

The Asian tsunami and the hecatombs of the “growth economy”^{*}

TAKIS FOTOPOULOS

The catastrophic Indonesian earthquake and the subsequent tsunami has not created any hecatombs among the privileged social strata, with the exception of (relatively) few tourists from the North and the prince of Thailand, who was happily surfing at the time. The vast majority of the victims were destitute fishermen, homeless and semi-homeless “natives” who lived in miserable huts, which were naturally swept away by the tsunami, or dismantled by the quake. This is not, of course, unrelated to the fact that, in contrast to the nations which belong to the closed club of ‘advanced’ countries like the USA and Japan, “developing” countries in the South not only do not possess any early warning systems and infrastructures to inform the public —something which it is estimated would have saved up to 100,000 lives^[1]— but also try to undermine the catastrophic significance of such a phenomenon, even when they are informed of its advent (as was the case in Thailand^[2]). This is in case any potential tourists are diverted elsewhere, taking together with them their precious foreign exchange, on which a hefty part of these countries’ foreign income depends - i.e. the income which, in turn, is used to buy the consumer goods from the transnational corporations of the North! However, the crucial issue for those of us, who do not suffer from a congenital or acquired inability to think rationally still believing in “acts of God” (a God who apparently takes sadistic pleasure in ‘testing’ mainly the poor and destitute, on account of humanity’s sins), is: why it is always those presumed innocent who primarily pay with their own lives for the “acts of God”?

The rational answer to this question is not difficult and lies in the way in which the present society and economy are organised. The unprecedented hecatombs that have been witnessed have laid bare not only the kind of social organisation which has been imposed by the political and economic elites on our planet over the last two centuries, but also the chronic multidimensional crisis (economic, ecological, political, social) which began at the same time and is continuously deteriorating under today’s conditions of capitalist globalisation. They have equally laid bare the Left’s bible-babble about the feasibility of effective reforms within the present system, the significance of economic “aid” and so on. Indeed, it is highly indicative that at the very moment at which even destitute homeless people in the North were contributing from their own means of survival to the survival of the millions of victims in the South in solidarity, their political elites were promising foreign “aid” which was the equivalent of five-and-a-half days’ and half a day’s spending (by the UK and USA respectively) in the “war” to eliminate those resisting the New World Order in Iraq!^[3] Similarly, the economic elites of the North have just decided a “generous” moratorium plan with respect to the huge debts of these countries owed to the North’s bankers (cancellation of debts is of course out of the question), while at the same time big multinational corporations are offering “aid” which usually amounts to an hour’s profit-

making!^[4]

It is, therefore, clear that, apart from the fact that the causes of too many of these “acts of God” lately are social (climatic changes and disturbances due to the greenhouse effect, floods due to huge urban concentration, deforestation etc.), even disasters like the present ones have hugely unequal effects which mainly hit the poorer social strata – i.e. the vast majority of the world’s population since, at the present time, the internationalised market economy condemns 2.8 billion people (about half the world’s population) to living in absolute poverty. This, not counting of course those billions who simply secure their basic means of survival and live in the miserable hutments of the planet’s “favelas”, which are swept away by the first strong downpour.

The ultimate social cause of all those phenomena is the “growth economy”, i.e. the system of economic organisation which resulted from the dynamic of the market economy and the Enlightenment ideology of “Progress” which constitutes its ideological complement. It can easily be shown that in a market economy system, in which the growth ideology and personal greed are dominant, “maldevelopment” is the outcome of the automatic functioning of the system itself. This is because it is the purchasing power of the high income groups in the North and the elites in the South which determines *what* is to be produced, and *how* and *for whom* it is to be produced. At the same time, the growth economy can only be maintained through its constant reproduction and expansion into new economic and geographical areas of activity – something which implies the destruction of every community’s economic self-reliance. But, from the moment that economic self-reliance begins to be undermined, either violently (as a result of colonialism) or through the market, and two parties with unequal economic power (in terms of productivity, income and technological know-how) are brought together, then, the automatic functioning of the market mechanism secures the reproduction and further widening of the gap between the two parties. Furthermore, this economic organisation imposes a new way of life which is based on the constant struggle for growth and consequent concentration (economic, urban and so on) – a process which encourages people in “developing” countries to deforest their land and their coasts, as well as to sell out their economic resources in general, while they themselves are crowded into monstrous urban centres of cheap habitation, or occupy “vulnerable” areas which, up to a few years ago, were uninhabitable.

Therefore, although the explicit or implicit aim of Progress was to ‘tame’ Nature through technoscience and economic development, the taming was as unequal as the type of development to which the anarchic market economy leads – which is geared by individual profit. It was this kind of “development” and growth which has led to the present economic crisis, expressed by the fact that the income gap between the one fifth of the world’s population living in “advanced” countries and the one fifth living in “developing” countries, which was at a ratio of 30 to 1 in 1960 - before globalisation had flourished, had doubled by 1990, and in 1997 stood at 74 to 1! The inevitable result was that today the richest 20% of the world’s population takes 86% of world income compared to the 1% taken by the poorest 20%^[5].

In conclusion, the growth economy does not only create billions of starving people, but it also leads to hecatombs of victims (mainly among the nonprivileged social groups), as a result of every “act of God”.

* This is a translation of an article that was first published in the fortnight column of Takis Fotopoulos in the mass circulation Athens daily *Eleftherotypia* on 8/1/2005

- [1] David Adam, "How gigantic quakes occur", *The Guardian* (28/12/2004).
- [2] John Aglionby et. al. "After the devastation, the grief", *The Guardian* (28/12/2004).
- [3] G. Monbiot, "The victims of the tsunami pay the price of war on Iraq", *The Guardian* (4/1/2005).
- [4] Jonathan Freedland, "Another wave of miserliness from Britain's super-rich", *The Guardian* (5/1/2005).
- [5] UN, *Human Development Report 1999*.