Trying to help, shaping the peace to come

THE SCANDINAVIAN ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

In spite of the diversity of national situations, there is undoubtedly a Scandinavian dimension in political culture, not only economic and environmental, but also in the field of foreign policy. This is particularly true insofar as the Middle East, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in particular, is concerned.

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with which those parties took their membership in the Socialist International (SI), made the latter a privileged instrument, or at least a positive echo-chamber, of Scandinavian Middle East policies. Having personally represented the PLO and Fatah in the SI for more than two decades, I have been a privileged witness to this process, the implications of which are still highly relevant to the present day impasses. Of course, this is a specific angle of vision and recollection, and may not constitute the whole picture: attempts to put an end to the conflict came from many quarters, including the US, but also the USSR, as well as Ceausescu's Romania or Tito's and post-Tito Yugoslavia. Recently, South Africa, for example, has also joined the group of states trying to contribute to the Middle East peace process. The matter here is to highlight the distinct Scandinavian role: not to claim it was the most decisive one, or the sole relevant one.

The most decisive factor in whatever progress has been achieved throughout the years in the direction of peace remains the double capacity of the Palestinian people to resist occupation and national obliteration, and to aspire to a peaceful settlement on the basis of international legality. The most decisive factor in thwarting progress towards peace has been Israeli policy, while the most crucial international player, in the Middle East as in the rest of the world, and maybe even more than in the rest of the world, is the USA. But Scandinavian countries have played a distinct role in this conflict for many years, and it is not by accident that the sole Israeli-Palestinian agreement ever achieved in a century of conflict bears the name of the Scandinavian capital where it was negotiated and concluded,

TEXT: Ilan Halevi

FROM A "NARROW" Palestinian point of view, "Nordic" involvement with the conflict is marked, as early as 1948, with the assassination, by Zionist extremists, of UN Mediator Folke Bernadotte, because he refused to endorse the Israeli occupation of Jerusalem and demanded the return of the Palestinian refugees to their homes. There is a long list of Scandinavian UN and international functionaries who have, for many years, tried to help in a variety of domains, and fortunately most of them did not have to pay with their lives for their commitment to their own sense of justice. But they invested considerable energy and talent in all kinds of attempts to be helpful.

Politically, the almost permanent hegemony of social-democratic parties over the majority of governments in at least three of the four countries,² and the earnestness

even though it was formally signed on the lawn of the White House.

In the history of the SI, two historical figures and founding fathers stand as particularly dynamic on the Middle East conflict: Willy Brandt and Bruno Kreisky. And it is no accident that both were in exile in Sweden during Nazi rule in Germany and in Austria. They were both in many ways the adopted children of the Swedish social-democrats, and they became sincere admirers of the Scandinavian model, before becoming father figures for the generation of Olof Palme, Gro Harlem Brundtland and others. Given the exceptional role Bruno Kreisky played in connection with the Middle East – being one of the organizers of Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977, and opening doors for Yasser Arafat and the PLO as early as 1974 – this connection is highly significant, as is the fact that Olof Palme was one of the first heads of government to receive the Palestinian leader on a state visit.

Europe and the US

In the Lisbon Council meeting of the SI in October 1993, a few weeks after the signing of the so-called Oslo Accords, much praise was addressed to Gro Harlem Brundtland for the role played in the Oslo process by Norway in general and by its Foreign Minister Holst in particular, who had just passed away. With her customary modesty, Brundtland recalled that “Norway inherited that ‘file’ from our Swedish comrades. When they lost the elections, Sten Anderson handed it over to Thorvald Stoltenberg, and Holst received it from him.”³

At the beginning, there was indeed a Scandinavian “peace conspiracy”. The secretary general of the SI at the time was

Finnish Pentti Vanaanen, and with the active support of the other Nordic social-democratic parties, the Finns pushed for a formal participation of the PLO in the Middle East Committee, while Sten Anderson, in his capacity as the Swedish Foreign Minister, took advantage of his official visit to Jordan to meet with two members of the PLO Executive Committee residing in Amman: Mohammed Milhem, the former mayor of Halhul expelled by the Israelis in the early eighties, and general Abdel Razak Yehia, who would later conduct, in Romania, one of the first public encounters between PLO officials and Israeli peace activists. This was in the spring of 1988, a few months after the beginning of the first intifada.

This context and the impact of the Palestinian upheaval on European perceptions of the conflict probably accounts for the acceleration of European initiatives in the direction of a political solution which could only be found, according to the 1980 Venice Declaration, “with the participation of the PLO on an equal footing with the other parties.” The PLO already enjoyed an observer seat in the UN system, but Israel and the US still refused to deal with it, and the State Department, as early as 1975, under Henry Kissinger, had put conditions – which it thought impossible to surmount – to such contacts: the PLO should “renounce” terrorism, recognize Israel (the concept of Israel's “right to exist”, devoid of any legal reality, was not yet systematically used) and accept UN Security Council Resolution 242 (adopted in 1967 calling for the “withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict” and the “[t]ermination of all claims or states of belligerency”) and 338 (adopted in

1973 calling on “[a]ll parties to present fighting to cease all firing and terminate all military activity immediately.”) Getting the PLO to fulfill these conditions, in order to make it an acceptable interlocutor for the American administration and forcing the Israeli government to cancel its veto on contacts with the PLO, thus became the primary objectives of those Europeans who were involved in efforts to create the conditions for peace negotiations.

On April 13th 1988, at the initiative of the Scandinavian parties in the SI, the PLO was invited for the first time to speak in a meeting of the Socialist International Middle East Committee (SIMEC) in Brussels. It took part, it should be noted, in the almost totally empty building of the European parliament on a Friday afternoon. The Israeli Labour Party, a founding member of the renewed SI in 1951, boycotted the meeting, but the Israeli Mapam party, the ancestor of left-wing Meretz-Yahad, was represented by Arie Shapir. He conducted a polite dialogue during the session of the Committee and even participated in a joint press conference.

Working towards peace

The date of the Brussels SIMEC meeting was not fortuitous: Sten Anderson, who was on his way to Washington in order to meet with Secretary of State George Shultz and report to him on his conversations with the Palestinian leadership in Amman, attended the meeting and had a lengthy conversation with the author of these lines. What looked like a promising development, however, did not interest the Israeli government at the time. A few hours later, an Israeli commando landed in the suburbs of Tunis and assassinated Abu Jihad,

considered to be the “remote control” leader of the intifada, thus providing Israel’s practical and official answer to these openings.

In September 1988, Yasser Arafat was invited to speak in the European parliament in Strasbourg. The initiative had originated with the German Social Democratic Party, and the invitation came formally from the Socialist Group in the European

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Parliament. In Strasbourg, Yasser Arafat gave several hints as to what was about to emerge two months later in the Palestine National Council held in Algiers: the Declaration of Independence of November 15th 1988, adopted unanimously, and the political resolution, adopted by the first majority vote in the history of the PLO. Together they basically fulfilled the conditions laid by the US administration for an official dialogue with the PLO.

While the Europeans, and even the Zionist left in Israel, including notorious “doves” in the Labour Party, acknowledged the change in the Palestinian position, the US administration still recoiled, claiming the terms of the Algiers resolutions were neither acceptable nor explicit enough. Here again, Sten Anderson intervened. He organized in Stockholm a meeting of the PLO delegation, led by poet Mahmoud Darwish, with a group of prominent peace-oriented American Jews. He then worked with

the us administration to invite Arafat to the UN General Assembly, where he would present the Palestinian peace initiative. In order to spare the State Department the embarrassment of granting, or refusing, a us visa to the PLO Leader, the General Assembly meeting was exceptionally displaced to Geneva, where Arafat gave a long speech in which one could, with a little bit of goodwill, identify all the elements required. Yet the American administration

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the ever-growing acknowledgement of
Palestinian rights.*

still hesitated to reciprocate by opening an official dialogue. This is when Sten Anderson intervened yet again. On the evening of the same day, he sponsored a press conference in the Geneva UN premises where he sat next to the Palestinian leader, who solemnly repeated the magic words, and agreed to isolate them from the rest of the discourse,⁴ eliciting an American reaction which took the form of a declaration by Ronald Reagan that he had instructed his ambassador in Tunis, Edward Pelletreau, to open a dialogue with the PLO.

Opening that famous press conference, Sten Anderson, who was gifted with an exceptional sense of humor, declared: "As we are talking about secret diplomacy, I will not tell you all the details of how we got here, but I will tell you some of them. Our own role in this whole affair has been mainly that of a mailman. But I must admit that we also wrote some of the letters!"⁵ To an Israeli journalist who threw at him: "But

the mailman has to beware of the dogs!" Anderson answered, "We know how to treat dogs!"

In 1989, the invitation of the PLO to the Stockholm Congress of the SI – an extraordinary conference celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the foundation of the Second International⁶ – in spite of the protests and pressures exerted by the Israeli Labour party, cost Finnish Secretary General Pentti Vanaanen his position. He went back to private legal practice.

I will recall here a short conversation I had with Sten Anderson in the course of the Congress of the Swedish Social Democratic Party shortly after. The delegates had proposed a resolution asking the government to deny us warships the right to anchor in Swedish ports if they did not submit to the Swedish anti-nuclear inspection procedures. The leadership of the Social Democratic Party, which had been in government for years, succeeded in amending the resolution and to obtain a two-year delay to find a solution, and lost the elections within less than two years. But at the outcome of that session, Anderson told me: "Just imagine that this resolution had passed as it was proposed. We would have been forced to inform the Americans tomorrow, and we could say goodbye to all our diplomatic initiatives!"

As Gro Harlem Brundtland put it in Lisbon, the Swedish socialists handed over the Palestinian Israeli file to their Norwegian comrades after they lost the elections, and they were the ones who took the lead in the process of official, but totally secret, negotiations between the PLO and the Israeli government, which would ultimately lead to mutual recognition and to the Oslo Accords. Of course the peace process for-

mally started in the Madrid Conference in October 1991, on an American-Soviet joint initiative, and along lines, procedures and architecture totally controlled by the US administration. That meant a very low profile for Europe as such, in spite of the fact that a European country hosted it. After the solemn inauguration in Spain, negotiations continued bilaterally and separately between Israel and the Palestinians, Israel and Jordan, Israel and Lebanon, and Israel and Syria. However, five “multilateral working groups” (on economy, arms control, water, environment, and refugees) were established wherein all states could participate. Norway – a NATO member outside the EEC, which, in that double capacity, enjoyed US esteem and consideration – invested considerable efforts in the peace process.

In the multilateral working group on refugees, for instance, which was “shepherded” by the Canadians, Norway played a crucial role, first by getting the group to appoint the Norwegian independent research foundation, FAFO, as the main resource for data, but also for analysis and proposals concerning Palestinian refugees. FAFO hosted the third session of the multilateral working group on refugees in Oslo in May 1993, at the very same time that secret conversations were taking place in the Norwegian capital. FAFO was headed at the time by Terje Rød-Larsen, in whose private home some of the secret Israeli-Palestinian negotiations took place. FAFO’s approach to the Palestinian refugee issue, however, was slightly problematic from a Palestinian point of view, because of its systematic dismissal of data from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

This appeared as converging with the Israeli insistence that UNRWA’s figures do not reflect reality, and with the American wish to close UNRWA altogether, and do away with UN General Assembly Resolution 194, which provides for the right of return for refugees to their homes and constitutes the basis on which UNRWA operates. After the Oslo Accords were signed, Terje Rød-Larsen was appointed as the Head of The Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator (UNSCO), a special UN agency to coordinate with the Palestinian Authority and with donor countries, while his wife Mona Juul was appointed as Norwegian Ambassador to Tel Aviv. Terje Rød-Larsen, and through him Norway, indeed played a visibly important role, and essentially a helpful one, in his capacity as the UN special coordinator. After his relations with the Palestinian Authority, and with Yasser Arafat in particular, became sour, as Rød-Larsen insisted on voicing out harsh criticism of the President of the Palestinian Authority, he was appointed as a special envoy in Lebanon, and he is still around.

The basic difference between the Madrid and Washington talks on the one hand, and the Oslo secret negotiations on the other, lay in the fact that while the PLO was excluded from the Madrid procedure, it was present as such in Oslo. Norwegian-PLO relations were therefore of the utmost importance, and the capital of trust accumulated in the earlier years was thus made to work. When it became clear that the Washington talks were leading nowhere, especially after the interruption of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations between December 1992 and May 1993, and when it became clear that only the PLO could deliver any compromise agreement on ‘interim arrangements’ that

were necessarily beneath the requirements of International Law, the newly elected Rabin government authorized direct and secret talks with the PLO. That was the Oslo track, which the Americans were first sceptical about, but the results of which they endorsed as “a conceptual breakthrough”, since it reflected a totally unpredicted Israeli readiness, undoubtedly tied to Rabin’s personal pragmatism, to deal with the hitherto taboo PLO.

After the Oslo agreements – the Israeli-Palestinian Joint Declaration of Principles for Palestinian Interim Self-Government Arrangements of September 1993, known as the “Gaza-Jericho” Accord, and the September 1995 Accord on the West Bank – were signed, Norway was unanimously asked to take the leadership of the various coordinating instances of donor countries (the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLIC) and related organs). The successive Norwegian governments, including the liberal-conservative coalition that came back to power in the late nineties, made the Oslo agreement their pride, their heritage, and their trademark. In the SI, Norwegian Labour Party leaders and government ministers such as Bjørn Tore Godal or Thorbjørn Jagland were unanimously and repeatedly offered the chairmanship of the Middle East Committee, where they acted as true custodians of the letter and spirit of the Oslo agreements.

At the bilateral level, at the same time Norway, “a small and rich country, which gives it special responsibilities”, as Jagland put it in the 2006 Labour Party Congress in Oslo, invested considerable sums in assistance to the Palestinians, both in terms of development and in terms of institution building, including support to Non-

Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations in general. Besides Norway, other Scandinavian countries are also involved in various forms of assistance and cooperation with both private and public sectors in Occupied Palestine, but much of it goes through EU channels. But at the bilateral level, this cooperation deals primarily with issues of human rights, women’s rights, democracy, good governance (“reform”), including the training of police forces, sharing of constitutional expertise, and more.

Scandinavian organisations

Looking back at those years, however, it seems obvious that the dynamics of Scandinavian involvement in the Middle East conflict and subsequent peace process have never been limited to government action or to social-democratic parties. Trade unions, youth and student organizations, private and public foundations, as well as NGOs, and a very strong solidarity movement, with particular features in each one of the four countries, all contributed in their own fashion to the ever-growing acknowledgment of Palestinian rights.

In Finland, throughout the eighties, the Finnish-Arab Friendship Society was politically active in a series of international fora, from the UN sponsored NGO coordination for Palestine to the European Peace Movement. Europe Nuclear Disarmament (END) was established in 1981 with the Bertrand Russell Appeal against the deployment of Cruise and Pershing Missiles (the “Euromissiles”). Starting with the Perugia 1984 third END Convention,⁷ the PLO attended every yearly END convention until 1992: after the fall of the Berlin wall and the dissolution of the Soviet empire,

Euromissiles were no longer on anybody's agenda, and END dissolved into the Helsinki Citizens Assembly (which the French call Assemblée Européenne des Citoyens). For years, END had been the framework where Eastern European "dissidents" such as for example Polish Solidarity, Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, or the Democratic Forum in East Germany, met with the rest of the world and with Western European pacifists ... and with the PLO!⁸

In Sweden, the social democrats had created a dynamic and active Peace Forum, led by Gunnar Lassinanti, which ensured their presence in "mass movements" such as END.⁹ In 1986, the END Convention was held in Lund, not only with Israeli and Palestinian participants, but also with such prominent Eastern European "dissidents" as Solidarność's Jacek Kuron. Other movements, in particular women's movements, have been active in that field for years. In 1991, in the midst of the first US-led war against Iraq, the Badalona (Cataluña) antenna of the Olof Palme foundation organized a seminar with Israeli and Palestinian participants, including Ephraim Sneh and the late general Aharon Yariv on the Israeli side, and with Fatah Central Committee member and Palestinian ambassador in Bonn, Abdallah Franji, Hanna Siniora and myself on the Palestinian side.

In Norway, the Palestine Committee and the Palestine Front, divided in the past because of their contradictory Cold War perceptions and still distinct today, have had a complementary activity and have greatly contributed to make the Palestinian issue and cause known to Norwegian opinion. After all, Norway suffered, in the seventies, from the Lillehammer mishap,

where Israeli secret agents, professional killers, assassinated a Moroccan waiter whom they mistook for a blacklisted Palestinian "terrorist". The killers were identified, and Israeli-Norwegian relations were quite strained for some time.

The cartoons

Public opinion polls in Europe, and particularly in Scandinavian countries, show an increasing support to the Palestinian claims and growing wariness of – and impatience with – the brutality of Israeli policies and practices. This often runs counter to the unending desire of the ruling political and intellectual elites, includ-

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ing the big media, to be recognized by Israel as "friends" and potential mediators. This is an all-European fantasy, as only unconditional support could guarantee such a status. But this contradiction, which exists in various proportions all over Europe, is a dangerous one: it opens a gap, creates a vacuum between official political discourse and popular perceptions that is not healthy for democracy, and in which all sorts of ideological delirium can settle in. The recent uproar created by Jostein Gaarder's article criticizing Israeli "apartheid policies", but also creating an amalgam between the Jews from biblical times and modern Israel and the accusations of anti-Semitism hurled at him by

Norway's Jewish community, but also by many politicians and academics, reveal both the permanence of great conceptual confusion, mostly because of the recourse to theological prisms, and the intensification of the Israeli ideological blackmail.

One cannot, of course, in such an overview of Scandinavian involvement with the Middle East conflict, ignore the recent affair of Islamophobic cartoons published in Denmark by a right-wing newspaper, reproduced in Norway and later in a series of other European countries in the name of freedom, secularity, tolerance, etc. The protests, gaining momentum long after the original publication of the caricatures, originated with the Palestinian community in Copenhagen, but was soon supported by the governments of several Muslim countries. Further, the protests elicited contradictory reactions on the part of the Danish government which started by haughtily dismissing the protest and refusing dialogue under the banner of freedom of the press, and ended up apologizing as though there was no freedom of the press. The affair went down to the streets of various capitals throughout the world, Danish and Norwegian missions were ransacked and burnt in Damascus and in Beirut, threats against Scandinavian citizens proliferated all over the area, including in Palestine, and a boycott of Danish, and to a lesser extent Norwegian, products was organized in several countries of the region.

The cartoon affair is at the same time devoid of any importance in terms of content and highly significant in terms of reactions. True, Islamophobia is no Nordic monopoly. It is produced daily in the us, where it inspires and impregnates the official discourse; it is produced in Israel,

where it serves a multitude of converging purposes; it is produced in France, where part of the left overdoes the extreme right in that capacity; it is produced in Russia, where it serves the war against the people of Chechnya, and it is produced, paradoxically, by the governments of several countries in the Muslim world itself, who use it in order to repress and isolate their own Islamic opposition.

But the affair of the Danish cartoons emphasizes one of the cultural dimensions and difficulties of Scandinavian-Arab relations. The Protestant traditions that have shaped the cultural and intellectual life of Nordic countries have indeed inspired humanitarian concerns, the desire to share, and a series of moral demands. But the focus of most Protestant churches on the Old Testament gives Israel, in the theological sense, a place apart in the world. Without sinking into the depth of Christian Zionism like American Evangelists and other "reborn Christians" (like the us President himself) and without following the footsteps of the Dutch Reform Church, which produced and endorsed the philosophy of Apartheid in South Africa, Northern European Protestants, who are the majority in their societies (unlike Protestants in "Latin" countries) still harbour self-contradictory feelings about Israel. Furthermore, these feelings exist without any direct historical experience, not even in the colonial mode, of interaction with the Muslim world. Here, the mixture of ignorance and religious prejudice can be particularly nefarious.

Scandinavian countries have traditionally played, each one in its own way and all of them together, a globally positive role in our area, trying to help overcome the con-

flict that has torn it apart for a century. One must hope that it will continue. But the configuration of the conflict, in the wake of the regression of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, of the us-led occupation of Iraq and of the recent Israeli aggression against Lebanon, is changing fast, and demands renewed initiative. Not only of moral commitment to peace and justice, but also of political intelligence, creativity and imagination. Here, the need for rationality and the discarding of ideological and theological passion is more urgent than ever.

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- 1 Ilan Halevi has written, among other works, «A History of the Jews, Ancient and Modern», 1987, Zed Books; «Sous Israël, la Palestine», 1978, Le Sycomore; «Question juive: La tribu, la loi, l'espace» (Grands documents), 1981, Éditions de Minuit; «De la terreur au massacre d'Etat», 1984, Papyrus; «Face à la guerre», 2003, Actes Sud; «Allers-Retours», 2005, Flammarion. He was a member of the Palestinian delegation in the Multilateral Working Group on Refugees from 1992 till 1996, and served as Assistant Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs from 2003 to 2005.
- 2 Liberals and conservatives always played a greater role in Denmark, but the international secretary of the Danish Social Democratic Party throughout the eighties Lasse Butz, a former journalist with no inclination for diplomatic self-censorship, was a very forceful critic of Israeli policies and a vocal supporter of the PLO. Danish student and youth organizations, which sponsored several Israeli-Palestinian meetings throughout the nineties, also played an important role.
- 3 Quoted from memory, as I was a member of the PLO delegation in the Lisbon Council meeting. Gro Harlem Brundtland's speech can be traced in the minutes of the meeting, available at the SI London Secretariat.
- 4 In 1975, Henry Kissinger had promised the Israeli government that the us administration would have no contacts whatsoever with the PLO so long as the latter did not renounce terrorism, recognize Israel, and accept Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 as the legal basis for negotiations. He then thought the door was locked forever. But the Algiers documents of November 1988 basically satisfied these demands. However, unlike the Europeans, the us administration claimed the Algiers resolutions were not explicit enough. Even after the December 1988 Arafat speech in the Geneva session of the General Assembly, the White House kept on claiming it had not heard an unambiguous statement, and the press conference was meant to repeat the required formulas without the rhetorical context in which they were enshrined in the

General Assembly speech.

- 5 Quoted from memory, as I was personally present, but certainly covered by the media present at that press conference.
- 6 In 1889, the Second International replaced the first one created under the impulsion of Marx himself, and it coordinated the international workers movement and socialist parties until First World War and the split provoked by the Russian-led communists, who established the Third International. In 1938, Trotsky's followers established a Fourth International. In 1951, socialist and social-democratic parties in Western Europe established the SI as the "legitimate" heir to the Second International.
- 7 From 1981 till 1991, END held a yearly summer convention, each time in a different country, and according to the local political context it was more or less official or more or less marginal. After Brussels and Berlin, where the Convention relied on opposition forces, the 1984 Perugia Convention, in Italy, was hosted by the local communist authorities, as the Italian Communist Party was an active protagonist of the END movement, itself and outgrowth of the British CND (Council for Nuclear Disarmament). In 1987, the Convention took place in Lund, Sweden, and the social-democratic backed Peace Forum was the main organizer in the host country.
- 8 In September 1985, at the beginning of Gorbachev's Perestroika, and in the aftermath of the 45-minute "chance" meeting between the Israeli Foreign minister Shimon Peres and his Hungarian counterpart in the corridors of the UN General Assembly in New York, the Palestinian leadership authorized me to establish contacts, on behalf of the PLO, with democratic opposition forces in the Soviet Bloc countries, "at the same rhythm and in parallel with the process of Soviet Israeli normalization." Several Palestinian ambassadors were involved in these contacts, which later helped to defuse an anti-Palestinian backlash in countries such as Czechoslovakia.
- 9 Former Danish Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, now the Chairman of the Party of European Socialists, thus formed, three years ago, a Global Progressive Forum as an entry ticket to the World Social Forum (wsf) and its regional instances, allowing social-democratic parties, and the SI as such, to become a protagonist in the international movement for "another" globalization, an evolution greatly favoured by the accession of Lula Da Silva, one of the founders of the wsf, to the Brazilian Presidency.