

## **Wolpe – 104<sup>th</sup> Dialogue: Questions for Richard Worthington and Maria Eugenia Flores – 27 September 2011**

- 1. There were some common themes in your talks – the problem of using growth as a model, the development of multinationals, the way our legal systems reflect the way we understand the environment. My question is, are these challenges of the environment not really an expression of the challenges of capitalism itself in the neo-liberal model?**
- 2. There was one glaring omission from Richard Worthington’s graphs – and that was the world’s population growth. If that is put on top of all the other graphs, then we will see that this is the real problem – there are just too many people. Until we address that, we are not going to solve any of the other problems.**
- 3. I had a trip through Namibia a few months ago and I walked into a shop and found that for less than R2000, I could have set myself up with basic electricity for my household using solar power. How come Namibia has this available so cheaply to their poor? And we have nothing? Surely we need to empower poor people by providing things like this?**
- 4. I want to draw people’s attention to the bottled water sitting there on the table. I think it represents hope and it connects with Bolivia. It takes about 3 times as much water to fill that bottle as it does to make it. About 1.5 billion tons of plastic is used to bottle the 89 billion of liters of water we drink. It takes 17 billion tons of oil to produce the plastic bottles. The point is that it is the absurdity of capitalism that lies in that bottled water. And at the same time, therein lies the hope – capitalism does not grow from the sky, it is a human phenomenon. We have made it and we can unmake it – the Bolivians are giving us a wonderful example of how to unmake it.**

### **Richard Worthington:**

First, the omission question: if we look at the drivers of greenhouse gas emissions, the primary one is the level of consumption. Hence the emissions of the total number of Africans are less than 10% of the total number of Americans. Population is one of the drivers of the human ecological footprint but it is by far not the greatest. So it leads us to the question: is this not a challenge of capitalism itself? I would answer this in my personal capacity by saying ‘yes’, this is a challenge of capitalism. Does it mean that we cannot address climate change without overthrowing capitalism or does it mean that we have to be aware of the shortcomings of capitalism while working on climate change? I would tend to agree with the latter. Why? For 2 reasons. First, if we had to overthrow capitalism before we stopped climate change it would be too late. Second, capitalism is not ‘one thing’. There are different forms of it that are practiced – eg China. On the one hand, it is increasingly capitalist, on the other, it is doing the most to change towards a low carbon economy. One cannot fully address the challenges of overshooting the needs of the planet without addressing how capitalism works. However, whether this requires having to fully conceptualize an alternative system before we can do so, then I don’t think we need to wait that long. So I have a ‘reformist’ rather than a ‘revolutionary’ agenda. Personally I relate more to a revolutionary agenda but I think we need to be working on both fronts.

In terms of solar energy in Namibia, I cannot not answer. I don't know how they get to have solar energy in their shops for such cheap prices. The solar industry has grown vastly in the past few years and the costs are coming down very rapidly. The more renewable we go, the more the costs come down. So your point is valid, we need to do more than just have ESKOM doing nice little window dressing projects ahead of COP-17.

**Maria Eugenia Flores**

Climate change exists because of capitalism and of course, nation states are not who we should turn to in order to create change. Nation states are accomplices to climate change. That is why we don't really believe in things like COP-17. The work that we are doing in Bolivia is outside and beyond the state, which I think is necessary to move this fight forward. The nation state is not the answer, it is more a part of the problem.

Our government did try to do a different type of capitalism, a more 'Latin American' type of capitalism, but they realised that it was an impossible challenge, and so the only solution is complete resistance and challenge.

- 5. What are the alternatives to the nation state? Is it local communities, are we looking at regional government? What kind of institution is going to solve this problem?**
- 6. Given that we are talking about structural problems of the global framework – if we are all tied into this consumption and production framework, would it matter if Bolivia were the power that suddenly started to change the agenda? Would it make any difference? Would they not just get sucked into this structure?**

**Richard Worthington:**

I can't pretend that I know what our future institutions should look like but I do think that we need to be a lot more honest with ourselves about what the failings of the current set of institutions are. The idea of sending representatives of nationalistic governments to United Nations processes – to get from where we are to where we need to be, in that you have other kinds of people doing that kind of work, there is no road map for that. So I am not saying that we should give up on the nation state.

We need to think about what strategies are going to be required. Some of those will involve more confrontations with the centers of capital, but some of them are quite reformist. For instance, a financial transfers tax – Tobin suggested this many years ago to dampen speculation on currencies, there should be a very very small tax on currency speculation. It was not a notion that was taken up very broadly but now in the European context, we have heads of state (eg Sarkozy in France), who advocate this stance. The European Commission just came out in favour of looking into a financial transfers tax on a lot more than just currency speculation. So, you are taking your arch capitalists, who are making money out of money rather than on being productive, and you are putting a little tax on that to put it into the global fund. In the UN Framework Convention, you have a means to figuring out how this fund would work. You also have a precedent in the UN Adaptation Fund. So, in that sort of area, global financial institutions are innovating to a degree – for instance, in the Adaptation Fund, communities have direct access to that money.

I point to this not as a 'quick fix' but to say that some of the global financial institutions are trying to provide people with easier access. We have to be clear that we expect our national governments to cede some of their powers to other institutions better suited to dealing with problems like climate change, that we have to tell them quite clearly that our nationalist intentions, i.e. our short term interests as a nation-state, is not what they ought to be looking to serve. You might find that they are serving their own interests rather than the national interests in doing so. So that does not fully answer your question. But my point it is that it is not a question of saying, 'well if we give up on the nation-state, then we give up on multilateralism at the same time' - we need to be a bit more real about what we can and can't expect out of these institutions.

'Financial transfers tax' is a longer-term goal – in Europe it is going to be used to address their financial crisis. Whether they would agree to put this tax into a global fund to address climate change is another question altogether, so this is why we are also wanting a tax on marine bunker fuels. 'Bunker fuels' are not included in the national regulatory system – eg the fuels used for international travel and trade. They are accounted for differently, under a heading called 'bunkers' because they are kept in bunkers. These fuels are largely unregulated. But if you were to put a price on those, you would be able to generate a large amount of money. And you could do it in such a way as to ensure that developing countries benefit.

### **Maria Eugenia Flores**

Our experience of the state is that it is extractive and predatory and we could not expect very much of it. It is not so much about delineating an alternative as creating a social process of increasing the region of autonomy and to give communities more of a say. This is especially important in the legal sphere. Here it is about removing the power from the state and layering it. This is what we are doing. It is not about a direct alternative, but rather a process that aims to give regional communities a greater say in decision-making.