
An ATTACK on the Financial Markets!

An editorial titled 'Disarming the Markets', which discussed the tyranny of financial markets, ended with the creation of a popular association: ATTAC - Association pour la Taxe Tobin pour l'Aide aux Citoyens. It was the birth of the campaign to fight international financial markets and privatisation. It also stood for something - the Tobin Tax, an idea that international finance must pay its dues as it moves from country to country.

Today the national organisation of ATTAC has some 30,000 members. In addition there are also more than 200 local committees all over France, constituted as legal bodies (ATTAC-Pays Basque, ATTAC-Touraine, ATTAC-Marseilles, and so on) in their own right, with democratic rules that are imposed on them, in exchange for use of the acronym. They sprang up spontaneously, and a bit chaotically.

The national leadership and the executive committee of ATTAC sets the political framework, issues statements, animates campaigns, etc. But if it decides to organize a day of demonstrations against the WTO, nothing will happen unless the local committees want it too. In that sense they are the backbone of the organisation.

Excerpts from an interview of James Brown with Bernard Cassen, the founder of this successful movement against neo-liberal globalisation, and an architect of the World Social Forum, give us the story.

Excerpts from an interview with

Bernard Cassen on the ATTAC

by James Brown

What are the origins of the movement that has developed so strongly in France against neo-liberal globalization?

In December 1997 Ignacio Ramonet, who edits *Le Monde Diplomatique*, published an editorial entitled 'Disarming the Markets', in which he discussed the tyranny of financial markets, and ended with an appeal for the creation of a popular association, ATTAC which would voluntarily implement Tobin's proposal for a tax on financial transactions.

When I asked Ignacio later why he had come up with ATTAC, he told me he had been thinking of one of Robert Aldrich's movies, called *Attack*. So he conceived the acronym before he knew what it would stand for, which is the best way round.

The appeal was launched like a bottle into the sea, without any idea of what the reaction might be. But no sooner had the article appeared than we were deluged with phone calls and letters... We were at a loss to know what to do. We had thrown out an idea, but it never occurred to us that it would be we ourselves who would create ATTAC. In the following issues we kept our readers informed and said we were making contacts, partly to gain time. But by March 1998 the pressure from them was so great we realized there was nothing to be done: we would have to take responsibility for setting up the association, since there was such wide demand.

As I had some organizational experience behind me, I was assigned the job of taking this in hand.

My first move was to bring together the organizations - not the individuals - **that had responded to our appeal.** This was a basic strategic choice: to build ATTAC out of existing structures, whether trade unions, civic associations, social movements or newspapers. We also drew in organizations that had not initially responded, such as the Peasant Confederation, with which I was on good terms, and other unions.

Institutionalising against takeovers

Although I was far from anticipating everything – indeed I didn't foresee the emergence of the committees themselves – I did sense that problems could arise here, and so I proposed national statutes that at first sight may seem undemocratic, but in my view are by no means so. There are 30 members of the national executive, of whom 18 are elected by the 70 founders of ATTAC, and 12 by the 30,000 membership at large. The reason for this structure is that the founders themselves were very diverse. They include the Peasant Confederation, civil-service, trade unions, social movements like Droits Devant!, and the unemployed. There is no movement in the streets that is not a founder member of ATTAC. We reckoned that if all these forces agreed on a line of action and a leadership, they would give balance and stability to ATTAC, thus creating a framework that allowed smaller movements at regional level to develop freely. In the localities, you may find the phenomenon of 'entryism' – organized political groups joining the local committees to try to take them over. So far, they have always failed. But with our national structure, power is not there to be taken; it is proof against raids.

Within six weeks of our first working session in March, the organizations concerned had agreed on the statutes, a political programme, and a provisional leadership. ATTAC was officially founded on 3 June 1998. Its founding members were essentially 'legal persons' that is, collective entities to whom a few individuals like René Dumont, Manu Chao or Gisèle Halimi were added for symbolic effect. I was astonished by the speed with which the different organizations decided to take part, including trade-union committees not usually quick off the mark, and by the financial commitment that accompanied it, allowing us to set up an office and equip a secretariat. The periodicals involved, besides *Le Monde Diplomatique*, included the Catholic weekly *Témoignage chrétien*, *Transversales*, *Charlie hebdo*, *Politis*, and a little later *Alternatives économiques*, a somewhat social-democratic monthly of good quality. So it was a slightly curious mosaic. But it was not conceived and has never operated as an organizational cartel, which would have finished it.

The result is a situation of dual power. The local committees are independent of us. Each has a president, a secretary, a treasurer. Likewise we are independent of them. A kind of dynamic tension exists between the two poles.

How do you define the aims of ATTAC?

I call ATTAC an 'action-oriented movement of popular education'.. Our work is in the first instance though not the last educational. On any given day, we have a dozen meetings, conferences and debates. To make sure this mission is properly carried out, we have a scientific committee that produces or checks the accuracy of the books or leaflets that ATTAC puts out. This is one of the reasons for the high level of credibility that ATTAC enjoys in the media and with politicians.

Informed Militancy

Essentially, militants must be well-informed and intellectually equipped for action. We don't want people turning out on demonstrations without really knowing why. So ATTAC members aren't activists in the French sense of the term, which differs from the English, since its connotation is action for action's sake.

You've given an idea of the scale and organization of ATTAC. How would you describe the social base of its membership?

.. grosso modo, you can say that we are an association recruited from the lower-middle classes upwards, mainly from the public services, with a significant proportion of students and teachers. Employees and executives of the private sector are also present. We also have a sprinkling of farmers and unemployed.

What we do not possess any more than anyone else are roots in the working class, or popular sectors more broadly. This is an acute general problem in France, just as, I imagine, it is in Britain. There is a terrible crisis of working-class representation in the political arena...

What about the age structure of the base of ATTAC?

That's our second weakness. The generational profile of ATTAC is not good. We don't have accurate figures yet – a proper study will be made in 2003, but I would guess that young people, that is, under 35, don't amount to more than perhaps 25-30 per cent of the total membership. Of course, parties and trade unions have the same problem: they fail to attract youth. People say the younger generation will only go to rock concerts, but the truth is more complicated. In principle ATTAC can attract these energies, which you could see in the big anti-Le Pen demonstrations last May. But this is a youth culture

that is difficult to capture in any organized form. *You see a generation that goes from one big demonstration to another – Genoa, Barcelona, Florence – without ever really engaging in day-to-day activities, in a kind of political zapping. Then in reaction against this channel-surfing sensibility, you get the super-politicization of small nuclei who often take the lead in the streets, as in Genoa or Florence. But a political generation is never formed overnight, so something more durable may arise out of this mixture.*

The World Social Forum is often thought to be a joint creation of ATTAC in France and the PT in Brazil. Is that so?

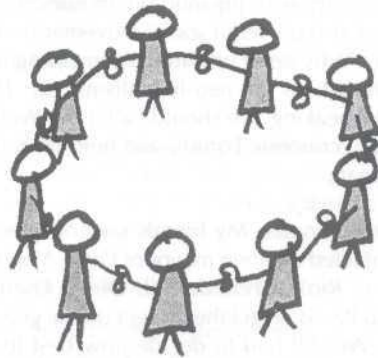
In February 2000 two Brazilian friends visited me in Paris. One, Oded Grajew, was a former entrepreneur. The other, Chico Whitaker, was the Secretary to the Commission on Justice and Peace of the Council of Brazilian Bishops. They said they had been to Davos, and they asked, 'Why don't Le Monde Diplomatique and ATTAC organize a counter-Davos?' I replied: 'That's already been tried, at Davos itself. But access to the place is tightly controlled, the Swiss police are murder, and to organize a counter-Davos in France doesn't make much sense.' Then an idea suddenly occurred to me, and I said: 'We need a symbolic rupture with everything Davos stands for. That has to come from the South. Brazil has the ideal conditions for doing so, as a Third World country with gigantic urban concentrations, a wretched rural population, but also powerful social movements and friendly political bases in many cities. Why don't we launch something in Porto Alegre, as a symbol of the alternatives to neo-liberalism?' ... Then I added with journalistic instinct, speaking 'we should call it the World Social Forum, to challenge the World Economic Forum, and hold it on the same day of the same month of the year'.

That took all of three minutes. My friends said: 'You're right. Let's do it in Brazil.' So they contacted the then mayor of Porto Alegre, Tarso Genro, and the then governor of Rio Grande do Sul, Olivio Dutra, as well as social organizations in São Paulo, to get the project off the ground. In May I joined them all in Brazil. We still had to decide how best to launch the project publicly. ATTAC alone could not do it. But in June there was the UN Social Summit in Geneva, at which dozens of non-governmental organizations were due to be present, offering an ideal opportunity. So in the closing session of the conference, Miguel Rossetto, then vice-governor of Rio Grande do Sul, launched an appeal for the World Social Forum which provoked an enthusiastic response. Six months later, miraculously, the Forum came into being.

How do you see the next phase of development for ATTAC and the World Social Forum?

The World Social Forum is not an entity, but a process – a snowballing momentum that is bringing together forces, which, though developing in the same direction, were without mutual contact and often completely unaware of each other. A global constellation is coming into being that is beginning to think along the same lines, to share its strategic concepts, to link common problems together, to forge the chains of a new solidarity. All this is now moving with astonishing speed.

What we are seeing today is a movement that, for the first time, is adopting the same perspectives, hitting at the same targets, and developing all over the world, linking local struggles to global objectives. History has accelerated so rapidly in the last ten or fifteen years that there is no reason to think it will stabilize now. I cannot help feeling that what we have achieved together so far will have some effect on what is to come. ▶



Organising Alternatives

In India we are being insidiously invaded with neo-colonial forms of globalisation. What collaborative endeavours are we forging to face this compelling force? What forms and levels of organisation do we see necessary for us to be effective? Does the ATTAC case reveal to us organisational processes that are worth emulating? Can we think of any comparable level of organisation in India apart from the formal, conventional political parties and their support organisations like the trade unions and student wings?

There are other questions that this interview raises - the place of non-party political processes and its impact on the polity. The early '90s saw an energetic series of attempts to get the various strands of peoples' movements and progressive elements from the voluntary sector to come together. This was a carry-over from the vigorous campaigns and coalitions that came into their own in the mid-eighties.

That momentum has faltered. Or is it only in the minds of the pusillanimous that this is so? Has the non-political stance left us on the high moral ground, even as the political spaces that do matter are filled by shallow and venal wo/men?

There are myriads of reports and letters, even books, on these struggles and movements. But critical analysis and reflection seem to be in short supply. We are hopeful that there are some books and reports hidden from our shallow gaze. We are sure that you will bring them to light for the Development Digest to showcase in forthcoming issues.