

Sacred and secular sources of hope for a post-modern society

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IN THE context of this colloquium I need hardly remind you that it was, of course, south of here, in Porto Alegre, that in 2001, the very first World Social Forum invented the stirring slogan ‘Another world *is* possible’. In any case, as a sociologist, I have long regarded ‘Hope’ as not only a conceptually fascinating and methodologically challenging social construct, but also as an exceptionally rich, complex and polyvalent category of personal and social experience. Inevitably, therefore, it is difficult to know exactly where to begin.

Let me do so by identifying –all too broadly and briefly –some of the major global features of socio-economic and cultural change already clearly identified by many contemporary social scientists. At the top of my own list is perhaps the condition of post-modernity itself –a condition recently described by James Alfred Martin, Jr., as ‘when all frameworks of narrative description embodied in their history and interpretation are currently dissolved in the acids of modernity’. Today, one might argue, all of life has become a series of reversible and increasingly ambiguous transitions. Fluidity and uncertainty pervade work, life chances, family life, class identity and cultural options. It is unhelpful, and perhaps unwise, to hanker after any hitherto established trajectories for the ongoing stages of our societal, communal, and personal life-cycles. We must *always* address today’s rather messier complexities.

At the same time there are also a number of identifiable and interlocking tensions within this increasingly fluid scenario –what the Polish-born sociologist Zygmunt Bauman so memorably terms ‘liquid modernity’. One, already hinted at, is that between social cohesion and social conflict, whose binary oppositions are beginning to emerge as consensus politics become less normative for most political systems. The second is the inescapable dialectic between the forces of tradition and the forces of change –a change exacerbated in some societies (your own perhaps among them?) by the process of modernization proceeding faster than the capacity of that society, its major institutions and its citizens, to adjust to both the speed and mass of change, especially, if not exclusively, of a socio-technical kind. Thirdly (and this is an issue to which I shall return) at a purely governmental level there remains, in most modern states, a credibility gap (what

the social psychologists call ‘cognitive dissonance’) between ideology, policy and everyday practice. All these tensions, although expressed here as theory, have practical, and often dysfunctional, consequences which are themselves acted out against a social, economic, cultural and political backdrop whose only permanent feature *is* change. These, of course, have formed the bases of many sociological hypotheses and much on-going social research. Let me try to summarize these for you.

Much of what I have said so far is sociologically routine –the sociologist on automatic pilot, as it were. But there are currently, I think, two other structural and cognitive impediments to Hope, which need to be identified. One is what Antonio Gramsci would have called the cultural hegemony of the neo-liberal stage of capitalism under which most of us have lived since the mid-1970s. It is based upon freedom for financial innovation, no matter where it might lead, and on privatization, de-regulation, unlimited growth, free, supposedly self-regulating, markets and free trade. It has given rise to the ‘casino’ economy, which has failed (indeed underwent a ‘near-death’ experience during the period of financial instability that began in the summer of 2007), and is now increasingly discredited, at least in the public mind, and among some academic professionals, too. As the late Kenneth Boulding, the distinguished Anglo-American economist, often remarked (*not* in jest!) ‘to believe that one has infinite growth in a finite system, one must be either a madman or an economist’. Yet our political and economic leaders (the self-appointed G-20 group who replaced G-7, or was it G-8?) know *exactly* what they are doing, and what they’re doing is re-founding neo-liberal financial capitalism (what a Cambridge colleague calls ‘foot-loose financial capital’) in all its manic vigour. This includes the ‘emerging’ countries (including Brazil) and nominally communist China. What really counts is ‘business as usual’ as soon as the ‘usual’ can be re-supplied. This system has for decades handed over unprecedented riches and innumerable privileges to capital, and governments apparently see no reason why it should not do so again. So they are fine-tuning the system a bit round the edges, while trying to appease public outrage, by acknowledging, or example, that exorbitant bonuses are themselves morally indefensible. They know perfectly well that, although bonuses infuriate people, they are merely the cherry on top of the cake, not the cake itself. All this reflects what future historians may well label ‘the triumph of neo-liberal ideology’ – an ideology deeply ingrained in the heads and hearts not only of contemporary elites, but of much of the general population, too. It governs elite behaviour and values, but also to some degree our own. It’s the latest version of what the early British Socialist, Beatrice Webb, called, back in 1925, ‘the capitalist domination of the mental environment’

The socio-cultural, and social psychological consequences are immense. At its broadest one might reflect that that as the English historian and social theorist R.H. Tawney suggested over seventy-five years ago, the moral economy

and the political economy are intertwined, and that ‘a political economy detached from the moral sense of the community is a political economy destined to fail’ –as it *is* doing. Put differently, it seems clear that the isolated *homo economicus* of our student textbooks (certainly the few remaining on my own bookshelves !) forever making rational calculations of self-interest, has been exposed as a straw man. The search for profit at a fantastic cost in terms of risk and unrealism has shown that there can be a form of economic rationality that is, in fact, wildly *irrational*. Indeed the fetishization of so-called financial instruments, and the virtual world of debt trading and paper assets are fitting symbols of that irrationality. Sociologically one could argue that the broader neo-liberal compact now provides the dominant structuring principle of social life. Its marketized language of ‘customer’, ‘contract’, ‘choice’ and ‘utility’ (so prevalent in the current British debate about the future of our National Health Service) now pervades Western, even global, culture. Social experiences and occurrences are accounted for in terms of what individuals think, choose and do, and individuals are treated as maximum utility seekers governed by economic self interest. This is a highly idealized view of human interaction, suited to the culturally dominant mode, and mood, of utilitarianism and market calculation –but it often leaves individuals with no meaningful relationship to one another. A wide range of disciplines –especially sociology, and neuroscience –show us how this understanding of human nature undermines well-being, destroys social interaction and impoverishes human potential. The Canadian social theorist, Charles Taylor puts the problem slightly differently, arguing that the ethical value of self-fulfillment has entered deep into modern Western consciousness. but the conditions for its realization do not yet exist. To sum all this up. The current neoliberal scenario is NOT a generator of Hope *per se*. Indeed it demands two critical responses. One must be to challenge the fiction that deregulated globalized capitalism of the kind so aggressively promoted from the 1980s onwards was ever a vehicle for for Hope -for sustainable prosperity in sophisticated and flexible economies, let alone for equitable access to wealth and security for the majority of the world’s population. Secondly, we need to acknowledge the fact that the economic ills of the last two years (not least in our own Eurozone) have brought to light a widespread anxiety about the kind of global society we are creating, and, even more, about the kind of human person, and the kind of human consciousness or sensibility we have been encouraging. More and more people have recognized a sickness or deficit in our imaginations. There has been an increasing recognition of the ways in which trust and the habits and disciplines of personal exchange and relationships have been swept aside in the rush towards profit. Indeed a good deal of empirical research has already recorded how working practices regularly reward behaviour that is detrimental to family life, and which leads to driven or obsessive, relentlessly competitive and adversarial patterns of behaviour. In sum we appear to be legitimating behaviours that are destructive and corrosive of a humane culture, and hence of Hope itself.

This prevailing economic model, and the values that underpin it, are equally bound up with my second macro-constraint on Hope. This is, of course, the future of the planet itself. Indeed the failure, in 2009, of the Copenhagen talks on global warming bear testimony to this potentially lethal interaction. For Copenhagen was essentially a vague compromise without any fixed deadline or obligations – more a statement of intentions than a treaty. The explanation seems fairly clear. The state political elites serve capital. They are unable or unwilling to control and regulate capital even when the very survival of the human race is ultimately at stake. One is reminded of the radical literary theorist Frederick Jameson’s quip that ‘it is easier to imagine a total catastrophe which ends all life on earth than it is to imagine a real change in capitalist relations’. Compare the reaction to Copenhagen in 2009 to that subsequent to the financial meltdown of 2008 (and still on-going). Global warming strategies could remain unresolved or deferred, but the call ‘Save the banks’ was, and is, an unconditional imperative which demands and receives *immediate* action. Governments still act as if solving fiscal crises were far more important than halting global warming. Now I am no expert on climate change or indeed ecological issues in general, but I have a number of Cambridge scientific colleagues who are. I also have one or two clever postgraduate students who are looking at the *non*-scientific dimensions of the issue. Now the former – the scientists, that is - tend to regard climate change as an incremental phenomenon in which the system of the biosphere appears to be stable but undergoes relatively small but steady additions of greenhouse gases. They argue that without immediate, radical, and conscious human intervention the system can only collapse and re-set itself – perhaps at a point incompatible with civilized life or with human life itself. In short our worst fears about climate change are underpinned by science, although *some* of my scientific colleagues argue – a touch casuistically, perhaps – that if we still have confidence in the power of science to measure the damage, perhaps we should have a bit more hope in its capacity to help put things right again. Good to find some of today’s scientists still keeping faith with the Enlightenment project!

My postgraduate sociology students take a different perspective. Those, like me, with a historian’s background, tend to argue that civilizations *are* mortal, and that contemporary societies are stretched financially, economically, socially and ecologically, to breaking-point, and as we have no functional, and effective shock-absorbers left, they see multiple disasters ahead – not only climate change, but resource wars, new epidemics, the collapse of eco-systems, and even of human societies themselves. Although such thorough-going apocalypticism sometimes reminds me of the Canadian philosopher Adam Morton’s tart dismissal of environmentalism as ‘a fundamentalist religion adopted by urban atheists looking to fill a yawning spiritual gap plaguing the West’, my students (some of them even authentically rural and Christian !) clearly have a point. In fact I think there’s something rather more interesting going on than merely

another twist in the meta- narrative of capitalism. For while it's clear that the crisis of climate change has been induced by the high-energy consuming model of society that capitalist industrialization has created and promoted, it's also clear that the current crisis has brought back into sharp focus certain other conditions for the existence of life in the human form that have no intrinsic connections to the logics of capitalist, socialist or nationalist identities. They are connected rather to the history of life itself on this planet. In other words, in contrast to nuclear war, which would be the result of a conscious decision of a particular agent, climate change is an unintended consequence of human action, and shows, not least through scientific analysis, the effects of our actions as a species. As the Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, 'unfortunately we have now ourselves become a geological agent disturbing the very parametric conditions needed for our own existence' And in a powerful, philosophical, aside he adds that 'the limitations to our freedom that become palpable with global warming ,are the paradoxical outcome of the very exponential growth of our freedom and power: that is, of our growing ability to transform nature around us, up to and including the very framework for life.' One psychological consequence of this (as Ulrich Beck presciently pointed out in 'The Risk Society'- published exactly twenty years ago, is that our subjective stance has passed from 'I am hungry' to 'I am afraid'. 'Today's risks, he argues, are not primarily external, but linked to scientific advances (the ecological consequences of industry, the psychic consequences of uncontrolled biogenetics, etc) so that the sciences are *simultaneously* one of the sources of risk, the sole medium we have to grasp and define the risk, as well as one of the sources of coping with the threat, of finding a way out, when, as it were, the impossible seems to be becoming possible. As Peter Burke shrewdly reminded us at the beginning of this seminar,' The Hope frontier can close quite quickly, leading simply to Fear'.

I began this lecture by briefly, and very broadly, pointing to some of the most readily identifiable, features of our post-modern (or if you prefer it, late modern) world. I might then have followed this by an equally routine sociological account of socio-economic changes, focussing on certain identifiable structural features – changing modes of production, transformations in the labour market, long-term structural unemployment, and the relationship of these to education systems, and the aspirations of young people. Such topics have already been touched on by others here. Like them, my own sub-text here would, of course, be the problematic relationship of Hope to 'life-chances' in the 21st century. But, as you may recall, my own starting point was to identify two specific macro-phenomena. Both are what in English we would term 'the elephant in the room' (i.e. something so large that you can't actually see it !) One was the theoretical and operational dominance of neo-liberal capitalism, and the other (not unconnected to it) was the current, and exponential, global ecological crisis. Both of these I would regard as primary –perhaps the primary –

pre-conditions determining our capacity to re-discover and re-fashion Hope for our own century, and beyond. It may, of course, be that the task is impossible, not least because the various available institutional delivery systems are now so diminished, tarnished, and impaired.

Politics are a primary, and dispiriting example. Indeed as Jose Souza Martins reminded us, 'you can't talk about politics without Hope'. Yet, in this context, may I invite you to think back to the two decades between 1990 and 2010? After the Berlin Wall fell in November 1989, the Soviet Union imploded, Eastern Europe was freed, Germany was re-united and the West had won the so-called Cold War without a shot being fired. Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the End of History: not only had Communism been vanquished, but liberal democracy and the market economy had triumphed throughout Europe and were bound to triumph throughout the world –or so we were told. Twenty years on, the hubristic boasting of that moment seems grotesquely misplaced. Yugoslavia was torn apart, and horrific wars across the world have killed huge numbers from central Africa to Western Asia and Sri Lanka. Post 9/11 the Cold war has been replaced by the so-called war on terror, as the defining feature of global politics, accompanied by the needless, and possibly criminal invasion of Iraq, and the prolonged and pointless occupation of Afganistan. Possibly the Arab Spring will fulfil its modernizing promise. We shall see. In any case the defining feature of world politics in the long term will surely not be Islamic terrorism, but rather a shift in power from West to East. If so, then we must ask ourselves, and our children, do we want to live in a world where the only choice is between a declining American-style civilization and an emerging Chinese authoritarian – capitalist form? Or, more subtly, do we want to collude with those ideologues who hope for a more ideologically enlightened society as a remedy for the miseries of the market economy?

Less polemically, I think that there is growing empirical, as well as journalistic evidence that political cultures are everywhere in a strange, rather febrile state. There is a deep sense of unease about the future, and our hopes for it. Older ideological moorings have either disintegrated or are no longer trusted, and the ordinary person who used to be considered a citizen is now reduced to the status of a consumer. In addition, what has increasingly impoverished political culture has been the growth of an ethic of possessive individualism that has changed the way citizens regard each other and undermined their sense of responsibility to future generations. Such an ethic is now a key part of the way economies and politics actually function, and its normative reversal is surely crucial for the future of hope. We face a range of complex challenges. Our politics is so obsessed with short term calculation and the passing passions of the 24 hours news cycle that it often seems quite inadequate at dealing with such challenges. There is an angry, resentful mood against politics and politicians in many countries. It can spark uprisings and bursts of hope as recently evident in

Egypt, Tunisia, and currently Syria, but it can also breed a chronic disengagement with politics and a fatalistic presumption that politics never changes anything. In such a context (and here I draw, inevitably, upon Max Weber's wonderful essay on 'Politics as a Vocation') we need to rescue the concept of civic virtue and re-connect it with individual moral well-being, which involves reclaiming the idea that as Weber puts it 'public life is a possible vocation for the morally serious person'.

A second, equally malfunctioning agent of hope is class formation – something which has (as much as political parties, trade unions, and churches), historically provided access to political ideas and civic activity. But in recent decades there is some evidence that, especially in the West, class-based societies are giving way to a more individualistic, meritocratic order. In his work on the so-called Third Way, my former Cambridge colleague, Anthony Giddens, has argued persuasively that 'de-traditionalization' and 'self-reflexive individualization' have replaced the valency of class as a social and political category. Traditional identities have fragmented and there has been a significant shift in social and economic risk from business and the state onto the individual. We live in a time of not so much what Ulrich Beck has described as 'capitalism *without* class' but of capitalism *destroying* class cultures and class relations, and re-creating them around new modes of production and consumption. Class remains a constitutive part of the capitalist order, albeit in a weakened state of flux and reconfiguration. Here I differ from Suzanna Sochaczewski's position, in that I think the working class formed out of industrial capitalism has now largely lost its economic function, and with the introduction of new technologies, the industrial workforce continues to decline. A new global division of labour now transcends the boundaries of the nation state. Goods are increasingly imported worldwide from low wage economies where primitive forms of capital accumulation have led to the doubling of the ratio of capital to labour. This has accelerated the process of de-industrialization and undermined the income base of the working class. Millions are now left existing like a reserve army of labour, economically inactive, or working in casual, low paid and insecure employment. Work, once a source of collective class identity, has become fragmented and precarious, making forms of class solidarity difficult to achieve. In just over three decades, class communities and cultures which had hitherto provided a defence against exploitation and protection from social isolation have been broken up. A people or group subject to such cultural destruction loses the means to defend itself against more dominant cultures. To slightly paraphrase the American philosopher Richard Rorty, 'the best way to deprive people of hope is to humiliate them by making the things that seemed most important to them look futile, obsolete and powerless'.

You will have noticed by now that I have not, as yet, identified many of those specific 'sacred and secular sources of hope' promised by my title. This is partly

because I realised, in re-reading my original *resume*, that my agenda –for a single lecture – was far too ambitious, and that to reflect intelligently and meaningfully, upon, for example, urban regeneration and community development (where I have direct UK research experience), or to see new religious formations (especially Pentecostalism) as embodying new ‘theodicies of hope’, or, more interestingly, noting how in a supposedly disenchanted, ‘post-religious’ era, both the language and the ideology of much social theory and social action are now –paradoxically – infused with religious values and terminology –salvation, redemption, etc. All this would simply have overloaded an already over-loaded lecture. Above all, I must confess that those two large elephants in the room -neo-liberal global capitalism, and the ecological crisis - now inevitably ,and increasingly dominate my own thinking about Hope, and what Suzanna called ‘the possibility of a good life beyond that which is handed to us’.

So am I an optimist or a pessimist? I think I am neither. I have hope and my hope is not grounded exclusively in faith, although like Immanuel Kant, I *think* I still believe that (I quote) ‘the mechanisms which will bring about social peace are independent of the will of individuals as well as of their merits’. But my hope is also, as you would expect from a sociologist, grounded in a world of secular knowledge, reason and possibility. So what are our prospects, when, as Peter Burke reminded us earlier, ‘the Times of Hope are the present historical moment’? Not good, I would say. Unfortunately - the twin crises (the two elephants), and especially the ecological one, *do* make the threat of serious and intensified conflict rather more plausible than it was even a decade ago. For while capitalism appears to be the only feasible form of economic organization in the modern world, capitalism without fairness is potentially toxic. My reasoning is as follows. If fairness and a measure of equality in the distribution of vital resources are the necessary conditions for peace, then an increasingly unfair, unequal ,world will by definition be a more violent place. If climate change gets out of hand and causes further scarcities affecting the most basic necessities of food, water and energy, serious social conflict might be the inevitable result, with terrorism, in Naomi Klein’s telling phrase, becoming ‘the poor person’s weapon of choice’. In this sense I’m not sure precisely where our hope resides. There *may* be some mileage in Serge Latouche’s notion of ‘*De-croissance*’ or ‘de-growth’ or ‘alternative hedonism’, which, beyond the individual level, means *reducing* economic activity, using raw materials and less energy, producing fewer goods, etc. ,although any political elite attempting to turn this theory into practice would surely be attempting suicide? Similarly I read an academic paper a few weeks ago whose author said he ‘found hope in the Internet increasing cooperation and social cohesion in society’. It was published in the very same week that the Internet, facebook, etc, facilitated, maybe even precipitated, the most serious urban disorders in London, Birmingham and Manchester for over thirty years ! Thirdly, some of you may already detect a mixture of hope,

provocation and despair in the writings of the currently very fashionable German social theorist, Peter Sloterdijk. Previously, he argues, we thought that only the (united) poor could save the world, but ‘the twentieth century has shown the catastrophic consequences of this attitude –the destructive violence which is engendered by universalized resentment.’ ‘Now’, he suggests, ‘in the twenty-first century, we should finally have the courage to accept that only the rich can save the world –exceptionally creative and generously giving individuals like Bill Gates and George Soros have done more for the struggles for political freedom and against disease than has any state intervention’. So, for Sloterdijk anyway, the rich are not merely inheriting the earth, but actually saving it ! Of course a fourth, diametrically opposing, hypothesis, of course, might be a post-Marxian one i.e. the possibility is that the only socialism we shall ever witness is the one we shall be forced into by material circumstances after a nuclear or ecological catastrophe. Finally, for my own part, while recognizing that Hope is a very fragile construct, as a historian by training, I draw some sustenance from the past. This does not take the form of a clichéd and flatulent meliorism, striving to acknowledge that over the centuries, sometimes, if not always, acting in solidarity, human beings have struggled, and often succeeded in creating a better world for themselves and future generations. I’m too much of a Hobbesian for that. Yet, when I look at the historical record, not least here in Latin America, I sense that although ‘they’ may win much of the time, inertia, injustice and violence do not always triumph. Instead, as we’re now seeing in some of the Arab world, a stubborn and dangerous reality can give rise not only to fear, frustration, and a sense of futility, but also to grounds for hope. You may, however, still continue to regard these concluding speculations, while suggestive, as insufficiently grounded, both historically and empirically, to allow us to confidently re-instate Hope at the normative epicentre of 21st century thought and action. Hence may I tentatively offer you two concluding scenarios? One is a relatively positive blueprint, in which the progressive future belongs to a Hope which can achieve a balance between individual self-fulfilment and social solidarity, personal ambition and the common good. It will be one which goes beyond a narrow conception of Hope to include aesthetic and cultural life. The importance of media, intellectual knowledge, art, music, poetry and image-making is that they give form to new sensibilities and forms of consciousness. They can give voice to the silenced and they create meaning where none has existed before. We might even discover a *politics* of Hope, rich in emotion and symbolism, that will restore ethical meaning and the idea of the common good. But at the same time –and this is my second scenario –when re-conceptualizing Hope for a post-modern society, we would do well also to heed the contemporary philosopher Slavoj Žižek’s advice to our own century that ‘the phrase “you have to see it to believe it” should *always* be read together with its inversion “you have to believe *in* it to see it”. ‘Both scenarios present a real challenge, not only for academic sociologists, but for all whom they seek to address.

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Summary – This paper will attempt to evaluate –critically – some of the sacred and secular expressions of hope currently identifiable within many contemporary, ‘post-modern’, societies, where, as one philosopher of religion has recently described it, ‘all frameworks of narrative description embodied in their history and interpretation are currently dissolved in the acids of modernity.’ Particular attention will be paid to four distinctive yet interconnected contexts’ where specific ‘strategies for hope’ – in both theory and praxis can be identified and evaluated These are: 1. *Urban regeneration and community development* – symbolising and securing hope for a viable urban future. 2. *The Ecological Imperative* - optimizing hope for the perpetuation of ‘Planet Earth’. 3. *Re-Sacralizing the Secular* - re-investing ‘post-religious’ secular social theory with overtly religious norms and values. 4. *The Aesthetic Imperative* - utilizing the visual Arts-both elite and popular- as a mechanism for social and personal transformation. All four

case studies embody explicit sources of ‘hope’ for 21st century individuals, communities and societies. Yet all four also demonstrate how the ‘cognitive distance’ between ‘is’ and ‘ought’, between ‘rhetoric ‘and ’ reality’ remains as visible, intractable and seemingly permanent as ever .Hence the re-constitution of ‘hope’ at the normative epicentre of post-modern thought and action, although a theoretical possibility, may prove, in practice, little more than ‘Hoping against Hope’.

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