

Editorial: Welcoming people power on the occasion of the World Social Forum

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In all countries, the ruling classes have used their control over information to influence people's world outlook and social awareness. Developments in information and communication technologies in recent years have given them even more power to control destinies of peoples, countries and the world as a whole. Those who control information and systems of communications also decide what interpretation to give to our history and culture. They decide which ideologies, individuals and political and social movements "live" and which will die. This is no crude mind control. This is a silent and hidden hand going into our collective minds to organize our collective information and knowledge. Aspects of information that are unpalatable to the ruling classes are deleted and those that legitimize their rule are magnified. This newly recreated world is then projected through all means of social communication: mass media, the education system, arts and culture as well as through libraries and archives.

Perhaps the most important example in recent years of the (mis)use of information for political and economic use is the propaganda mounted by the Bush and Blair administrations about the "existence" of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. It did not matter that there was no real evidence for this, it did not matter that "evidence" had to be created to suit the political aims of those keen on waging wars – wars that have led to the death of over 700,000 people in Iraq. It did not matter that other countries are allowed, as a "natural right", to develop and use weapons of even more deadly mass destruction. No, what mattered was that people had to be convinced by incorrect information about the existence of such weapons in Iraq and to designate Saddam Hussain, once an ally of the same powers, as a monster who had to be destroyed – together with the country and citizens as "collateral damage".

The fact that those who invaded Iraq controlled, directly or indirectly, mass media to silence the oppositions to the wars was a crucial factor that allowed the invasion to be given a superficial gloss of "agreement" in national and international terms. Millions of people around the world marched and shouted their opposition to the wars, but this had no effects on the so-called democratically elected "leaders" who used the most advanced weapons of mass destruction to rain death on people of an independent country. The same mass media were used to hide crucial facts – that the real interest in destroying Iraq as a viable country was to meet their geo-political interest in West Asia, to control oil in a major oil producing country which was threatening to stop using US dollars for oil transactions. The same media are used to misinterpret resistance as sectional wars. Those opposed to the invasion of their country are not seen as part of resistance, and their resistance is interpreted as religious wars in the well-used imperialist tactic of "divide-and-rule".

A discussion about the central role of information in our social and political lives today is an appropriate one during the World Social Forum. Control over

information about brutality and destruction as seen in Iraq have been used in the history of the world as created by imperialism for over 500 years. One needs to look at just a few books published recently to see this as very much part of the British Empire. Those who may not have time to read all the new material can perhaps look at just two books:

- Caroline Elkins (2005): *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya*. London: Pimlico.
- John Newsinger (2006): *The Blood Never Dried: A People's History of the British Empire*. Bookmarks.

These books provide details about historical brutality and terrorism employed by imperialism for centuries in Kenya, Ireland, China, India, Egypt, Palestine, and Malaya. No part of the world has escaped this brutal onslaught in which whole nations and communities have been wiped out. Yet such facts are not common knowledge as our media, information and educational institutes do not make us aware of them, preferring instead to focus on a few "benefits" bestowed on people around the world in the name of Empire.

One can see the position of British ruling classes from what Gordon Brown says. He wants Britain to stop apologising for its colonial past. Instead, the British Chancellor calls for the "great British values" - freedom, tolerance, civic duty - to be admired as "some of our most successful exports". But Britain has never apologised for its colonial massacres and plunder and there are very few examples – if any - of a British colony having been left with "freedom, tolerance, civic duty" as a benefit of colonialism. Perhaps it is time for the Chancellor to read the two books quoted above – together with *Never be silent* - and talk again about "our successful exports" – which in Kenya have included mobile gallows to "pacify" the rebellious natives. Perhaps he can also give us facts to disagree with a former MP, Richard Cobden who was opposed to the British Opium Wars in China. Newsinger (2006, p. 67) quotes Cobden:

...in the slave trade we had surpassed in guilt the world, so in foreign wars we have been the most aggressive, quarrelsome, warlike and bloody nation under the sun. [In October 1850, he wrote:] we have been incomparably the most sanguine (bloodthirsty) nation on earth.

This role of the "most sanguine nation on earth" has now been taken over by USA which took over from the British Empire.

But all is not lost. The same technology that enables "difficult" parts of history to be deleted from our consciousness also provides people with tools to retrieve that same history from the recycle bin and put it in the forefront of life. As Derek Walcott says, "*The native, the exotic, the victim, the noble savage, is looking back, returning a stare*". The process of returning a stare is made easier today as people everywhere claim back their histories and break embargos placed on their information. Everywhere, they are breaking controls on the means of production of books, news and information. The people's war of liberation in the information field has started in earnest.

And that is the significance of the 2007 World Social Forum in Nairobi. It comes at an important time in history. The power of USA is fast declining – economic,

political and moral. While new powers such as China, India, and Brazil are taking its place, none of them demonstrate the imperialist zeal for world domination that Britain and Europe did at one time, and that USA has done since the end of the Second World War. The defeat of USA in Vietnam did not teach it the real lesson that people's power was on the ascendancy. The changes in USSR only increased its arrogance and increased its attacks on people and countries to force "regime changes". Its slow defeat in Iraq is reinforcing the same message. This time, this symbolises its decline as a world imperialist power.

There is evidence of new people's power and movements everywhere today, ranging from Latin America to Asia and Africa. At the same time, new possibilities opened up by ICT have created conditions for people to take power into their own hands by forming global communities of interest that have the potential for setting world agenda in many fields: political, environmental, economic. The WSF is one such community.

It is significant, as documented in this issue of ISC, that library and information workers are taking a stand, both as individuals and as information workers, in this process. It is to the credit of colleagues in Africa that they are setting new standards of control over information in this important forum at an important historical juncture.

We wish all the participants at the WSF a successful Forum and look forward to the consolidation of a new forum where real economic, political and cultural democracy and social justice are the guiding principles to create a new world. Real people's power is within our grasp today – if we can unite on these principles.

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