Comments on Wagar's "Toward a Praxis of World Integration"

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Warren Wagar's 1995 ASA paper is an attempt to articulate a view of global political praxis culminating in a "democratic, liberal, and socialist world commonwealth." This is an admirable idea, but do the ideas in that paper get us closer to its realization--I think not. As I will argue below, Wagar's paper is nothing more than the Third Internati onal writ large, a polemic on organizational form ironically tied to a Eurocentric Second International view of the world that appears to ignore the historical lessons of both efforts.

Wagar insists on two key points: 1) only the values of the Enlightenment (which he turns into the "Left Enlightenment" with a wave of his magic wand) provide the basis for this new world order; 2) only a single, transnational political party provides the organizational basis for toppling the old world order and bringing in the new.

With respect to the first point, it is obvious that there is nothing inherently "socialist" or "Left" about the Enlightenment. It has served admirably as an ideological cornerstone of capitalism for hundreds of years, and will likely continue to do so. How Wagar proposes to convince the world's

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peoples that it is the only basis for a humane social order is a mystery. One might just as well argue the same line about any of a number of ideologies, including Christianity. Just as Wagar acknowledges that such religious movements were "vectors of capitalism," so might we argue that the Enlightenment has been a vector of capitalism. In other words, although Wagar

desperately wants to claim otherwise, it is on ly his subjective preference
that makes the Enlightenment superior to any other set of ideas as the basis
for a new socialist world order. One might ask, why is it necessary to insist
on this point? If one were truly interested in the practical politics of
building a political movement, one would realize that even while one might
want to argue to many of the ideas of the Enlightenment, it would be
politically self-defeating to argue for them in the way that Wagar does.

Wagar dismisses various anti-systemic movements because "their agendas are
very different from ours." Who are "we"? The study group that will found the
World Party? Professors at the ASA? True partisans of world revolution?
Graciously, Wagar admits that "There are surely many thousands of people,
even many hundreds of thousands of people, around the world who are
fundamentally opposed to [the modern world system]." No, there are not. There
are not even hundreds of thousands of people who have even heard the term
"world system." They may be obj ectively opposed to the world system, insofar
as they oppose those manifestations of it that affect their daily lives, but
they are not subjectively opposed to it, in the sense of being potential
members of a conscious movement with a clear understanding o f the global
nature of the system that exploits and oppresses them. And that is the crux
of the revolutionary problem: how to organize the masses of people who
objectively are in opposition to the system into a subjective opposition?

How to do this? Wagar appears to believe this can be done by fiat. The "only
way" is "to insist on a transnational and transzonal framework for all
political activity at the local or national level." This is precisely what
socialist, communist, nationalist and other movements have been trying to do

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for much of the last 80 years. Wagar offers no insight into how his version
of this practice will produce any better results. How will the World Party do

this? By arguing about slogans, l ike the various parties of the New Communist
Movement did in the 70s and 80s when they led and/or derailed local reformist struggles? By "holding open meetings" and distributing the "provocative analyses" written by World Party cadre? This appears to be nothing more than same practice of the myriad study groups turned myriad
communist parties in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world in the 1970s. Having
participated in the same, and having been an eight -year member of a party
that tried to make world systems analysis the theoretical core of its practice, I find nothing in Wagar's proposal that suggests how his version
might be different that the previous efforts.

Thus, what is disturbing about this paper is that it fails to take into account any of the concr ete history of attempts to create socialist movements
in this country or anywhere else. The organizational strategy (infiltrate
governments and corporations) used to be known in the Third International
days as "boring from within." The notion of distributi ng "provocative analyses of the world crisis" has been practiced ad nauseam around the world.
The idea that national organizations should be subordinated to a global cause
was the basis of the Third International; the history of those parties and
that organization speaks volumes about the problems with that approach. Yet
Wagar can blithely write that all must subordinate themselves to Civitas
Humana, and since the World Party is the only vehicle that can bring us there, to the party itself. That is the kind of logic that got Bukharin killed, and more than that, forced him to utter the rule of this organization
logic that condemned him: the Party is always right.

Yet none of this is referred to by Wagar. There is no notion that anything
has been tried or tha t anything has been learned. No discussion of the problem of middle class radical intellectuals trying to lead working class
and peasant movements. No idea of various organizational forms that have been

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used, their strengths and weaknesses. No concept of how to move from reformist to revolutionary practice. No, in Wagar's view "we" infiltrate

corporations and governments (why defer power and income while waiting for the revolution? why suffer in a trade union or peasant association?), write "provocative analyses" and wait for the apparently inevitable collapse of the world system, at which point "we" leap out and proclaim ourselves as leaders. This is not serious political thought, it is simply a political fantasy, an expression of cynicism, powerlessness, and profound detachment from the everyday lives of most people typical of most intellectuals.

And all this accompanied by an apparent disdain for those in whose name Wagar would lead the revolution. The masses, we are told, are disappointing us again: "the initial response of the disempowered and the marginalized to our [sic] crisis everywhere has been flight." Whose crisis? The theoretical crisis of intellectuals? The crisis of global austerity capitalism? What nerve it takes to dismiss the daily struggles of peoples to survive in such a manner!

But never mind. Wagar has determined that "a consensus must emerge among progressive forces" and that the "realistic" next step is the formation of anti-capitalist institutions. At the end of the 20th century, this does not seem like a profound insight. Nor does it seem like a profound critique to suggest that those who are ignorant of their history are condemned to repeat it.

Why not take a serious look at a recent att empt to build a transnational, transzonal movement? Here I refer to the United Nations women's conference held in China. This was the fourth world conference on women, the result of serious political efforts for years to build a movement like that Wagar describes. The result of this conference was a 120 -page Plan for Action, agreed upon by some 5,000 delegates from 189 countries, encompassing issues from spirituality to abortion rights to nutrition, worked out in some 3,000