

## 'We are in a period of global civil war of low intensity'

Ipsita Chakravarty | February 25, 2014 4:37 pm

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### SUMMARY

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*Boaventura De Sousa Santos is director, Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Portugal. In Delhi for a lecture, he spoke to Ipsita Chakravarty on the failures of the modern state and why development is a fallible word:*

#### You have suggested that a certain idea of the modern state has run up against its limits. How should we begin to rethink this idea?

The idea of the modern state is based on four premises. One, that the state is an institutional formation, and one of the pillars of modern social regulation. The other pillars are the market and civil society. There must be a balance between these pillars. But the balance has been destroyed in favour of the market. Global capitalism has become the main principle of social regulation, and the state remains legitimate to the extent that it serves the market. This is creating problems because the market was not designed to think of the common good or sovereignty. Two, there are two markets in a modern state. First, the economic market, where there are values that have a price tag. The other is the political market, the market of ideas. These are not for sale. They have to be in competition through the electoral process. Because the logic of the economic market is becoming the basis for state action, we have seen a fusion between the economic market and the political market. So in a sense, political convictions are up for sale. And we call this corruption.

Three, the monolithic, homogenous state has crushed cultural diversities. Often, one aspect of national culture was elevated over others. Four, the idea that the state has three functions. One of legitimacy, the other of capitalist accumulation. But the state also has a trust function — to ensure resources for people, to meet needs that may arise from illness, unemployment, accidents. Since the market now prevails over regulation, accumulation prevails over other functions. So the state in many parts of the world has become untrustworthy. I have been claiming that we are in a period of global civil war of low intensity.

**You've spoken of 'revolts of indignation' that have a generative potential. But in, say, Egypt, the democratic energies of such a movement have been mostly frittered away.**

These movements know much better what they don't want than what they do. About 30-40 years ago, some of these movements would have a clear idea of an alternative society, premised on socialism. After 1989, this came to a crisis. Since then there has been no clear alternative. Some people think they are becoming dangerous. Others like myself think they are truthful not because they are a solution, but because they signal the need for one.

**In that context, what about the AAP, which seems to believe in participatory democracy? Recent events suggest they have transmitted some illiberal impulses into the Indian system.**

In India, we need a transformation in the political system as a whole. But I cannot guarantee that this party is the solution. The AAP must be careful not to repeat wrong messages, because then negative perceptions will overshadow positive perceptions. The same applies to participatory democracy. I studied these processes when they started in the beginning of the 1990s, particularly in Brazil, where the municipal budget was allocated on a participatory basis. They managed not only to transform the political perception of people about the local state, they brought about social redistribution. The allocation of resources becomes more equitable, more adequate to the needs of people. They also enabled the democratic participation of many people who felt completely excluded from political processes — people who live in slums. I'm a defender of participatory democracy as a system that complements, but cannot replace, representative democracy.

There are also dangers. First, participatory democracy works as a new form of management of state funds. But it is important to know that there is a budget to be distributed — in many places where these systems were created, the state was bankrupt. So people made an effort to participate but there was little money. Why is this a danger? Because participatory democracy has a much lower threshold of frustration than a representative democracy. When people vote for a party in a representative democracy, and then find that the party is doing the opposite of what it promised, they get frustrated. But maybe because of the fidelity to parties, they will vote again for the same party. In participatory democracy, this is not the case. If they don't see results, the next year they won't participate.

The other danger concerns the decisions made by the majority. These may not be the best decisions from a national perspective. Participatory democracy has to make decisions within the limits of the law and the constitutional system.

**Do you have views on the Amartya Sen-Jagdish Bhagwati debate?**

I respect Amartya Sen's views on development. But the emphasis on human capabilities and choices is a paradigm that takes the individual as the basis of the polity. In many societies, that cannot be taken for granted. There are structural discriminations that cannot be solved by individual rights. In some societies, if we don't start with collective rights, we'll never reach individual rights. A Western concept of the human underlines Sen's understanding of the individual. In many regions, the individual is part of a community, a family, a tribe. Second, when we talk about the human, we also accept a West-based division between humanity and nature. In many societies, nature is not a resource, it is a living entity. We belong to nature. How can we square rights of nature with a focus on just the human?

So, many movements don't speak of alternative development but alternatives to development. They don't use the word development because once you do that, you are caught up in a model that favours economic growth above all else.

## **Time for the high command to go**

Centralisation of power in the Congress is neither winning voters nor motivating cadres.