle during a World Bank meeting), passionate and militant when needed (most recently when speaking to the rally in front of rows of riot police outside the Hong Kong Convention Centre) and pretty unassuming the rest of the time.

Walden's "style" is not simply a matter of personality type, but an active choice about how to engage in politics. He has little time for what he calls the disempowering "apocalyptic" style which ignores all the realities of organising. Nor does he like elitist language which creates a distance between the intellectual and the activists, even while proclaiming a "radical" political position.

He describes himself as a radical, in favour of fundamental transformation of the capitalist and imperialist system, and a non-reformist who concedes that "reform can be radical in certain contexts."

Walden is a prolific writer, with a journalist's instinct for a story and a compulsive need to write. The trajectory of his writing never wavers and his arguments accumulate over time — like a layers of lacquer — with striking consistency and polish. His book, "Dilemmas of Domination: The Unmaking of the American Empire" (2005) is the latest iteration of an argument that has been building for 30 years. He is anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist and the themes of US military and economic domination, the centrality of multilateral institutions to projecting US interests, the systematic subordination of the South, the failure of liberal democracy, the inherent weaknesses of imperialism, the reality of power and inter-imperial rivalry, and the destructive nature of capitalism, are leitmotifs which recur through much of Walden's writing.

An estimable law professor once Walden described as a "pamphleteer". Having subsequently discovered that the American revolutionary Thomas Paine was also described in those terms, the classification seems apt. Walden has the energy and the commitment to say the same thing, over and over again, adding new arguments, garnering new evidence, developing the plot and deepening the characters, never with the obfuscation of the worst kind of academic writing, but with a lively intention to shake the elite and provoke us to action. Indeed, his writing, viewed as a whole, chronicles the rise of US imperialism post World War 2 with an impressively consistent critique of power and hegemony that remains open to the evidence, and always optimistic about redemption through struggle and the power of people's democracy.

POLITICS AND IDEAS

Walden describes himself as anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist. "I am not socialist in the traditional sense of advocating the elimination of markets and the centrality of the state," he says. Rather, his emphasis is on ensuring democratic control over production, institutions, the market and even private enterprises. "The state is important for economic transformation, but the state itself must be balanced by an active civil society which closely monitors and intervenes in processes of state management." In his view, the form of the institutions and organisations of production and politics are secondary so long as there is effective democratic control. "Maybe you could call me a pragmatist," he says.

Bello: I would say I've been a pragmatist, working with whatever seemed useful to the task in hand. That obviously includes the theoretical arsenal of Marxism. But I wouldn't call myself a Leninist any longer, because I think the crisis that hit the Communist societies was related to the elitist character of Leninist vanguard organizations. One can understand the historical reasons why they emerged, in repressive situations, but when they become permanent and develop theoretical justifications for their lack of internal democracy, they can become a really negative force. I have been attracted to aspects of the new movement — its decentralized form, its strong anti-bureaucratic impulses and its working through of the ideas of direct democracy, in the spirit of Rousseau — whether one labels that anarchism or not. Still, at this stage I think the movement's most valuable contribution is its critique of corporate-driven globalization, rather than the model it offers for coming together and making decisions. But there is a global crisis of representative democracy throughout the West today, as well as in countries like the Philippines. The movement does represent an alternative to this. Can direct democracy work? It did in Seattle and Genoa; so we should ask how we can develop it further. How might we — I hate to use the word — institutionalize methods of direct democratic rule?

Edited excerpt from New Left Review (NLR) 16, July-August 2002

Walden is also viscerally and intellectually anti-imperialist and he believes the essential problem of power should never be underestimated. The reproduction of global corporate capitalism, he says, cannot take place unless it is pushed and protected by a hegemonic state. "Contrary to the position of some progressives that the state has become less powerful, the hegemonic state, that is the US, has become vastly more powerful," he argues. "Therefore, directly confronting and opposing politically and militarily the US is central to a progressive strategy."

He has no time for those currents of the WSF and the global justice movement which talk about transformation without confronting power. In his view, Hardt's and Negri's analysis is "fascinating and useful in parts" but they miss the centrality of the US, and that its armed might is the "linchpin of the system."

"Although I agree with Gramsci that legitimacy and cultural hegemony keeps a system together in the long run, the role of political and military power in the short and medium term should not be underestimated in the reproduction of the system," according to Walden.

Walden's thoughts on imperialism and the US empire are best accounted for in "Dilemmas of Domination" in which he lays out his thesis on the "crisis of global capitalism" which is characterised by a crisis of overproduction (economic), a crisis of overextension (military) and a crisis of legitimacy (political and ideological). These multiple crises are not only weakening the US empire, but also intensifying contradictions and conflicts as it seeks to hold on to power at all costs.

He concludes: "Although the United States remains the world's prime power, its system of domination is under severe assault and may be in the process of unraveling." In this he sees many opportunities for "liberating change not only for the marginalised nations but for the people of the United States as well."

THE ALTERNATIVE TO GLOBAL CAPITALISM: DEGLOBALISATION

The "deglobalisation" framework was developed most fully by Walden in his 2002 book, *Deglobalisation: Ideas for a New World Economy*.

In it he writes, "Deglobalisation is not about withdrawing from the international community. It is about re-orienting economies from the emphasis on production for export to production for the local market."

The key characteristics of the process are:

- producing goods and services that respond to people's needs rather than to the demands created by a corporate-driven consumer culture; with technologies that enhance rather than destroy the community, the environment, and life itself;
- drawing most of a country's financial resources for development from within rather than becoming dependent on foreign investment and foreign financial markets;
- carrying out income redistribution and land redistribution to create an internal market that would be the anchor of the economy and create the financial resources for investment;

- de-emphasizing growth and maximizing equity in order to radically reduce environmental disequilibrium;
- adopting accounting systems that reflect real gains and losses or tradeoffs between environment and the economy, so as to promote environmentally compatible economic policies;
- acknowledging and reflecting in economic policies and frameworks the centrality of women's contributions in both production and reproduction of the economic and social systems;
- ending the urban-rural divide endemic to capitalist development by re-valorizing agriculture, agricultural communities and agricultural economies;
- subjecting strategic economic decisions to democratic choice and not leaving them to the market;
- subjecting the private sector to effective legally sanctioned state regulation, and subjecting both the private sector and the state to popular, democratic control;
- creating a new production, exchange, and distribution complex that includes community cooperatives, private enterprises, and state enterprises, and excludes TNCs and where the operation of the market is subordinated to the common interest;
- enshrining the principle of subsidiarity in economic life by encouraging production of goods and services to take place at the community and national level if it can be done so at reasonable cost in order to preserve community;
- promoting economic arrangements that uphold human rights and the right to self-determination, and support rather than undermine cultural and political diversity.

Some see a close link between Walden (and Focus's) strategy of deglobalisation and the earlier work of Samir Amir who, in 1990, wrote: "de-linking" is not synonymous with autarky, but rather with the subordination of external relations to the logic of internal development... permeated with the multiplicity of divergent interests."

Similarly, Walden stresses that deglobalisation is not about delinking or autarky; rather it is about reversing the top-down and homogenizing processes of neo-liberal globalization, characterized by economic policies of trade and financial liberalization, export-oriented production, privatization and de-regulation and implemented through the international trade agreements and loan conditions of the World Bank, the WTO and the IMF.

Although deglobalisation is not "The Strategy" of the anti-globalization movement, its formulation as a possible alternative to the dominant processes of neo-liberal globalization shows that there are other visions of the world. For its advocates, the deglobalisation paradigm provides a strategic approach to challenging globalization which has two prongs: "deconstructing" the power of the corporations and financial markets and "reconstructing" social relations, communities, the environment, and the local economy.

However, critics of deglobalisation persistently equate it with autarky and protectionism, and see it as a backward-looking rejection of the "positive" aspects of globalization.

"Deglobalisation" as articulated, at least until now, is weak in terms of integrating into the proposed alternative the new (and positive) economic, political, social and technological networks and organisations that are characteristic of this phase of globalization (as opposed to global capitalism). Although Walden speaks of internationalism and globalization of people, his dominant view is local and state-centric, but without a clear vision of what kind of state is desired or of how that transformation might take place. Nonetheless, it goes far beyond traditional Third World nationalism by placing peoples' democracy at the heart and attempting to integrate feminist and ecological perspectives.

Another weaknesses of the deglobalisation strategy is that it does not go very far in elaborating the kinds of economic systems that might emerge in a deglobalised world or how to begin the process of reducing the massive, albeit uneven, economic interdependency that has been created through neo-liberal globalization. Patrick Bond's 2003 critique of deglobalisation draws attention to the limitations of the strategy, seeing it as a combination of "globalised regulation and utopian localization strategies" without any clear anti- or alter-capitalist perspective.

Walden would disagree: for him "deglobalisation" is implicitly and inevitably anti-capitalist because it is rooted in radical peoples' democracy.

FRIENDS AND ENEMIES

On political assassination

Late in 2004, the underground Communist Party of the Philippines published a diagram naming "counter-revolutionaries" showing their "links" with Trotskyist and Social Democrat organisations. Included in the list were the names of two former CPP cadres who had been assassinated, one with the admission of the armed wing of the CPP, the New Peoples Army. The other is widely believed to have met a similar fate. Walden was included in the diagram, along with several other well-known Filipino activists, although not all of them former CPP members. Walden and his colleagues denounced this as a "hit-list" and publicly called on the CPP and its associated organisations to refrain from political assassination. The CPP, and in particular its intellectual leader in exile Jose-Maria Sison, were not moved. Sison described Walden thus:

"As exponent of civil society so-called, Bello is a well-behaved and obedient citizen of the violent state of the US-lining comprador big bourgeoisie and landlord class."

(http://www.defendsison.be/pages_php/0412300.php)

Unsurprisingly, Sison denied that the "diagram" was a hit list, and the party has restated its position that "counter revolutionaries" will be dealt with by the peoples court. (see <http://home.wanadoo.nl/ndf/archive/2005/archive0010.html>)

On terrorism, war and resistance

Following the attacks of 11 September 2001, Walden wrote "the attacks were motivated by a widely shared sense of injustice and moral outrage in the world."

In the introduction to an interview with Hamas leader Usamah Hammdan in Beirut, he said "Hamas is associated in many people's minds with 'suicide bombings' of Israeli military and civilian targets. Widely condemned as a terrorist tool, the bombings have altered the military situation considerably, leading one Hamas leader to describe suicide bombing as the Palestinians' F-16." (Man under a death sentence: an interview with Hamas leader Usamah Hammdan, by Walden Bello and Marylou Malig, Focus on Trade #106, December 2004.)

He has also taken a clear position on the Iraqi resistance. "For a people under occupation, armed struggle is not one option. It is the only option." (Speech at the University of the Philippines Foundation Day Assembly on June 19, 2003.)

Walden's views on terrorism and resistance have been welcomed by most, but they have discomfited others, especially in the North (and in particular the US) where strong language and unambiguous positions cause people to look over their shoulders to see who is listening. For others (or perhaps it's only me) there is a sense that violence is somehow being glorified (on this question, a gender perspective is perhaps most enlightening).

For the record, Walden is against terrorism, but he insists on the necessity of addressing the causes of terrorism: injustice and inequality, cultural oppression and marginalisation. However, he insists that the greatest danger is not from the terrorists, but from the United States.

On trade

Focus on the Global South's radical position on the WTO and its "disagreement" with the powerful international NGO Oxfam over their strategy on the WTO caused ripples in trade campaigning circles. In 2003, Oxfam launched its campaign calling for "market access" for developing countries. Although this could be seen as a technical or even tactical difference, for Walden and for Focus, Oxfam's push for market access failed to address either the power relations in the WTO or the failures of export-oriented development. Walden wrote that Oxfam had the "wrong focus and wrong direction for the movement against corporate-driven globalization during this critical period." (What's wrong with the Oxfam Trade Campaign, by Walden Bello, Focus on Trade #77, April 2002) Subsequent developments in the WTO have shown that Focus's view that "market access" would not solve the problems of the South or of the WTO were well-founded.

On the World Social Forum

While a strong and active supporter of the World Social Forum, Walden has little patience for the "open space" view which he sees as favouring reformist tendencies and a recipe for inaction and, ultimately, the death of the WSF. Recently, he wrote this of the Caracas WSF:

"Caracas was good tonic for a process that is in danger of losing its way. It underlined the fact that success for our side

can only come at the price of tough struggles and great risk. Constantly threatened by a formidable alliance between the US and the local oligarchy, Chavez and his supporters are fighting for the space to transform Venezuela and Latin America. And he was daring us to fight for the space from which to transform the world, to translate into action the WSF slogan that "Another World is Possible" (The 6th WSF in Caracas: A Shot in the Arm for Global Civil Society, by Walden Bello and Mary Lou Malig, Focus on Trade #116, February 2006)

Clearly, Walden is not one for "changing the world without taking power" or at least, he might argue, we need friends in power if we are to have a fighting chance of changing the world. His appreciation of the importance of political power is shown by his deep involvement in Akbayan, a political party contesting elections in the Philippines.

INFLUENCE ON THE GLOBAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT

There is no doubt that Walden has a tremendous impact on the global justice movement. His "legitimacy" comes not only from his powerful work and his being from the South (these things should be admitted) but also from his willingness to put himself on the line, both intellectually and physically. As described earlier, his engaging and easy writing style and his tremendous capacity to synthesise and order arguments into a compelling whole, ensures that his writing and speeches have an impact on how people see and understand the world. People are ready for a radical reading of the world, and Walden provides it. My other theory is that his friendly and modest personality is well-suited to this new form of "networked" movement where personal and non-hierarchical (or at least non-institutionalised) relationships are important. And of course, Walden's high visibility in the movement is supported greatly by the work of his colleagues at Focus on the Global South — also committed activists — who work with coalitions and alliances and networks: they are doing the movement "building" rather than the movement "leading";.