

COMMENTARY

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Decision-making and survival

BY PABLO GONSALEZ CASANOVA

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In the first years after the Second World War, it was believed that international conferences could promote the economic and social development of the countries which were later called the Third World. Nationalist movements in countries that were soon no longer to be colonies and communist movements in countries that thought they had left capitalism behind shared the same convictions in the promise of development. The victory over the nightmare of Nazi-fascism, the end of formal colonialism, and the success of a great number of national liberation movements in Africa, Asia, and some Latin American countries lifted the universal hope and conviction in development.

Today, with so many lost paradises, with paradigms of scientific, political, and humanistic thought trampled down, with the occurrence of diplomatic incidents which render uncertain the existence of a world legal order, with weakened governments, with extremely powerful industrial and financial corporations that transcend the rule of national legal systems and write off the social and ecological consequences of their operations as "externalities" — under these circumstances, to talk now of "sustainable development" and to propose measures to reach it seem like a collective phenomenon of self-delusion on a world scale.

The coalition of forces abroad in the world and within nations is highly unfavorable to the formulation of policies that give priority to social problems. Riots of poor people in Caracas and Los Angeles, in South Africa and the Middle East, in the former USSR and in central Europe, in the Philippines, in South Asia, and in India and Sri Lanka are dismissively recognized as familiar urban and racial unrest, as fundamentalist movements, or as private struggles among ethnic groups. They have nothing to do with the wonderful prospect of world development.

It is true, some governments in Latin America and elsewhere perceive with dismay the mounting danger of their social problems and the scandalous deterioration of their natural environment. Few try or can try to stop the compelled drain of capital to the North — in "repayment of debt" — or the continued worsening of the terms of their trade with the North.

The state of the world is duly deplored by the governments and business enterprises that dominate the world. But none make the slightest effort to secure even their own survival, let alone the survival of the planet and its people. The weakness or absence of alternative

political forces commanding the power to make change is apparent. Protest at what is happening is deprecated as alarmist and pessimistic.

In fact, these problems cannot be solved within the terms either of prevailing world economic policy or of national market policies — determinant as these policies are of the poverty of populations that grow larger and poorer every day. Neither can such policies stop the deforestation, the pollution of waters, the exhaustion of the soil, or the contamination of the global atmosphere. This implies the necessity to reject the ruling dogmatic principle embraced by the holders of power and first propounded by Adam Smith and the preindustrial merchants, namely, the concept of the market as a site for rational social decision making per se.

Now the UN has convened its conference on environment and development. It will publish yet another declaration with no likelihood of its being implemented, of bringing about any change in world power relations or in the inexorable decay of the planetary

ecosystem. Those who have the power to change the course of history are deaf and blind to the imminent destruction of humanity and of themselves along with the rest.

To escape that fate, all must recognize that historical change today has moved on from the middle of the century. Then it could be managed by reforms and counterreforms, by revolution and counterrevolution, or, in accordance with the new version of the concept of progress, by development.

Today we are prisoners of these concepts. What we must do for our survival is recover the record of the rise and fall of cities and civilizations and of the concepts of historical crises and cycles. The present crisis gathers to more ominous dimension than the crisis of the 1930s, economically and, for the first time in history, ecologically.

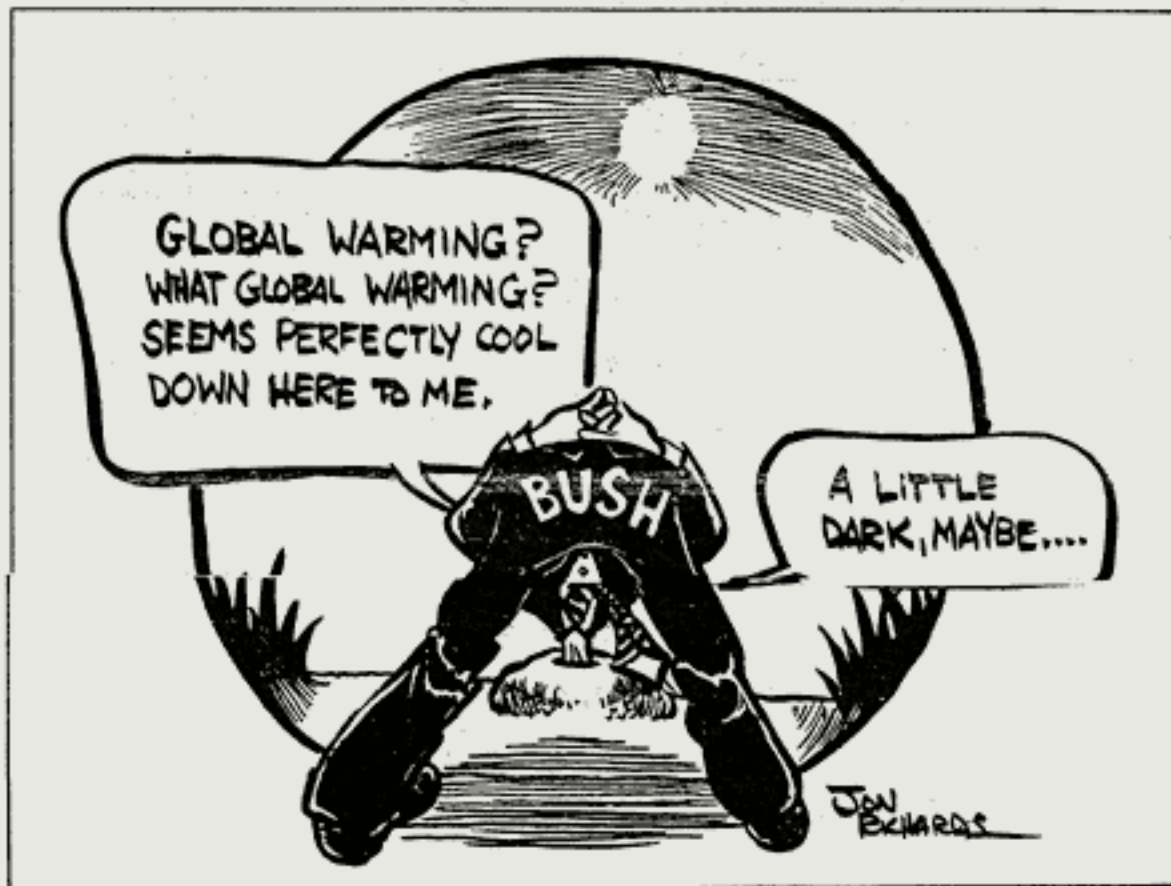
It is possible that the imminent fall of the present world empire will not herald the beginning of a better history. Nothing guarantees, as some think, that some

humanist "actor" will spontaneously organize a world order that will end the millenary history of inequality, injustice, and suppression of individual freedom, a history that now threatens, also, ecocide.

Men and women, maybe with the help of God but not of his invisible hand, must begin again the project of building an order which can resolve humanity's predicament, for the powerless and the powerful of today as well. Our delay of this theoretical-practical task is perilous. We have not, at this late hour, been able to design a project for survival.

If humane forces are to overcome tomorrow, the scientific and political battle must begin today. While it is necessary to study the locus of power in decision making, it is necessary also to build a political force in each of our countries that enforces the decision to survive.

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