

Walden Bello on the Global Anti-War Movement and the World Social Forum.
Interview with Ruth Reitan, NIGD member and Asst. Professor of International
Studies at the University of Miami
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In late March 2008, Focus on the Global South's Walden Bello attended the International Studies Association (ISA) Convention in San Francisco in order to receive this year's Outstanding Public Scholar Award from the ISA's International Political Economy Section. Excerpts from his address can be found at:

<http://focusweb.org/challenges-and-dilemmas-of-the-public-intellectual.html?Itemid=153>

While there, he spoke with NIGD member Ruth Reitan comparing the rise, current state and future prospects of the global anti-war and anti-imperialist movements in Asia, the US and Europe, and discussing attempts--and also difficulties—in further collaboration between Northern activists and the most decisive forces on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan. Walden also clarified his recent critiques of the World Social Forum's role in advancing vs. hindering the global struggles against neoliberalism and neo-imperialism.

RR: I'm interested in talking about the international coordination of the global anti-war movement. As we see there's this kind of flow to the movements, where certain hegemonic themes emerge--anti-neoliberalism for a while, and then anti-war and then maybe now climate change. Can you talk specifically about the *spaces*—and these spaces can be social forums but also other sorts of networks or coalitions--that have been most conducive in this kind of switch from, or mixture of, anti-neoliberal and anti-trade agreement movements with anti-war?

WB: From my own participation, when we're talking about the interface between the anti-globalization movement that had emerged around the World Trade Organization and the multilateral, financial institutions hooking up with so many national and sectoral struggles internationally, I think the network that was pushing for the big September march in 2001 that was going to be coming on the heels of Genoa--Genoa having taken place in July before--this was going to be an even bigger confrontation than Genoa. Well, a lot of those energies which were blunted or which were not given an expression in Washington were what went into the anti-war movement. I think that a really important transmission line there was the World Social Forum that took place that year in Porto Alegre and then the European Social Forum (ESF) that took place in 2002. It was at the European Social Forum and the big anti-war march that the call was made for the international civil society to march in opposition to the intended war in Iraq on February 15, 2003. So you had all this energy around the global justice work that had been refused expression in Washington--and there was

momentary disorientation around September 11, but it was my sense that the disorientation was really, really momentary, and it was really people from outside the movement and the media, etc. who were basically saying ‘now the anti-globalization movement is dead’-- but it was almost natural that these energies would flow into focus on the anti-war work. And so that was my sense of the participants, in Focus on the Global South and the networks I’m involved in, that had been focusing a lot of work on the WTO: that most of the networks we’re involved with started to reorient themselves and became a mass base for anti-war sentiment and anti-war work.

RR: And it all happened spontaneously, everyone sort of agreed that this was the top issue?

WB: Yes. But aside from the global justice network, and the anti-globalization network, the war in Iraq had mobilized the old peace networks too. So it wasn’t just the anti-globalization movement morphing into the anti-war movement, but there were a number of other networks--as I said, the traditional peace network, many of them in the US, the American Friends Service Committee, and a whole series of groups--that basically had been lying more or less in stasis after the anti-Vietnam protests came alive again. That’s one.

I’m trying to capture this period now: Another segment of people that was mobilized into the anti-war work, aside from the global justice network and the traditional peace movements, was many sectors of the old left. Especially the Marxist-Leninist parties--communist party structures which, I think initially, many of them had been wary of the anti-globalization movement [due to] some sort of distrust of these anarchistic qualities from their point of view. And so they were not really that integrated into the global justice movement and they were not really that integrated into the World Social Forum at first. But the anti-war movement, in many ways--it was the war in Iraq that brought the old left—old left meaning Vietnam-era left--and the new global justice movement [together]. I think the war in Iraq really brought those two together.

RR: And has that been a good thing? Mobilizing the old left?

WB: Ya, I think overall it’s been a good thing, but it also has had its difficulties. And we could see that for instance especially in Europe where in many countries the anti-war mobilization fell under the leadership of what may be called groups that were very prominent on the old left, groups with traditional structures and methods of working on the left. So the Stop the War coalition for instance in England: You saw these tensions between what was called the horizontals and the verticals coming up, and I

think the SWP [Socialist Workers Party] did a lot of good work but at the same time there was this sense that came up both in the ESF and in the Stop the War [coalition] that people felt that it had a sort of commandist kind of way of relating to other movements and other organizations. And so we saw this tension especially in the ESF in 2004 in London.

So I think that overall it was positive, but it also in many ways brought tensions which were not really resolved. And I'm not exactly sure if this tension played a very key role in the sort of demobilization in the year after February 13 -15 [2003]. When you look at the US, I think if you look at the United for Peace and Justice network, I may be wrong but I think you have such diversity within the leadership, groups like Global Exchange and others, and so there's the combination of the old and the new: the movements, and groups like Global Exchange were definitely rooted in the American [and] in the global justice movement, and so you didn't have the same kind of leadership and style and methods kind of tension in the US that you had in Europe, especially in England.

... I've worked with them [the SWP] , and all I can say is that there are many people that are not enamored with the way that they exercise leadership, but at the same time I think that overall they've been important in the anti-war work. But at this point I think we cannot afford divisions coming from another era resurrecting themselves in the struggles of this era. That's one of the things. You can never completely break with the past. However new or reconfigured this movement is there are still tendencies, struggles and issues--whether it's an organizational thing or a vision thing-- that also get reproduced now, and it must not be underestimated, the impact of what I would call the dead hand of the past of early movements.

RR: And what about in Asia, were there parallels?

WB: I think that in Asia, if you compare it to the US movement and the movement in Europe, it was relatively low intensity, the anti-war movements there. Basically, it was uneven in its expressions in different countries. In India, I think that the anti-war work around Iraq brought together a group of some of the mainline left groups, like the CPM was very actively [involved, while] the new social movements were not that into the anti-war work, but from our experience a lot of the anti-war work was conducted with the old, traditional left groups and with selected new formations. You look at some of the main marches, forums, events that took place in different cities in India: from our own experience in Focus, one of our greatest allies in organizing things was the CPM--Communist Party Marxist-Leninist--, the one that is now part of the governing coalition, or a minor part.

RR: The Asian Peace Alliance: I saw something about that, but it didn't seem to...

WB: No, there were efforts, but as I said it was uneven in Asia, it was a minor actor, but during the February 15 march you did have major marches in Bangkok, Philippines, Tokyo, Seoul, Delhi, Mumbai, and you had permanent coalitions that were formed in places like the Philippines, but they really did not have a kind of critical mass.

But previous to that there were efforts, when we were engaged in the early 1990s to form a kind of Asian peace network calling for the demilitarization of the Pacific. Focus tried to form two anti-military organizations that would encompass both South Asia and East Asia, but they never really took off.

RR: And this was in the 80s or 90s?

In the late 1990s. And then there was the Asian Peace Alliance in 2003, when we called the first meeting, I think it was in 2002 but it also never really took off. It survived for a while, and the idea was that it would be a peace alliance that would take on not just war, like Iraq or the wars in Afghanistan, but internal, domestic issues, justice issues that led to war. The idea therefore was that we should look at security in broader terms, not just traditional war, but we're also talking about security issues, environmental issues, social justice issues that create conflict. That was the ambitious goal of the Asian Peace Alliance. There was an effort to bring together a number of networks, but it never really took off.

Now you've got to realize that in places like South Korea and Japan there were already pre-existing anti-bases networks, but through the 90s and the early part of this decade, they pretty much were of a low intensity, certainly not able to mobilize the big mass sentiments like in the 1970s and the 1980s especially. But these were some of the networks that came into the anti-bases network and anti-military networks--these were some of the networks that we were trying to pull together for this Asian Peace network that didn't really fly.

Then the Iraq war: What happened there was Focus [on the Global South] got together a delegation of people to fly to Baghdad in the weeks before the American invasion, or the threat of the American invasion. It was a civil society team and there were [also] parliamentarians from both Southeast and South Asia. This was of course one of several groups from throughout the world that were going to Baghdad at that

time, some to act as human shields, some to make a last ditch effort to try to force a diplomatic solution. We left-- We were there 'til about 36 hours before the invasion, and then we got out before the Americans started bombing the place.

But out of the peace mission that went to Baghdad in March 2003, we called for a meeting that took place in May in Jakarta and we came up with the Jakarta Peace Consensus. So in terms of the anti-war work around Iraq that emerged in Asia, I think the really key event was the Jakarta meeting. Quite a number of people were there, Medea [Benjamin] I think came from Global Exchange. So there were efforts [discussed for] future work that would be taken around Iraq--sending delegations to Iraq and also working on setting up an anti-bases network. There was a whole agenda of work that was set out in Jakarta.

The anti-war work in terms of Asia: [Following] the Jakarta Peace Consensus in 2003 we basically took the initiative, and Focus was a central part of it, to set up this international conference on Iraq that would take place in Lebanon in 2004. Prior to that we had tried to get together a team that would go to Baghdad in I believe it was March or April of 2004. We were about to go, in fact some people were already on the plane, one had already gotten to Amman, Jordan, and we were then told by the people in Iraq--this was the time that fighting broke out in Falluja and all over the country--we were advised no, so that had to be postponed.

But nevertheless the Lebanon meeting took place, I believe it was around July 2004, and it was really a major meeting. It brought together a diversity of people from all over: from Europe, from Asia, the United States, and etc. But it was really full of tensions. There were tensions within the hosts themselves: Because this was a meeting that was very impressive in many ways because it was a whole range of Lebanese groups including the Communist Party, including Hezbollah that co-sponsored this meeting, so a wide range of diversity. But at the same time there were certain groups within Lebanon itself that felt that it was just a certain set of actors within the left in Lebanon that were putting themselves forward and not including others. That was there, but I think that was a minor thing.

The bigger thing was the conflict between some of the Iraqi groups that were there, that were both exile and internally refugees and other anti-war solidarity groups that had both European and Iraqi people. And in many ways, we at Focus came into the scene thinking that we would come up with a really high-powered network, because this was really a major effort itself to bring everybody together. But there were all these tensions that broke out that in many ways we had not been aware of, on especially Europe-based groups that were working around Iraq. And it broke out in major arguments on the floor and it included plans for what would be a major goal to

strive for in the coming year. One group proposed that there would be an anti-war meeting that would be convoked in Baghdad itself in 2005 that would bring people from all over the world, and I won't name names but there was one group that was pushing that and pushing that and pushing that, and it was rejected by other groups.

So in other words, the way the Lebanon meeting went was, we in Focus had high hopes of bringing people together, but we were also naïve to the extent that we underestimated existing tensions around anti-war groups that had links with Iraq groups that were based in Europe, and then these tensions broke out on the floor. Which basically meant that the conference failed to live up. So if you're talking about Asian initiatives in the anti-war work, I think that was the last major initiative around Iraq in which Asian-based groups like Focus played a leadership role.

Now ever since then, we as individuals whenever we have been asked to speak and invited to anti-war gatherings either in the United States or in Europe, we have come, but basically as individuals or representatives of Focus within preexisting events.

We had not given up, however, the idea of having an anti-war movement that was supportive of Iraq, because the whole idea was that we would feed into this Iraqi solidarity that would organically link to the Iraqi resistance. The problem was that *which* Iraqi resistance? This was the time when there was no identifiable single Iraqi resistance, or even big groups. You really had a multiplication of locally-based insurgencies. And this was the time when we had the beheadings. Really what was happening was who do you relate to in Iraq? Was it a national liberation movement? Many of those fighting were fundamentalists. Who actually you could hook up with in an effective force was very difficult to identify, and people who put themselves up as representatives of the Iraqi resistance abroad, were in fact representatives of a very limited nature within Iraq itself.

The last initiative that we've had around Iraq over the last few years was trying to get an Iraqi civil society meeting in which there would be a coming together of Iraqi civil society groups and people on the outside, with no fixed agenda, but just to find ways of how can we support the emergence of progressive civil society in Iraq. And again in many ways that's been overtaken by events within Iraq, especially the Sunni-Shiite Muslim divide. We were in contact with certain Iraqi folks that had good names, I forgot his name now, but there were a number of figures that could bridge the gulf between Sunni and Shiite and seemed to represent groups that were able to come together but it didn't pan out. But we're still trying.

RR: So, what's your sense of this momentum or organization around the SWP--they

just had this World Against War Conference in December [2007] and they seemed to have brought people from the region to this conference. Is that one strand?

WB: Ya I think that's great that those initiatives are taking place, and I've been invited a number of times for SWP events, Stop the War coalition events but -- I try to work with everybody, but the difficulty is again that other anti-war forces see these as an SWP event or managed event. We respect the experiences of both the SWP and others and try not to meddle in this dynamic, but nevertheless it's there, and many of these things go years back, which makes it difficult. The SWP has also been working with other groups around something called the Cairo Conference, in fact it's taking place this March. I was invited to go, but I chose to come here [to the International Studies Association convention] instead. The Cairo conference is taking place at the same time that that WSF conference [International Council meeting] is taking place in Abuja.

RR: That says something--they're not checking each other's calendars!

WB: Right. So my sense is that you have all these nodal networks, but they have not been able to mount a coordinated international process since February 15, 2003. There were efforts: the Lebanon conference was part of these efforts, the various efforts around the World Social Forum to build up an anti-war network, the Cairo conference, the World Against War conference. I think that those are really important initiatives, but you have to realize that they haven't been able to come together in terms of a more coordinated response.

My own sense about the effectiveness of the anti-war work [is that] I think that the anti-war movement played a very critical role. Yes, it was not able to prevent the US from moving into Iraq, but I think that you cannot discount the fact that it contributed to ensuring that Germany and France would not get into the war, and I think that it contributed to the pulling out of a number of forces, particularly Spain and Italy from the war effort. So I think that those have to be acknowledged.

But at the same time I think that we have to recognize [that while] certainly I think it has played a role in turning global public opinion against the war so that governments and new allies of the United States wouldn't come and join the coalition of the willing, and certainly the anti-war movement in the United States played a very big role in turning public opinion against the war--At the same time, I think that if we really cut to the chase, what has made the big difference in terms of turning the direction of the war? It really has been the Iraqi resistance and then now, of course, the Afghan resistance. That really is what centrally has turned things around in terms of the US

capacity to impose its will. And I think that a very central factor--apart from existing tensions between old left and new movements around the anti-war work--a very central factor that explains the difficulties for "lifting off" has been the character of the resistance in Iraq and to a certain extent in Afghanistan.

I think that compared to the national liberation fronts in Vietnam, although the anti-war movement did not explicitly side with the Vietcong, nevertheless they saw it as a legitimate nationalist force trying to liberate their country, and that it was a legitimate struggle and that however much people thought the leadership was Communist, nevertheless it was setting its goals in terms of national independence, social justice, economic sovereignty. It was a secular nationalist force, and people felt basically that they may not actively get behind that but nevertheless there was confidence that it was forces within Vietnam that was pushing them,[so] you felt confident about your actions in this period.

You didn't have that with Iraqi resistance, and I think that that was a major, major problem in terms of really creating this dynamism in the movement that could override organizational rivalries. We really had a very different kind of resistance--fundamentalist, and these methods of beheadings--that was not something that people could relate to. And I don't think you can just blame the media. These images that came out--calculated, yes, to turn people in disgust from the war--but at the same time it is not the kind of thing that would encourage people to go out into the streets to demand the US withdraw in large numbers. So we must not underestimate the fact that there was a failure to relate to an attractive force in Iraq that was fighting the United States, and I think that was a very key explanation in terms of the failure of the globalizing anti-war movement to lift off.

Okay, so what succeeded though, from the Jakarta Peace Consensus, the immediate agenda around Iraq? One of the items of the Jakarta Peace Consensus was the creation of an anti-military bases network, and over the last few years in fact that is the one that has taken off. This brought together the traditional anti-military bases network as well as new ones in Latin America and new formations within Europe, and so the fact that so much of the Iraqi war was waged out of European bases again stimulated people and really gave the reality because of imperial war [being] waged from within your own country. And so there was consistent organizing around this, low-key efforts to bring this network together, that really came together in Ecuador in 2007.

RR: Were you there?

WB: Yes I was in Ecuador in March-April. And I think that was very significant, the formation of an international anti-bases network headquartered in Latin America, which had traditionally not played a key role in anti-bases military work. And so my sense is that this is a very live network, precisely because of the low-key efforts to bring it together. There were no big ambitious goals, and it wasn't something that was dominated by traditional anti-war forces, or left forces. This network has really largely been created by independent anti-military forces. I have not followed up on some of the activities, but I hear from Herbert [Docena] and others that it's a network that has a lot of momentum behind it.

RR: In fact its first 'win' was coordinated during the event, wasn't it, that President Correa said that he would be ending the base agreement. And he is in fact ending them?

WB: I am not sure. I think so but...

RR: Another thing that I recall coming out of Jakarta was also this International Tribunal to try Rumsfeld and Bush.

WB: Right. I forgot to mention that, the Turkish group. Again, coming out of Jakarta there was a proposal that there would be an international tribunal. The Turkish groups worked on that and in 2005 they held the Istanbul Tribunal on Iraq, with Richard Falk and Arundhati Roy. It was a very good exercise in the sense that there were international tribunals that were taking place in different countries that converged in this big event in Istanbul. So I think that that's the other element. Thanks for reminding me.

RR: And is that going to be translated at all into any kinds of initiatives in established courts?

WB: I think that was their intention, but I don't think that that has really moved forward.

RR: Maybe I could speak with Richard [Falk] about that?

WB: Ya I think that Richard would know, but I don't think that there has been movement along that front.

RR: Could we talk about the social forums specifically a little bit? You've been a 'sympathetic critic' recently about the social forums. For this article I'm writing currently we're focusing on what difference does it make doing things through the social forum, if any. Can you give your analysis about the anti-war movement working through the social forum versus working through these other meetings? Are they basically interchangeable?

WB: Yes, I would say yes. The social forum is a very good venue, whether it's the WSF or the ESF or the different social fora that have taken place at the regional level or even the national level, like the US social forum. I think that one of the things that's important is that it provided a space for precisely bringing different networks together, to interact; several networks as well as networks working on peace issues come together and figure out what to do. So I think that the forum has provided this space, and that's been invaluable, that's the first thing.

The second thing though is that a lot of these activities, or *most* of this, has taken place outside the social forum, whether it's the Jakarta Peace Consensus or the different conferences that have been called. We didn't need the social forum to make those events--we're talking about the international peace network or say the courts or the international tribunals. The Forum was a good space that assisted but it wasn't central. In other words, it would have happened without the Forum. That's my sense about the issue.

But the question is, could the social forum have done more, and that's really where you have the differences. Because some people, like Chico [Whitaker] basically want the Forum to continue in the way it is: that it doesn't take positions but is just a space that brings people together. And I think that you're familiar with the criticism I have of that which is basically, at a certain point, just serving that role depoliticizes the Forum. Maybe early on it was important to have that space so that progressives can come together to affirm themselves, but after awhile that function begins to wear thin. You end up just having one social forum after another in which lessons are not accumulated, it's just a festival or a market of ideas that does not result in more effective action. And my sense is that unless you are able to link the Forum to activist energies it's going to atrophy. And so my position has been that we're not asking the social forum to take stands on a thousand and one issues. I think that we're asking it to be partisan maybe on five to six issues and then structure itself as not only a forum for discussion but also as a network to move things along to achieve those goals. So my formulation of that is as opposed to a *liberal* open space, a kind of a *partisan* open space concept. And I think that part of the malaise or the lack of organization of the

Forum revolves around precisely that: The open space idea has become empty and this is really a problem for the Forum. I've made it very clear that my position is not that we should take up the Forum, that was more a rhetorical kind of question, but we should start transforming it into more of a partisan activist network.

And if that happens, I think one of the areas where this is so urgent is the anti-war network. Because my sense is that even if the Democrats get elected, they would continue to be in Iraq. Because it will create a massive crisis--they've already created a massive crisis. I think Pakistan is going to explode if it has not already. There'd be a very great temptation again to intervene there, and then of course Afghanistan is going to create more and more pressures for the deployment of US troops because things are unraveling there, which we told them way back, seven years ago, it's impossible. So I think the international peace network is very important now and has become more important in the last few years, And of course there's Iran, so you have all of these unresolved issues. The Democrats are going to need to prove their national security credentials. Just like Bill Clinton--one of the first things he did when he took over is to launch strikes against Saddam. So I think that even if the Americans were to withdraw from Iraq, to compensate for that the Democrats might look for adventures elsewhere and certainly in Latin America especially, with respect to Venezuela.

RR: So it seems that what you're saying is that if there is some civil society or some sort of resistance that looks enough like our goals or our ethics that emerges within Afghanistan or Iraq which is a critical-enough force that there could be some kind of solidarity between the anti-war movement outside and inside--until that emerges organically with enough visibility inside, then there won't really be much progress on that particular issue.

WB: Ya. I would agree on that. The chances there will be a force that civil society can support within Afghanistan and Iraq is probably very low at this point. However you have a mass opinion against new interventions and war and that can be translated into mass action when it comes to the possibility of new interventions, especially with respect to Pakistan, with respect to Iran, and with respect to Venezuela. So my sense is that any effort by the US to move into these countries would really generate a massive backlash here [in the US], irrespective of the fact of whether or not you like Hugo Chavez. It's just that--what I said earlier--whatever motives they come from, there is a weariness in this country about any kind of new intervention. It's the sense that the US is overstretched, that the US is in decay, that there is a lack of attention to problems at home. The motives may be very different, but in the Third World, coming from the developing country perspective, this is a kind of isolationism--

morally and politically--an isolationism that really needs to be encouraged at this point in time.

My sense is that both the Democrats and Republicans really are worried about this, because from the Republican end this really cripples their ability to intervene with force arbitrarily, and for the Democrats they see that the US has been a major role in the world [as a] hegemonic power, but desire a kind of soft power policy without discounting the use of military force. And so they are just as worried about isolationism, because what they really want is to recreate the post-World War II liberal internationalism, and that's really what Barack and Hillary are all about. They express it as 'to have our moral force in the world, to have our soft power, to have diplomacy rather than the military', but that still is a moral kind of imperialism, that 'we still are the city on the top of the hill'. It still has to do with an idea of American exceptionalism due to the fact that it is the 'natural leader' of the world.

And that's what I'm worried about, and this is why what we should really be encouraging both in the United States and outside is this looking inward, and forget about international responsibility, forget about international engagement, that we really need to look inwards. [This] really creates more space for countries to strike out on their own without the US policing them all the time. That's my sense of where things are headed. That people are just not going to support another major intervention, in fact my sense is that the irony of history is that Bush precisely created the conditions for preventing the United States from effectively policing the world.

RR: So just to end up where we began, about organizations: You said organizations, unless they have internalized mechanisms--

WB: Yes, the thing is what makes an organization successful for that particular era to meet the challenge of the times creates the illusion that it has found a formula for success, and the problem is that conditions change, and that conditions demand new solutions. When things change and organizations depend on the formula of success of the past, that's a very dangerous situation for them because they're facing new challenges with old formulas. And so how does one get out of that--the radicals of one era become the conservatives of another era. How does one get out of that?

I think that there must be an effort on the part of an organization to be constantly self critical, to reinvent itself every few years. A very important issue in this reinvention is to make sure that you bring people into the organization that have new perspectives and are young. There has to be a way so that the old leadership gets supplanted by a new leadership as much as possible in a voluntary way☺ Because younger people

coming from outside the organization bring fresh perspectives, fresh networks of support. Having said that, this is of course not a very easy process, we're talking about an organization that constantly reinvents itself because it has flexible structures; that's a tall order, because the natural tendency is to stick with the old formula, to stick to the old leadership, and for the old leadership to say, 'well, this is the way we've always worked and it has worked in the past'. So there may be some organizations that developed that formula, but we're at Focus trying to do that. Which is why from my own personal point of view I think that staying in the leadership too long is not good.

RR: So what you say about your own organization, could apply to the social forum too?

WB: Ya, I would say so.

RR: --that maybe it played a very important role initially but that we need to have some kind of mechanisms to re-orient.

WB: Right.