

Commentary No. 444, March 1, 2017

"Resist? Resist! Why and How?"

From time immemorial, persons who feel oppressed and/or ignored by the powerful have resisted those in authority. Such resistance often changed things, but only sometimes. Whether one considers the cause of the resisters to be virtuous depends on one's values and one's priorities.

In the United States, over the past half-century, there emerged a latent resistance to what was seen as oppression by "elites" who enacted changes in social practices offensive to certain religious groups and ignored rural populations and persons whose standards of living were declining. At first, resistance took the path of withdrawal from social involvement. Then it took a more political form, finally taking on the name of Tea Party.

The Tea Party began to have some electoral successes. But it was dispersed and without a clear strategy. Donald Trump saw the problem and his opportunity. He offered himself as a unifying leader of this rightwing "populism" and catapulted the movement into political power.

What Trump understood is that there was no conflict between leading a movement against the so-called Establishment and seeking power in the state via the Republican Party. On the contrary, the only way he could achieve his maleficent objectives was to combine the two.

The fact that he succeeded in the world's strongest military power heartened like-minded groups all across the world, who proceeded to pursue similar paths with steadily increasing numbers of adherents.

Trump's success is still to this day not understood by the majority of leaders of both U.S. mainstream parties who search for signs that he will become what they call "presidential." That is to say, they want him to abandon his role as the leader of a movement and confine himself to being the president and leader of a political party.

They seize upon any small sign that he will do this. When he softens his rhetoric for a moment (as he did in his February 28 speech to Congress), they do not understand that this is precisely the deceptive tactic of a movement leader. Instead, they feel encouraged or hopeful. But he will never give up his role as movement leader because the moment that he did this he would lose real power.

In the past year, faced with the reality of Trump's success, a counter-movement has emerged in the United States (and elsewhere) that has taken on the name of Resist. The participants understand that the only thing that can possibly contain and eventually defeat Trumpism is a social movement that stands for different values and different priorities. This is the "why" of Resist. What is more difficult is the "how" of Resist.

The Resist movement has grown with remarkable rapidity into sometimes impressive enough that the mainstream press has begun to report its existence. This is the reason that Trump constantly inveighs against the press. Publicity nourishes a movement, and he is doing what he can do to crush the counter-movement.

The problem with Resist is that it is still at the stage where its many activities are dispersed and without a clear strategy or at least not a strategy they have yet adopted. Nor is there any unifying figure who is able at this point to do what Trump did with the Tea Party.

Resist has engaged in manifold different actions. They have held marches, challenged local congressional representatives in their public meetings, created sanctuaries for persons menaced with state-ordered expulsions, interfered with transport facilities, published denunciations, signed petitions, and created local collectivities that meet together both studying and deciding upon further local actions. Resist has been able to turn many ordinary persons into militants for the first time in their lives.

Resist however has a few dangers before it. More and more participants will be arrested and jailed. Being a militant is strenuous and after a while many people tire of it. And they need successes, little or big, to maintain their spirits. No one can guarantee that Resist will not fade away. It took the Tea Party decades before they got to where they are today. It may take Resist equally long.

What Resist as a movement needs to keep in mind is the fact that we are in the midst of a historic structural transition from the capitalist world-system in which we have lived for some 500 years to one of two successor systems - a non-capitalist system that preserves all of the worst features of capitalism (hierarchy, exploitation, and polarization) and its opposite, a system that is relatively democratic and egalitarian. I call this the struggle between the spirit of Davos and the spirit of Porto Alegre.

We are living in the chaotic, confusing situation of transition. This has two implications for our collective strategy. In the short run (say, up to three years), we must remember that we all live in the short run. We all wish to survive. We all need food and shelter. Any movement that hopes to flourish must help people survive by supporting anything that minimizes the pain of those who are suffering.

But in the middle run (say 20-40 years), minimizing the pain changes nothing. We need to concentrate on our struggle with those who represent the spirit of Davos. There is no compromise. There is no "reformed" version of capitalism that can be constructed.

So the "how" of Resist is clear. We need collectively more clarity about what is happening, more decisive moral choice, and more sagacious political strategies. This does not automatically come about. We have to construct the combination. We know that another world is possible, yes, but we must also be aware that it is not inevitable.

by Immanuel Wallerstein