

Interview: Walden Bello at the Cambridge Union

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Walden Bello has devoted a lifetime to the struggle against fascism - both globally and in his native Philippines.

Bello is a consistent critic of World Bank and US support of the brutal and increasingly fascistic Marcos (and now Duterte) regimes. When teaching at UC Berkeley, Bello was arrested for leading the non-violent takeover of the Philippine consulate in San Francisco, before going on hunger strike to raise awareness of the issue. He later broke into the World Bank to steal unpublished documents, revealing the extent of the IMF's support for Ferdinand Marcos.

Alongside activism, Bello is the author of 25 books, including *Counterrevolution: The Global Rise of the Far Right*, and *Deglobalization: Ideas for a New World Economy*. In 2003, he was awarded the Right Livelihood award "for his outstanding efforts in educating civil society about the effects of corporate globalisation, and how alternatives to it can be implemented".

Jess Black and I had the pleasure of speaking to Walden Bello last week, following a Cambridge Union debate: "This House Believes that we are Witnessing a Resurgence of Fascism".

Bello's opening plea, to get beyond intellectual distinctions and to recognise the word 'fascist' as a crucial weapon on the ground, went unheeded by the other speakers, who largely debated matters of semantic and historical consistency.

But Bello continued to make his point when asked about the importance of his activism alongside journalism and academia: "the thrust of academic life is often to make the nuance more important than the essence. But if you're on the streets or in politics, you have to come to the point, because if you don't do that as strongly as possible the consequences are not academic."

It is a debate dating back to the Frankfurt School, a group of largely German-Jewish Neo-Marxist intellectuals, who tasked themselves with preventing the reemergence of fascism in Europe and America in the '50s and '60s. Heavily criticised for their pessimistic and ultimately disempowering focus on education and individual psychology rather than societal change, I ask Bello if the best solutions to the resurgence of fascism are radical ones, or whether to fight fascism we need to try and defend the status quo.

Having been a member of the communist underground in the Philippines, Bello starts by clarifying his disagreements with a group (and an ideology) that he left behind in the 1980s: "Ultimately the left in the 1930s had a very limited view of fascism, which resulted in very limited tactics. The criticism of fascism that you had in the 1930s was very economic and always related it to monopoly capitalism, really disregarding its social base - which was actually the petit-bourgeoisie or the middle classes - as well as things like the political psychology of charisma."

But of course the man who Naomi Klein called "The world's leading no-nonsense Revolutionary"

does not simply dismiss the alienation and discontent of those supporting contemporary fascists, or endorse our current systems: “We really must be able to motivate people with a vision that looks to the future, and not just a simple defense of classical liberal democracy. We need a more participatory vision of socialism and that puts the focus on equality. We have to look to the future, and unless we can give people a more meaningful vision of how society should look, and not just go back to the old rhetoric of the left, it’s not going to work.”

Next, we discuss Trump, who Bello sees (like Duterte and Bolsonaro) as defined by his opportunism, but also by his work in the entertainment industry, which made him “sensitive to what people on the ground wanted”. Thus the ideologically malleable celebrity saw that the “de-industrialization of the midwest was his root to power. He was able to appeal in fact to all those resentments of people who had been left jobless and seen their communities destroyed because of this doctrinaire pursuit of free trade that allowed the transnational corporations of the United States to move en masse to China.”

Bello was key in the early days of the alter-globalization and food sovereignty movements, protesting at G8 summits, including Seattle and Genoa, and has said in the past that the (populist) right “ate the left’s lunch” when it comes to opposing economic globalisation. Seeing the instrumentalisation of a movement which Bello was close to must be disheartening. So, what happened?

For Bello the answer lies in technocratic neoliberalism. Speaking the language of management and efficiency, leaders from the left – Clinton, Blair and the french socialists – implemented neoliberal, free-market policies which traditionally right-wing parties would never have been allowed to. “This was a very dangerous combination, because on the one hand neoliberalism led to very bad economic consequences for many ordinary people; but then the technocratic side was very elitist, workers were told: ‘Hey we know more than you, so leave the functioning of the economy to us, because experts are in the best position to handle big economic issues.’”

Here, Bello draws on Thomas Piketty (whose 1,042 page *Capital and Ideology* he has summarised for a less academic audience in *Reading Piketty Part I*) as he asserts that: “The parties of the left have become the parties of the highly educated professionals. That’s part of the reason why so much of the traditional base of the left in Western Europe and the United States have become alienated from the social democratic parties, and open to being pirated by right-wing parties.”

So might the polarisation causing so much concern among political commentators – the return of explicit ideology – actually be a good thing? I ask. Perhaps a more vocal far right leads to a more motivated and engaged community – exactly what is needed for other contemporary issues such as the climate crisis. Could this be what we are seeing in the protest movements of today?

Bello agrees that “It is important to have this return to ideology, in a positive not pejorative sense – commitment to equality, to justice, to democracy as fundamental. If you look at the climate crisis, the main adjustment really has to be in the Global North, because it has been historically the greatest producer of carbon emissions. You have over-developed consumption societies, and for the North degrowth is a very necessary path to achieve those values.”

For inspiration here, Bello ultimately does look back to the 1930s, but not to the communists. As I ask about the difficulties of instigating degrowth in the Global North given the nature of electoral systems with, at best, five year terms, Bello is not pessimistic. “There will always be all sorts of political constraints. We need what you had in the 1930s in the United States, where Roosevelt was able to construct a coalition which lasted for three terms until his death – more than a decade. I would not say that it is impossible to achieve.

We all have constraints, and sometimes these constraints may be very overwhelming, but for the Left of every generation, they have always been very overwhelming. But there always emerge people who think out of the box, and it is the people that think out of the box that are able to break the logjam. I just hope that those people come sooner rather than later.”

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