

The Lessons of Prague

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The events of September 2000 in Prague marked a turning-point. When the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund planned their annual meeting for the Czech Republic, they hoped for a peaceful gathering in the only Eastern European country where hatred of neo-liberalism has not yet become a mass phenomenon. The outcome was that the international bankers were obliged to flee from a city whose streets had become the scene of battles between police and thousands of demonstrators from all parts of Europe. The bankers did not even manage to hold a concluding press conference. By no means all the participants in the movement against capitalist globalisation, however, interpreted what had happened as a victory. Many were shocked by the violence on the streets, and still more were dismayed by the united attack mounted on the movement by the press.

It is thus essential to draw up a balance sheet of the events and to form conclusions. After Prague, the movement is clearly shifting into a new phase. It is not simply that disagreements have begun appearing among the protesters. The international financial organisations are not standing still either. For them, Prague was a severe defeat, in a certain sense even more serious than the “uprising in Seattle”. For this very reason, the “executive committee of the ruling class” will inevitably draw conclusions from what has happened, and will adjust its course.

So what did Prague mean for the Left? The most important development was that in Prague, the movement against corporate globalisation became truly international, that is, global. Seattle was above all a manifestation of protest by a new generation of American youth, to a significant degree retracing the route of the 1960s radicalisation, though in new historical circumstances. Now, thanks to Prague, the movement has taken root in Europe. For the first time since the International Brigades in Spain in the 1930s, people from different countries joined in resisting a common enemy, resisting it physically. Solidarity, from being a slogan and a symbol, was transformed into practical action. In Prague, Turks and Kurds, Turks and Greeks, Germans and Poles, Spaniards and Basques marched together. They were forced to stand up not only to the police, but also to neo-nazis.

The anti-globalisation movement is at the same time both internationalist and anti-nationalist. Meanwhile, the “defenders of globalisation”, in order to stop the movement, resorted to the power of the national state. They not only used the Czech police against demonstrators, but also set out illegally to stop people on the borders of the republic, deported people from the country, and so on. After the IMF and the World Bank had fled, the police took out their frustrations on the Czech protesters, who were subjected to widespread repressions. It was made clear that globalisation does not mean “the impotence of the state”, but the rejection by the state of its social functions in favour of repressive ones, irresponsibility on the part of governments, and the ending of democratic freedoms.

As the movement has spread to Europe, it has changed in many ways. If an anticapitalist spirit or mood prevailed in Seattle, in the case of Prague one can speak of a much more distinctly formulated anti-capitalist message. Here the difference in political cultures is making its effects felt; Europe has a far stronger socialist tradition. In Prague, far-Left organisations that had gathered from the whole continent also played a notable role. Here we find new prospects opening up, but also new problems. In principle, the ideological clarity and readiness of the participants to articulate their principles represented a step forward. At the same time, many people recognised that the red flags and revolutionary rhetoric frightened not just ordinary residents of Prague, but the more moderate participants in the movement as well. The ultra-Left groups unexpectedly proved capable not just of uniting and working together on a European scale. They also showed that masses of young people are once again pouring into their ranks.

At the same time, the predominance of the most radical and ideologised groups may act as a brake on the growth of the movement. In my view, the solution to this problem does not lie in cultivating “moderation” — this would be the same thing as the activists admitting their own powerlessness — but in the participants in the movement making their own positions more profound. The time has come for Left activists not just to denounce globalisation, but to formulate their own demands. There needs to be less socialist rhetoric, and more socialist program.

The need for a positive program is also growing because in the aftermath of Prague, the international financial institutions will also undoubtedly come out with their own reformist initiatives. Until now, critics of the financial oligarchy have rejected reformist declarations by IMF and World

Bank representatives as empty rhetoric. Now, however, the situation is changing, and unless we recognise this, we will lose the initiative.

The time is ripe for the reform of financial institutions not only from the point of view of the Left, but also from that of the global ruling class. The mass protests are forcing this class to take its opponents seriously. The elites understand that repression alone will not solve the problem, and that the need is for real concessions to the “moderates”, concessions aimed at splitting the movement. Meanwhile, the global financial system is itself in such a wretched state that the people who are insistently demanding reforms include not only Leftists, but also such representatives of the capitalist oligarchy as George Soros.

Serious attempts will be made at reform, but whether they will be successful is a quite different matter. And in any case, this will not be the reform we would have wanted. It is quite conceivable that reforming the international financial institutions is impossible as a matter of principle, and that the effort to transform them will bring about their collapse, just as perestroika led to the collapse of the USSR. This, however, will become clear after the event; for the present, the financial oligarchy is trying to make the system manageable again, and once more to seize the initiative.

In this situation, it is vital for the movement to have its own positive program. The movement, however, is extremely heterogeneous, so any attempt to formulate a single, common program could lead to a narrowing of the mass base of the protests, and even to a split in our ranks. As in the past, the movement needs to grow on a broad basis, but it also needs to grow “in depth”. In such circumstances, the place of a single common program could be taken by a complex of proposals, a sort of pool of ideas which are not obligatory for every activist, but which in sum reflect the direction in which the movement is heading.

Even now, some ideas can be formulated. Not only should the debts of the developing countries and the former “communist” world be written off, but new rules for international credit should be worked out. In particular, the financial institutions should be forbidden to impose “conditions” which violate the sovereignty of the countries involved (including the right of the population to choose their economic system and policies for themselves). The IMF and the World Bank need to be replaced with a system of regional banks, organised on a democratic basis and answerable to all the participating countries equally. Because the international financial institutions are not private but public agencies, it is essential to separate the public interest from private profit - in other words, not a cent, not a penny, not a kopeck of public money for the private sector.

This last thesis needs some elaboration. Until now, transnational capital has forced us to live by the rules of the market, while it has itself been insulated from the negative consequences of the market through being “bailed out” in numerous ways. We have to turn this situation around. If the capitalists want the market, they should have to live by its laws. Public money, whether on the national or transnational level, should not be spent on anything except public, socialised projects. There is a need to establish a network of regional and transnational development agencies, which would implement large-scale projects in the interests of the majority, under democratic control and in conditions of complete openness.

During the 1990s the privatisers argued that national banking, transport and telephone companies, and so on, were too small for the global market. These companies have not in fact become any larger since they were privatised, but in principle the argument is correct. If the public sector is to function under the new conditions, it has to be integrated on a transnational basis. This has to become our key demand, in addition to the slogans of nationalisation, which are customary for the Left and have by no means lost their relevance.

The programmatic discussion in the movement can give birth to new ideas and approaches, the more of them the better. In any case we have to establish, in society and in our own milieu, a clearer idea of where we want to go and what we are seeking. The clearer our positive demands, the more obvious will be the contrast with the actual reforms, and the more difficult it will be for the global financial bureaucracy to work with “moderates” in our movement. Meanwhile, this orientation to “moderates” is now the key element in the policies of the IMF and the World Bank. These organisations have worked out their tactics with relation to protesters. In this regard, the articles that have appeared in the mainstream press since Prague are highly revealing. Some elements of the criticism are recognised as constructive, and it is noted that the leaders of the IMF and the World Bank themselves favour reforms. At the same time, a massed attack is unleashed on “extremists”, whose actions are associated with “violence”. The street protests are compared with football hooliganism.

“Serious” critics of the financial institutions are in effect offered a choice. They can either lend indirect support to “reform from above”, or they can join the camp of the “hooligans”, and so discredit themselves. This tactic has the potential to split the movement. Until now, the efforts to drive a wedge

into the opponents of corporate globalisation have met with failure. The World Bank and the transnational corporations have spent enormous sums trying to coopt NGOs and to turn them into a sort of pseudo-opposition whose main task is to let off steam from the cauldron and to create the appearance of discussion. This approach was highly effective in the mid-1990s, but by 1999-2000 it had begun to break down. Seattle showed that even moderate NGOs stood to gain from joining the protest movement, since this increased their bargaining power. If they resisted the gathering strength of the movement, they would risk discrediting themselves and finishing up isolated. This situation, however, is now changing.

The formal pretext for elements of the movement changing their orientation is not a desire to make a deal with the IMF, but disagreement with violence. It is a different matter entirely that the people who take their distance from the movement and break with the “extremists” have no other option left to them apart from reaching an accommodation with the financial institutions.

Since “violence” is the main theme of the movement’s opponents, we have to decide where we stand on this question. On the day after the events of September 26, a number of officials of the NGOs that were represented in Prague, especially members of the American liberal academic intelligentsia, characterised what had happened as a “defeat”. They argued that the demonstrators, with their violent actions, had discredited the ideas for the sake of which they had taken to the streets. It is no coincidence that most of the mainstream press had argued in precisely the same spirit. In hindsight these claims, both on the part of the critics of “violence” and on that of the journalists, appear absolutely hypocritical. In the first place, the aim of the protests was never simply to express disagreement with the IMF. The organisers did not hide the fact that through blockading the Congress Centre, they were setting out to disrupt the meetings which the fund and the bank had planned for Prague. This tactic stemmed from experience, over many years, which showed that the international financial elites simply did not react to traditional forms of protest such as demonstrations, pickets and press statements. Meanwhile, disrupting meetings and blockading buildings inevitably presupposed a certain element of violence. The question, of course, lay in the scale of the violence. The violence that occurred in Prague in September 2000 was by no means extraordinary even by Western European standards. Moreover, the tactics of the police, and the whole system of police training, were organised in such a way as to preclude any chance of success through non-violent actions. You cannot march through police barriers without entering into confrontation with the police.

It is certainly to be lamented that the first stone was flung at the police from within the crowd. Herbert Marcuse quite correctly stated that the revolution has to be economical with violence; demonstrators should not provoke the police. On the other hand, the crowd in this case was full of police provocateurs. A clash was absolutely inevitable; both sides were preparing for it, and did not conceal the fact. In these circumstances, the supporters of “non-violence” should not have gone to Prague at all, or should have honestly declared their disagreement before the actions began (as, for example, the Bolsheviks Kamenev and Zinoviev did when they dissociated themselves from Lenin before the October Revolution). The cries of “Violence!”, however, rang out after the event, when the right-wing press launched an aggressive campaign against the movement, and hundreds of Czech activists, most of whom had not taken part in the street skirmishes, were thrown behind bars. In such a situation, the complaints of the “moderates” against violence on the part of the demonstrators are objectively an expression of solidarity with the police violence and repression.

References to Gandhism and “the Indian experience of non-violence” do not stand up to historical criticism. Gandhi above all rejected armed violence; an armed uprising is not the same thing as a fight with police on the streets. Secondly, Gandhian non-violence in India was accompanied by such “excesses” as the burning down of police stations together with the police. Gandhi clearly condemned such excesses and sought to restrain the violence, but he never maintained that such developments could be avoided as a matter of principle. On the contrary, the “excesses” of the radicals were an important element in Gandhi’s strategy, since they increased the bargaining power with the British authorities of Gandhi himself and of other “moderates”. In principle, such a “division of labour” is possible in modern anti-oligarchic movements as well. The moral principle that unites “radicals” and “moderates” must nevertheless be solidarity and resistance to the repressive structures of power. In Prague, by contrast, a section of the “moderate” NGO officials effectively solidarised with the police and the mainstream press in attacking the supporters of “violence”.

As the movement grows broader, representatives of the Third World will be attracted to it. Demands aimed against the international financial institutions will be combined with protests against the anti-democratic practices of the authorities, and against corruption and speculation within the framework of the national state itself. All this means that the amount of violence that accompanies mass actions on a global level will not diminish, but on the contrary will increase. This is the objective

reality; it cannot be dismissed or evaded with quotations from Mahatma Gandhi. If we want to minimise violence, we have to learn to manage it.

In fact, the Prague demonstrations saw the organisers make exceptionally skilled use of tactical violence. If this had not been the case, if the inevitability of violence had not been factored in at the very beginning, when the protests were planned, there would still have been clashes, and these would have been many times worse. In any case, the attacks by demonstrators on police in body armour and the sacking of a McDonalds restaurant, whose owners knew of the attack in advance, are not to be compared with the everyday repressive practice of capitalism. If such actions are not the most thought-out answer to capitalist practice, they are nevertheless a just response to it.

Here it is worth reflecting on the attitude of the press to the violence in Prague, and to the violence that accompanied the overthrow of Milosevic in Belgrade. Both events occurred within the space of a month. In each case, radical-minded youth resorted to violence, entering into confrontation with police. The demonstrators in Prague were described as hooligans who did not know what they wanted, while the events in Belgrade were termed a popular uprising. Obviously, in the case of Belgrade the media were condemning the dictator Milosevic, while in Prague they were extolling the democrat Havel. Meanwhile, the police in Prague behaved in exactly the same way as the police in Belgrade, and from a legal point of view the actions of the authorities in the Czech Republic were at best doubtful (illegal bans on foreigners who had the right to enter the country without visas; the outlawing of peaceful street processions; and so forth).

Ever since the time of the American Revolution, illegal acts by the authorities have traditionally served as a justification for civil violence. It should be added that in Belgrade, the number of wounded was greater by an order of magnitude. Two people from the crowd were killed, and looting took place. In Prague there was nothing like this. In short, the media reacted not to the violence as such, but to their own political preconceptions; it was the latter which determined the angle from which the violence would be presented and commented upon.

It is at least strange that the moderates denounce the bourgeois order, and at the same time want the love of the bourgeois press. At a minimum, it would be natural to suppose that a significant part of the press would be hostile to the protesters whatever they might do. From the very first day, the teams of journalists who arrived in Prague did not hide the fact that the only show they were interested in was physical confrontations between demonstrators and police. Many newspapers wrote in hindsight that the street skirmishes “distracted attention” from the weighty discussions on the problems of globalisation. I would argue that the truth was quite different. The discussions went on for a whole week without attracting the slightest interest from either the Czech or the international media. South African Finance Minister Trevor Manuel told the press he could not understand what the protesters wanted. Earlier, in Prague Castle, Walden Bello and other ideologues of the movement had spent a good hour explaining their positions to him. Unlike Manuel, James Wolfensohn was at least honest enough to admit to understanding what the discussion was about.

From September 22 to 24 the Initiative Against Economic Globalisation (INPEG), which had drawn general attention to itself through its organising of the September 26 protest, held a counter-summit with the participation of leading critics of the IMF. Throughout the whole period of the counter-summit I saw only one television camera there; this belonged to... a weekly Czech program devoted to rock music! The more moderate group Bankwatch also held a large number of meetings that were totally ignored by the press. Two-thirds of the reporting of the street actions of September 22 to 25, actions that were entirely peaceful, consisted of discussions of the forthcoming violence. In an effort to attract the attention of the press, INPEG activists set out to organise street carnivals, made effigies, and held street theatre performances. These could have been subjects for good reporting, but the expectation of violence dominated everything. It is significant that many captivating images from those first days went to air and were published in the newspapers only after September 26, and with such commentaries as: “What began as a carnival finished up in street fighting.” The same could be said of a number of statements by activists and guests of INPEG. These were quoted only after the event, after the press had got what it was awaiting so impatiently. From the first minutes of the September 26 march, the journalists were discussing only one thing: “Where are the riots?” When everyone was expecting violence, sooner or later it was going to happen.

Naturally, the radicals accuse the press of ideological bias, but this is only part of the problem, and not the main one. A considerably greater problem is the fact that the media, and especially the television, have lost the art of thinking in depth. Ideas are dull, while violence is spectacular. The television demands action, not discussion. The media need images, not words. Ideas are complex, while action is simple. Such are the laws of the genre. A trashed McDonalds is a message, registered on

people's television screens. Meanwhile, arguments about who is responsible for the ruin of Russia or for the poverty of the countries of the Third World remain, so to speak, in parenthesis.

Everything is reduced to the form, the image, the spectacle. This in turn presupposes the rule of stereotypes, the triumph of banality and the absence of meaning. The "clip consciousness" of television journalists requires neither analysis, nor efforts to understand the causes and consequences of events. It is only in hindsight, when it becomes clear that simply showing an "image" is not enough, that the possibility of discussion arises. It has been the spectacle of violence on the streets of Seattle and later of Prague that has forced a section of the press to pay attention to the growing critique of globalisation.

It could be said that violence is the PR of the poor. If you have money and power, then one way or another you are ensured of the attention of the media, even if you are talking about the cut of your jacket or the type of coffee you drink at breakfast. For those who have neither money nor power, protest can be the sole means of drawing attention to themselves. The Polish and German youths who trashed the McDonalds on Wenceslas Square in Prague simply had no other means of self-expression.

It does not follow from this that smashing shop windows is good. Whatever we think of fast food, civilisation has devised far more intelligent and meaningful forms of protest. The problem, however, is that the press takes no responsibility for developing democratic dialogue. While condemning excesses by the demonstrators and by the police, it refuses absolutely to accept any share of the blame, and pretends that the dominant manner of handling information has no effect on what is going on. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Demand gives rise to supply.

Of course, the press was present at the meeting in Prague between Wolfensohn and the representatives of non-government organisations, just as it was present at the discussion, held in Prague Castle under the patronage of President Havel, between critics of corporate globalisation and international financial leaders. The reason, however, was that the people taking part in these meetings were well-known and influential, even the ones on the side of the protesters. Ordinary participants in the protests were not admitted to such meetings, and the discussion recalled a stage performance mounted specially for the television cameras.

Democracy consists not only in the possibility of expressing different points of view (this possibility was manifested to some degree in the discussion in the castle), but also in everyone having this possibility. The problem lies not only in politics. At its heart is the indifference of the media, and above all of the television, to any attempt at "dull" theorising; the rule of banality; and the refusal to listen to the opinions of people outside a narrow circle of "newsmakers" (whether these are official or "alternative" is ultimately unimportant).

The compulsion of the media to show the most "expressive" and "dramatic" leads to exaggeration of the scale of the violence and conflict in the television version of events. For example: "Not a single shop window in Prague remained whole," though the only windows broken were in a few McDonalds and Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets. This practice is far from harmless, since the press provides stereotypes of behaviour. Perhaps someone has the idea that this is the way to deter people from violent acts, but most likely, the effect will be the reverse. Among the participants in the actions, the feeling is created that "violence is the only thing that works with the media." Meanwhile, the television viewers form their own stereotypes, by no means always predictable or innocent. Hence a certain number of young people who identify with the protests begin to develop a positive stereotype of violence.

On the evening of September 26, one of the Eastern European anarchists described the clashes which had occurred as "European ritual-carnival violence", adding that in other parts of the world everything would be far worse. The meaning of this statement is absolutely clear: a great deal was done for show, especially for the television cameras and still photographers. This is also a real problem for the movement; to place your stake on violence, even of the carnival variety, as your main method of propaganda is just as absurd and dangerous as a dogmatically understood "non-violence". It is clear that if the movement places its stake on violence, it will inevitably collapse — unless, that is, the key aspect for us becomes the struggle to turn our positive principles into reality. We must not issue general statements about "non-violence", but formulate a clear strategy for the movement, a strategy which will give us a realistic chance of keeping violent excesses to a minimum. The more organised and considered our actions, the better the chances that this will happen.

Prague was indeed a turning-point.
The passions have done their work.
Now it is the turn of reason.