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Another World Is Possible

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Paris

For a magic moment, the citizens' movement was no longer on the defensive. From Seattle to Genoa, via Washington, Prague, Quebec, Nice and a dozen other destinations, the dispiriting decades of unbridled corporate greed and freewheeling financial markets seemed to be drawing to an ignominious close, smothered under their own sheer awfulness. Or if such a perception was mere wishful thinking and a bit premature, at least neoliberalism was under credible and forceful attack.

Negatively labeled "antiglobalization" by the media but known to its thousands of participants and millions of sympathizers as the movement for global justice, the nebula of protest and proposals was coalescing and gaining strength. The corporate and political elites could no longer meet in plush peace and confidential quiet to do their deals, and were obliged to retreat to fortresses whose defenses the demonstrators regularly stormed both physically and ideologically. The winds of history were blowing in a new and refreshing direction.

Then came September 11. Like the rest of the world, Europeans were shocked and horrified, especially by the sheer scale of the destruction and the potent symbolism of the targets, but in another and admittedly limited sense, we'd been there before. We'd had bombs in our metros, terrorist attacks on our railways and exploding cars in our streets, not to mention centuries of wars, invasions and occupations.

As the initial trauma wore off, we also tried to analyze what precisely lay behind the attacks and to ask political as well as moral questions. While everyone agreed that nothing could justify the terrorist attacks on the United States, some also recalled another September 11 when the American-sponsored coup d'état in Chile brought down the democratically elected Allende government, ushering in a fascist regime that murdered and "disappeared" thousands. American support for the *contras* in Nicaragua; the training of Latin American torturers in North America; the attacks against weak and defenseless countries like Panama, Grenada and Sudan; the bombing and blockading of Iraq leaving civilians dead and maimed but Saddam Hussein firmly in place--all these were remembered and discussed, as was the crucial US role in the endlessly destructive Israel-Palestine war.

While the prestigious French daily *Le Monde* headlined "We Are All Americans," others felt that this assertion very much depended on "which" Americans. Yes, without question, if it meant mourning for the victims and their families; no, if it meant unqualified support for the corporate, financial and government elites, and for business as usual.

Nor were we surprised when these same elites in Europe, our neoliberal corporate adversaries and their domestics, instantly seized upon the atrocities to advance their cause. By the morning of the 12th they had already sharpened their sticks. Using crude, faulty but sometimes effective logic in an attempt to intimidate and criminalize the

citizens' movement, they declared, "You're antiglobalization, therefore you're anti-American, therefore you're on the side of the terrorists." For weeks, the media gleefully and unrelentingly framed their coverage and their questions in that light alone.

So we've had to explain incessantly why such arguments are not just wrong but pernicious, and we've refused them the pleasure of painting us into the villain's corner they had reserved for us. We reject as well the "antiglobalization" label and, in order to counter accusations of "anti-Americanism," stress our ties with our American friends in the global justice movement. We've also continued to mobilize, and on that score, it's gratifying to report that September 11 has had relatively little long-term impact. Although virtually unreported in the mainstream press and, alas, with zero effect on the negotiations themselves, the recent WTO ministerial meeting in Doha, Qatar, brought far more people into the streets than had gathered in Seattle. Decentralized demonstrations were organized in at least thirty countries, including forty locations in France and twenty-five in Germany.

The demonstrations in Laeken at the end of the Belgian EU presidency in December brought out tens of thousands, including a large number of trade unionists, with almost no violence (one or two shattered bank windows). On January 19, ATTAC-France (ATTAC is an acronym for the Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions to Aid Citizens, whose program now reaches well beyond the push for the so-called Tobin Tax, the proposed small tax on international currency transactions) filled to overflowing the largest rock concert hall in Paris for the kickoff of the upcoming presidential and legislative election season. While we have no intention of becoming a party, we do promise to harass all the candidates unmercifully around our issues. Next month, ATTAC-Hungary will be launched, the fortieth country to join this international movement. The CGIL, Italy's largest and most progressive trade union, recently decided to become a "founding institutional member" of ATTAC-Italy. Kids all over Europe asked their parents to give them the airfare to Porto Alegre for Christmas so they could attend the historic international citizens' gathering there January 31-February 5.

We know that for Americans, the backlash of the terrorist attacks has been far more powerful and the aftermath more lingering. With flags flying on every corner, the obligatory rallying around President George W. Bush no matter what he decides, and a kind of suffocating and frequently phony patriotism dominating the debate, it's clear that the pressure is considerable.

Allow me still to argue that it's time to pull ourselves together, pull up our socks and pull together--take your pick of metaphors, but also take heart: September 11 is not the end of the world. History may even be handing us a radically new moment, one we did not choose but ours to seize. Our message is more relevant today than it was on the eve of September 11.

The emotions the atrocities awakened in all the rich Western countries caused me briefly to entertain the naïve hope that their leadership might finally recognize the gravity of the situation and provide an appropriate response. I should have known better. Those who hold our futures in their hands are not serious. They see no farther than the noses of their bombers. Frightening though the prospect may seem, citizens must accept the risk of being serious in their place.

What does "being serious" mean? For starters, recognizing what our leadership refuses to admit: that terrorist nihilism is one response to poverty, despair and hopelessness. I don't mean to imply that redistribution of resources and aid programs, however well conceived, could have stopped bin Laden and his immediate followers. They care nothing about the poverty of their own compatriots, but they do know that terrorism thrives in the rich soil of exclusion and victimhood.

On September 10, half the world was already living, if one can call it that, on less than \$2 a day, with a fifth surviving on half of that. Thirty thousand children were already dying needless deaths daily. Inequality is exploding both within and among nations, and perhaps contrary to the poor of the nineteenth century, today's poor know they are poor. The plausible fantasies of Western television constantly remind them of their own failure to capture the material rewards of modernity.

The only rational response to global problems is global solutions. "Foreign direct investment," the panacea of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, consists mostly of mergers and acquisitions that result in harmful economic concentration and job losses, and in any case such investment flows to only a dozen or so countries. The UN target of 0.7 percent of the wealthy countries' GNP for development aid is never going to be met, and we should stop pretending that it will be, because this particular pot of money is shrinking by some 5 percent a year. What resources do exist are unaccompanied by control over the local elites, who all too frequently use them for their own ends, a recipe for waste, corruption and inefficiency. What's needed is to ratchet up our efforts to the international level and launch a global Marshall Plan, financed by various international tax instruments (including but not confined to Tobin-type taxes) and made conditional on genuine civil society participation and rigorous auditing. Debt relief ought to be a precondition of a properly functioning world system; otherwise the debtors are competing on the "level playing field" the neoliberals never tire of extolling with lead in their sneakers.

The cash is out there. It can be found not only by taxing financial transactions but in tax havens where, as Bush himself has proven, it's possible to identify, target and close down accounts belonging to anyone the United States identifies as a terrorist--so why not the accounts of drug barons and traffickers in women, children, endangered species and armaments? Thanks to these same cozy locations in the Caribbean and other fiscal paradises, taxes on transnational corporations are undermined while taxes on labor and consumption contribute far more than their fair share.

"Free trade" as managed by the World Trade Organization and reinvigorated at the recent negotiations in Doha is largely the freedom of the fox in the henhouse. Despite the advance on generic drugs for pandemics like AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, the South's needs are shelved and the transnationals continue to run the show according to their own preferred rules.

None of the profound changes we call for will, however, happen spontaneously, and our present elites certainly don't want them. Clearly the shock of September was not great enough to force them to change their minds and their behavior.

So, American friends, where does all this leave us? First of all, please bring the United States back. We need you, the world needs you. Although people on every continent are joining in this struggle, there are no guarantees we can win. Without a strong US movement, in the bastion of corporate and financial-market-driven globalization, we are in fact likely to fail.

I hope not to be misunderstood in saying that September 11 must not lead to an unhealthy inwardness and self-preoccupation but to tough-minded analysis followed by outward-looking action. The adversary hasn't changed since September 11. That adversary is still "Davos" and everything Davos stands for, whether meeting in the mountains or on the banks of the Hudson. *Homo davosiensis* wants all the resources, all the wealth, all the power and all the freedom to extend his ascendancy across time and space. This means that we too must be world-spanners and history-inventors, right now. As we say in French, *l'histoire ne repasse pas les plats*--"History doesn't offer second helpings"--so we'd better deal with what's on our plate now, which is world poverty, inequality, exploitation and hopelessness. How?

The great Chinese general Sun Tzu said 2,400 years ago, "Do not do what you would most like to do. Do what your adversary would least like you to do." In Porto Alegre, people from all over the world will be trying to determine what the adversary least wants and how to deliver it. In New York, we hope you will be supremely inconveniencing the Davos mob, denying it whatever it may want just now and in future (one thing it *does* want is for violence to spoil the proceedings and attract exclusive media attention, so watch out for *agents provocateurs*).

Personally, I have not been so hopeful in decades. The mood is changing. People no longer believe that the unjust world order is inevitable. To Margaret Thatcher's TINA--"There is no alternative"--they are replying that there are thousands of them. Now it's up to us all, especially to Americans, to prove that, as we say in ATTAC, "Another world is possible." And urgent.