Some thoughts about inter-people alliance building as the basis of “another world” (2019/6/27-7/1, HK GU 6th SSF)

Muto, Ichiyo

(This memo consists of excerpts from my paper written in for a two-volume anthology of writings on movement of movements, edited by Jai Sen and published in 2018 by PM Press. My paper titled “Toward the autonomy of the people of the world – need for a new movement of movements to people’s alliance processes,” an enlarged version of my contribution to Z-net debate in 2010. )

The global capitalist regime is dividing people into conflictual situations in the same process that links them up in the unequal global division of labour. The new inter-people relationships thus made, characterised by antagonistic closeness and not made by the choice of the people involved, breed inter-people violence and conflicts. On the other hand, this same process can, as it often does, generate the urge and initiative among some of the people dragged into antagonism to create new mutual relations beyond the erected barriers. The two diametrically opposed urges are stimulated by the same capitalist globalisation process.

Alliance building therefore relates to the effort to demolish from within the structural and subjective barriers separating / linking the people’s communities. In other words, if members of the groups linked together into externally determined relationships begin to interact with one another, find that relationship not fatalistic, and discredit, weaken, and overcome it by creating new relationships of their own making, in which people from both sides find each other different than before, then the process to an alliance gets down to a start. In the PP21 programme, we called it ‘inter-people autonomy’, meaning that communities self-manage not only their internal affairs but also their mutual relationships. People’s alliance – as a step toward people’s autonomy on a global scale – emerges as people’s collectives and communities create new relationships of their own making.

Here I am talking about very diverse groupings of global people with intersecting identities. Their diversity, instead of being developed as the richness of human civilisation, is exploited by the capitalist regime as the base of competition useful for capital accumulation. Alliance building is to give back life to diversity as the wealth of global society.

But what groups of people are we talking about? Global society is articulated into extremely complex, in fact infinite, sets of relationships, both macro and micro. These are constantly changing, so it would be useless to try to enumerate them. They come to the surface as new resistance occurs asserting certain identities. But some of the macro divisions are historically present, brought forward by major movements of the oppressed people involved. Among such division lines are those relating to North-South, gender, class, urban-rural, national, ethnic, cultural, and religious relationships.

Our alternatives address precisely this problem complex. Given the organic intertwinedness of the problems, the process to overcome it needs be a composite process, intertwined processes to be addressed in a single space and time. ‘Single’ does not mean mechanical simultaneity. Nor do we anticipate an apocalyptic settlement. It means disentanglement in the same historical time and in interrelatedness. It means that trying to fully resolve any one of the problems as separate from the others cannot, after all is said and done, succeed in resolving even that problem. This is a crucial point. For instance, the environmentalist movement will never succeed in preserving nature if it refuses to consider Southern poverty.

The clue to disentanglement is to begin with alliance builders taking sides with the dominated in the above list : women, indigenous people, other oppressed minorities, the South, agriculture, labour, civil nature, and diversity. Already, vigorous voices have been raised and demands presented by or on behalf of them. We have fairly active social movements on all of those issues. The starting point in our search for global alternatives is to exert our full force to work changes on the dominating side in line with the demands of the dominated – on men, conquerors, North, capital, state, human arrogance, and homogeneity. Without the prerogative of the dominated, there is no emancipating alternative.

As hard as we might try, we shall find that an alternative world cannot be constituted by a mere mechanical summing up of such efforts. For there is no guarantee that alternatives evolved by different sectors and on diverse issues fall in predetermined harmony into a single picture of an alternative world. Alternatives pressed by urban citizens may collide with those developed by farmers. A feminist perspective may create misgivings among traditional communities. Conflicts are bound to occur.

But the differences and even conflicts can be constructive. They may be a driving force toward weaving comprehensive alternatives. If the conflicts end in antagonism, the current system will survive, capitalising on them. Mere compromise is postponement of antagonism. But if the differences are brought to a higher level of synthesis through dialectical interaction, then we have an Alliance of Hope with ever self-enriching alternative visions and programmes that fully cope with the entirety of the historical problem complex.

**Characteristics of Inter-Movement Politics for Inter-People Alliance**

Social movement today, in my view, faces this kind of historic challenge. For alliance building, movement plays a decisive role in helping this process get underway. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, discussing the World Social Forum and the global left, noted that one of the salient contributions of the WSF was “the passage from a movement politics to inter-movement politics”.[[1]](#endnote-1) By ‘inter-movement politics’, he signalled “a politics run by the idea that no single issue social movement can succeed in carrying out its agenda without the cooperation of other movements”. I fully agree. Inter-movement politics, however, is not complete in itself. Nor is it merely a matter between issue-based movements. In the people’s alliance context, it carries a more general signification. A few important features involved include the following :

* **Inter-people politics :** Inter-movement politics, if relevant, must involve inter-people politics. Meaningful social movements are always an organic part of their respective constituencies. Inter-movement politics can have significance only when it is integral to inter-people politics and is not closed within itself. In other words, inter-movement politics is tested by the degree to which it engenders inter-people interactive politics conducive to people-to-people alliance making.
* **Movement and constituency :** This does not mean, however, that a specific movement ‘legitimately’ and monopolistically represents one constituency considered more or less homogeneous. The constituency itself is a mobile entity comprising complex identities. The relevance of inter-movement politics should prove itself by the organic relationships it creates and recreates with the community. Inter-movement politics also works within the same constituent community that usually generates plural movement initiatives.
* **Interaction :** Interaction between people, as collectives and as individuals, in a positive context is one of the main modes of alliance building. Interaction in a hostile context would mean escalating hostility, distrust, and clashes, but we have abundant experience that people from usually unfriendly or even hostile groups, meeting in a favourable context, find each other just common human beings and friends.[[2]](#endnote-2)
* **Mediation :** Let me call this kind of interaction ‘virtuous interaction’. The other type is a vicious interaction, that aggravates conflicts. For virtuous interaction to take place, mediation is essential. Movement is expected to be an essential element of mediation. Assumptions under the old paradigm were that classes are represented by their parties and class alliances are deemed arranged when the parties representing them come together to sign a joint front agreement. But we know that movements, let alone political parties, do not represent people’s collectives. It is the people’s groups themselves that interact and enter into alliance processes. And it is in these processes that movements based in their constituencies can play indispensable mediating roles.
* **Bonds:** How can virtuous interaction take place among different communities, even those apparently antagonistic to one another? I cannot go too far here into this crucial question that would involve philosophical inquiries. But we all know that there are some certain bonds which enable human beings to live together in friendly relationships. Despite mounting evidence to the contrary, tempting us to be cynical, we cannot totally deny the working of this deeply seated social despite all evidence to the tempting us to be cynics. Christians may call it love, Hardt and Negri “love,” Confucians “jin” (perfect value, or benevolence), Buddists “jihi” (mercy), and others by other names. I dare not give it a name though in 1969 we called it “peopleness.” [[3]](#endnote-3)At a more practical level, John Brown Childs, theorist and advocate of trans-communality, talks about “general ethics of respect.”[[4]](#endnote-4) All these terms seem to point to the ability of the people to make human linkages, displayed in multi-faceted actual practices.
* **Internal impacts :** Virtuous interaction can cause changes not only in the mutual relationships between groups, but also in the internal power relationships and cultures within the groups involved, in emancipating directions. Contacts and interaction with others may first make a community repulsive and defensive, but if the ideas are emancipator and interaction is properly mediated, there emerge people in the group liking them and using them to change the dominant structure, if any, of the group they belong to. This is very complex processes sometimes leading to imposition but if channels of mediation are properly constituted, it will create mutually learning and changing processes. As Childs observes, “These ethics of respect can lead to some transformation of interacting participants” and “this transformation is not a one-sided conversion to a single perspective, but rather involves an opening up to shared understandings.” [[5]](#endnote-5)
* **Structural changes :** We have said that under the capitalist regime different communities and collectives of the people are bound together, even despite themselves, in antagonistic relationships, typically of hierarchical formation. Alliance building therefore would not continue, even if virtuous interaction is constituted, if the oppressing / oppressed, exploiting / exploited, dominating / dominated relationships that exist between collectives are allowed to continue. For alliance building to continue and develop, this process should entail processes mitigating the structural and subjective inequality in power relationships toward the goal of their abolition. Otherwise, alliance building will remain a mere lip service and be discredited.
* **Alliance and economic articulation :** This aspect of the matter takes us to the broader field of building another world, or another global society. In the classical Marxist-Leninist understanding, a worker-peasant alliance was not only the key to the formation of revolutionary power, but also the basis for new economic articulation in a new society between industry and agriculture, or urban and rural. The experience of the first wave – mostly negative – should be reassessed from this angle, namely, the economic aspects of class alliances and antagonisms. The people’s alliances that we are envisaging here, which embody a far more complex inter-group dynamic than worker-peasant, are pregnant with future economic articulations of another world. This means that people’s alliances are not just political partnerships that are likely to collapse the moment political goals they are aimed at are achieved, but rather the embryo of a society yet to come. Alliance building through interaction and relational transformation will involve processes of changing existing socio-economic patterns of articulation toward a better world.
* **Dialogue with nature :** Interaction should take place not only among people. The alliance building process of necessity entails reflection on the whole course of capitalism-driven modern civilisation, particularly its arrogance toward nature, including our bodies. Interaction – or dialogue – with nature will have to be initiated, learning particularly from the wisdom of indigenous peoples, and redefining development and progress, in order to find ways to undo the self-destruction we have willingly inflicted upon ourselves.
* **Social contracts as steps in an ever-evolving people’s charter :** Alliance building through positive and virtuous interaction is a dynamic process and therefore fluid and changeable. But at each phase of the process, the parties involved must negotiate terms of agreement at a given time on a certain basis. In other words, the permanent process needs times of punctuation. This will represent the formal aspect of alliance building. This means that we are coming up with inter-people social contracts at diverse levels. Some of them may be written out and signed on and others may be accepted as new habits observed and practised. At a time when nation states still exist, the autonomous agreements may be institutionalised or even made into state laws or written into international covenants. Let me emphasise that these are processes already underway; but they are not necessarily perceived as steps towards alternative world building, as they are usually seen only in the respective issue-based contexts. Thus, in actuality, alliance-building processes are, explicitly or implicitly, social contract making processes. The agreements and contracts are also renewable and actually being renewed reflecting new inter-people relationships. Movements are there as agencies to remake them through inter-movement politics. If these numerous autonomous inter-people contracts and agreements proliferate and are accumulated, linking ever broader segments of global people’s activities, and if they begin to guide the course of events, then we approach inter-people autonomy whose shared basis will be a people’s charter composite of numerous agreements and in constant process of renewal.

Movement or Space? The WSF as a New Type of Movement

Now I go back to the actual movement, the ‘movement of movements’ and its important arena, the World Social Forum. I have heard that for some time the question of whether the WSF is a space or a movement has been debated as an issue relevant to its very essence. I have no doubt that the WSF is a movement, but it should consciously be a movement of a new type. Chico Whitaker, probably one of the stronger proponents of the ‘space’ school of thought, says that “movement and space are completely different things”. I disagree with this dichotomy. According to Chico :

A movement *congregates* people – its activists, as the activists of a party – who decide to organise themselves to collectively accomplish certain objectives. Its formation and existence entails the *definition* of strategies to reach these objectives, the *formulation* of action programmes, and the *distribution* of responsibilities among its members – including those concerning the direction of the movement. Those who assume this function will lead the activists of the movement, getting them – through authoritarian or democratic methods, according to the choice made by the founders of the movement – to take responsibility for their commitments in the collective action. Its organisational structure will necessarily be pyramidal however democratic the internal process of decision and the way used to choose those who will occupy different levels of management might be. On the other hand, its effectiveness will depend on the explicitness and precision of its *specific objectives*, and therefore, of its own boundaries in time and space.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Sure, the WSF should not be, and cannot be, a movement of the type Whitaker has described. True, there may be some people who want to reorganise the WSF in that image. But the rejection of this type of movement does not justify the idea of the WSF being a square rented for free use. In between these two poles is the possibility and necessity of a new type of movement. The WSF, I believe, should develop itself as such a movement – **a movement devoted to generating and mediating interactions among diverse groups of people, deliberately igniting processes to build and develop inter-people alliances based on multilateral agreements that will form the body of the people’s charter for global people’s self-rule.**

Is such an effort a ‘movement’? I think this is exactly what people mean when they use the term, a ‘movement of movements’. This coinage vaguely implies cooperation among various movements but can be understood as only a temporary, utilitarian cooperation. I think it can mean far more.

The WSF has created excellent possibilities for a new type of movement to emerge. In fact numerous workshops and other events in the arena offer various issue-, sector-, class-, gender- and otherwise-based movements to meet, develop common platforms, and common action. But systematic efforts of WSF to encourage inter-movement politics, it appears to me, have been absent or minimal. As far as I know, meetings of social movements which used to be held as voluntary projects were not intended, nor were they appropriate, as occasions to facilitate serious, patient discussion and negotiation for transborder alliance building. Setting dates for worldwide action and agreeing on general goals, it seems, was the utmost that social movement gatherings could aim at. It is time for us to clearly recognise inter-movement politics, and for that matter inter-people politics, in their own right, as new dimensions of movement.

I think the time is ripe for change. The WSF functioned as an effective arena where, by the momentum of huge convergences, people emerged as ‘another superpower’, making their presence felt. Instead of constituting ourselves chiefly by reacting to the global power, we need to find ways to constitute ourselves among ourselves through the medium of a movement of movements.

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**Muto Ichiyo** is an activist-writer on political and social affairs, national and global. Born in 1931 in Tokyo, he joined student movement and peace movement in the 1950s; was active in the anti-Vietnam War movement in the 1960s; founded the English journals *AMPO* (1969) and the *Pacific-Asia Resources Center* (1973); initiated the *People's Plan 21* in the 1980s, and in the 1990s founded the *People's Plan Study Group* (PPSG) of which he served as a co-president until 2007. He taught at the sociology department of the State University of New York at Binghamton, in the US, during the 1980s-90s.

1. Boaventura de Souza Santos, ‘The World Social Forum and the Global Left’, http://www.forumsocialmundial.org [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Due to the nature of this paper, it is difficult to cite concrete examples of interaction among people’s groups causing virtuous internal changes. Such occurs both at macro and micro levels. In large-scale interaction, think of encounters between the Zapatista movement and the Mexican civil society organised by EZLN. The systematic interactions caused the Mexican civil society as well as inter-continental encounters. Mediated encounters, interactions, and alliance building efforts are underway at milliards of levels from macro to micro, involving interim solutions of all kinds; even ‘conflict resolution’ processes may contain lessons to be drawn; it is therefore important for us to study these instances from the perspective of people’s potentials to create and recreate social / political relationships of their own as against the imposed mutual relationships. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ichiyo Muto, PP21 Keynote Speech, “For an Alliance of Hope,” *AMPO*, Vol.21, No.2-3, 1989 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. John Brown Childs, Transcommunality-From the Politics of Conversion to the Ethics of Respect, Temple University Press, 2003, p22 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Childs, ibid., p22 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Chico Whitaker, ‘The WSF As Open Space’, Jai Sen et al, eds, World Social Forum : Challenging Empires, Viveka Foundation, 2004, pp 112-3 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)