

Another world is possible, if!

By Susan George,
Created 2004-10-12 23:00

openDemocracy: Why are you coming to the European Social Forum ([ESF](#) [1]) in London?

Susan George: Social forums always energise. They're great because they bring people together within the organising country who are not used to working with each other. This is very positive.

It's a very good thing for Britain at this juncture because we on the continent need you! You're going to be an extremely important element in current and future campaigns, and the more we can get to know you throughout Europe the better that will be. So I'm looking forward to it tremendously.

openDemocracy: Do you have any doubts about the forum?

Susan George: I hope that in future we can dispense with plenaries altogether. We have got to get beyond the phase of ritual denunciation, of repeating truisms, of explaining who we hate and who we love over and over again.

We have spent huge amounts of effort across Europe defining "[axes](#)" [2] which are so broad that they finally don't mean much. We also waste time and energy in negotiating details of each plenary: who gets to speak there; what gender, what religion, what nationality.

I think it's time this stopped. People who are interested in the same general topic need to be able to come together much earlier, and plan cogent, strategic campaigns for the following year. Where people need support to keep abreast of the latest thinking and analysis, we can organise teach-ins.

Fortunately, the next World Social Forum ([WSF](#) [3]) in Porto Alegre, Brazil in January 2005 will abandon the plenary system.

openDemocracy: So what would you most like to see happen at the ESF?

Susan George: This is almost a utopian suggestion, but each year we really should decide *one* thing that we want to win on. Everybody, from whatever different campaigns, should be willing, when the call comes, to put aside their own work temporarily and say yes: we will be there together.

It's time we concentrated on creating the balance of forces that is going to allow us to win, because people are going to get awfully tired if they don't win occasionally. And this is not going to happen through ritual denunciations, by saying Bush is a terrible man or that the war in Iraq is a terrible disaster.

I'm not advocating that everything else should be sidelined for the whole year, but that if – for example – we decided to focus on an international day on debt, involving sit-ins in banks or related activities, then that could bind activists from many different groups in a single, united, achievable, common goal.

Afterwards, the various campaigns could return to work on human rights, gay issues, water or the arms trade [4]. But for a particular period they could unite and focus.

Greenpeace was quite successful with such campaigns. All its offices across the world would suspend their particular activities and join together. Of course there is a difference in that although Greenpeace [5] has a mass of support it is not a mass organisation. An entire social movement is much messier!

openDemocracy: What single issue do you think European global justice campaigners should mobilise around in 2004–05?

Susan George: This is up to Europeans to decide, but the questions I would ask are: what would produce the greatest good for the largest number of people in the largest number of countries? What would shake up our adversaries the most, destroy their credibility the most, and be the best platform for future campaigns? What would attract the least hostility from the media, which is generally if not universally hostile to the movement?

My own suggestion for an answer to that is to really be serious about debt of the world's poorest countries to the rich world. In my new book [6], *Another World is Possible...If*, I speak about the tragic self-destruction of the anti-debt campaign Jubilee 2000. If the campaign had pressed on it could have been successful.

The debt issue can unite north and south. People are widely informed about it, and action on it would bring great relief to millions of people.

That is one suggestion. The focal issue could be something else – water, climate change, or – the issue I am now working on – the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS [7]).

openDemocracy: Why is GATS important to you, and what does your campaign involve?

Susan George: GATS is the international framework to privatise absolutely every human activity. It's a framework text, not a finished treaty, which encompasses a series of negotiations moving relentlessly in the direction of greater liberalisation.

I work most actively with a group called S2B [8] ("Seattle to Brussels"), which first met around the demonstrations in Seattle. S2B is the European part of the international network called Our world is not for sale [9].

We organised around the Singapore issues [10] for the World Trade Organisation's (WTO [11]) Cancún summit in September 2003 [11]. Thanks in part to our efforts, the text says that these issues won't return to the agenda at least until the end of the Doha round. This is a negative victory, in the sense that the WTO [11] hasn't gone as far or as fast as documents published in 1999 and 2000 revealed; we still have a long way to go before we can beat this thing.

In France and other European countries I'm part of a campaign calling for GATS-free zones and for a moratorium on the negotiations. We're working with local government because we don't see a way to reach the WTO or the European Commission, both of which are totally undemocratic structures; our own governments are the only democratic space we've got.

We have some 560 local governments in France – towns, regions, departments – that have demanded a moratorium; on 13–14 November, we will hold a full, formal meeting with them – a sort of “Estates General” [12]. After that? We will see!

Europe and global social justice

openDemocracy: In your book *Another World is Possible...If*, you argue that Europe must play a key role in progressive globalisation. Why *Europe*?

Susan George: This is at the heart of my book’s argument – that Europeans must lead the world. My experience is that there are many people outside the movement who sense that there are a lot of things wrong with the world, but who are hesitant or unclear about what they are able to do.

Here, my central argument is that, faced with an America that is going to be immovable even if Kerry gets elected, Europe has to lead the change. I stress that Kerry would be better than Bush, but in any case we cannot afford to wait for the United States to move on key questions like climate change or even something as consensual as the millennium development goals [13].

So my plea to Europeans is to recognise who they are, what their achievements have been for the interests of the poor and working people over the last hundred years and say that a welfare model is possible for the entire world – and that it’s up to us in Europe to make that happen. Europeans are the only ones who combine three assets: a large enough population, a gross economic product which is comparable to the US’s, and an accumulated political experience [13] and a model of governance that is not perfect but which – in its ideal form – is based on solving conflicts through law and not through invading countries.

This is accompanied by a European social model based on international consultation, intergenerational solidarity, public services, free and universal education for all, affordable healthcare.

Sometimes, when I’m speaking about this I am accused of cultural imperialism. It isn’t. Everybody in the world would like to have education, healthcare, public services, proper food, clean water – the essentials of life. I’m not saying that Europe should dictate to the rest of the world, but to highlight its achievements in these fields is not answered by such accusations.

openDemocracy: Aki Nawaz, a British–born Muslim musician who spoke [13] to **openDemocracy** recently, seems to be on the same wavelength as you. He thinks Europe is where the change needs to come.

Susan George: We – Europeans – have to find significant additional amounts of development aid and reverse what is happening now, which is a transfer of \$200 billion a year from the poor to the rich. The aid must be wisely spent with what I term democratic conditionality. This means you don’t just hand it over to the governments of poor countries and hope for the best. You insist that there is a fairly elected council, truly representative of people’s interests, sitting with the government. They jointly determine what the priorities are for the extra money. *They* draw up the plans, not the Europeans; but we have to raise the money.

openDemocracy: In your book you say that you favour socialism plus democracy but not social democracy. **openDemocracy** has featured a debate [14] around a proposal by David Held for a “global covenant”, which, broadly speaking, is a social democratic process at the global level. Held has been criticised by people across the political spectrum from Maria Livanos Cattai [14]

to [Patrick Bond](#) [14]. Could you identify what you mean by socialism plus democracy and where that is different from social democracy?

Susan George: For me socialism plus democracy means a great deal more popular control over what any government can do. That is why I call for democratic conditionality in different countries.

It means that exploitation has to end, and particularly north/south exploitation; that people have to have much more control over their daily lives; and that those daily lives can be made a lot more viable. To make the kinds of advances I'm talking about, making sure that everybody on earth is included, would only cost about 0.5% of gross world product.

My book, *Another World is possible...If*, comes after *The Lugano Report* [15], which is the other side of the global story – a system where capitalism decides that hundreds of millions of people are completely useless as producers and consumers, that they have no rights to be screwing up the planet with their political demands, their ecological depredations, their social problems; the system finds all of these too costly.

If we don't create a world which is much more participatory in all aspects of life, including work, then I truly think we're heading for a [Lugano scenario](#) [16].

openDemocracy: But if you think that's the case and you think that delivering real, concrete change is needed now, then aren't social democratic parties, as they've generally been known in Europe, the tools in that process?

Susan George: We had twelve out of fifteen European Union countries governed by these parties. Twelve out of fifteen! But what did they do?

openDemocracy: Well, there have been initiatives by, yes, even the Labour government in Britain such as a recent [push](#) [17] for more comprehensive debt relief for the poorest countries.

Susan George: They're so slow! They only do things ten years after they should. Worse, they signed up to the entire neo-liberal agenda in [Lisbon](#) [18], and now the socialists in France are saying we have to vote for this European constitution which will cement the neo-liberal system and the free-market competition system for decades ahead.

openDemocracy: One of the contrasts you draw in your book is between the ability of those on the right to efficiently, even ruthlessly organise – [Grover Norquist](#) [18] in the United States is your example – and the lack of organisation on the left.

Susan George: That's why I'm worried that we are using an ESF to repeat messages we proclaimed a million times before. I think we need to spend our time on organising among ourselves first: how do we change the balance of forces, how do we strategise, what are we going to do in February, July, and September 2005? That's the work we need to do.

openDemocracy: Do you think global justice activists should work through and with political parties how are they going to really effect change?

Susan George: To a degree, yes. We need thorough social pressure to make the parties change. I sometimes wonder if this is possible. In France, for example [Lionel Jospin](#) [19] still does not understand why, as the socialist candidate, he was defeated in the first round of the 2002 presidential elections in France. He made too many compromises. But people have a sense of urgency. They don't want all these compromises with the adversary.

openDemocracy: Many people sympathise with the feeling of wanting to give up on political parties. But, according to your own logic one has to keep working to change them because, as you argue in your book it is the nation–states, the elected politicians who govern those states can influence otherwise undemocratic bodies like the European Union.

Susan George: For the moment that’s what we’ve got. I’m very pragmatic. I’m sick and tired of questions like: “should we reform or destroy the WTO?” I just won’t deal with those questions any more – because this is not in our hands.

What we have to do now is to push as hard as we can with the maximum number of allies to get the change where we think we can get it – because if we don’t work pragmatically we won’t have the chance either to reform *or* to destroy the system. We are not the God the Father – so let’s stop talking about these issues as if we were! It is a pointless discussion at a time when the adversary is all but triumphant. We have to strategise.

Bush and Kerry

openDemocracy: In your new book, you say your own commitment to change is motivated by a burning anger that one too many times “the bastards have gone too far”. There are people who define themselves as progressives who argue that George W Bush is good to have in power because he makes it clear how bad “the system” is. On that logic, should people want Bush to win the 2004 US presidential election?

Susan George: People who can say that have not looked at what Bush does everyday. A calendar in the American journal *Dissent* [20] charts all the positive regulations of every kind the administration has dismantled. These entire four years have been spent destroying anything decent, and giving every possible favour to the rich; this in addition to the as many as 30,000 Iraqis who have died in the war, following the many thousands more who died under the earlier sanctions regime.

I’m not clear how much Kerry might change, but the only argument for retaining Bush is that one has fascist leanings – because that he is where is trying to take the country. Bush is destroying the constitution of the United States of America! If people consider that is a good thing, I leave them the responsibility for their opinions.

openDemocracy: It seems to me this is still a disputed issue among some people who call themselves progressives and who see Bush and Kerry as equally bad.

Susan George: This is nonsense. Ralph Nader’s [21] own party has implored him not to run. Naturally the Republicans raced to get him into the elections in Florida. He’s running in the same party that Ross Perot ran the last time. This is pure self–indulgence.

This interview took place on 11 October 2004

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