

The Davos Class

Sunday 24 February 2013, by [GEORGE Susan](#) (Date first published: 24 January 2012).

The Davos class run our major institutions, know exactly what they want, and are well organized, but they have weaknesses too. For they are wedded to an ideology that isn't working and they have virtually no ideas nor imagination to resolve this.

“All for ourselves and nothing for other people” seems in every age of the world to have been the vile maxim of the masters of mankind,’ [1] wrote Adam Smith in 1776 in *The Wealth of Nations*, universally considered the first comprehensive inquiry into the nature and practice of capitalism.

The masters of mankind are still with us: I call them the Davos class because, like the people who meet each January in the Swiss mountain resort, they are nomadic, powerful and interchangeable. Some have economic power and usually a considerable personal fortune. Others have administrative and political power, mostly exercised on behalf of those with economic power, who reward them in their own way. Contradictions among its members can most certainly exist – the CEO of an industrial company does not always have exactly the same interests as his bankers – but generally speaking, when it comes to societal choices, they will agree.

I'm not impugning anybody's individual morality here – there are surely plenty of kind-hearted bankers, generous traders and socially responsible CEOs. I am simply saying that, as a class, they can be counted on to behave in certain ways if only because they serve a single system. The Davos class, despite its members' nice manners and well-tailored clothes, is predatory. These people cannot be expected to act logically because they are not thinking about longer-term interests, usually not even their own, but about eating, right now.

You can find the Davos class in every country – its members do not belong to a conspiracy and its modus operandi can be readily observed and identified. Why bother with conspiracies when the study of power and interests will do the job? The Davos class is always extremely small relative to the society and its members naturally have money – sometimes inherited, sometimes self-made. More importantly, they have their own social institutions – clubs, top schools for their kids, neighbourhoods, corporate and charity boards, holiday destinations, membership organizations, exclusive fashionable social events, and so on – all of which help to buttress social cohesion and collective power. They run our major institutions, including the media, know exactly what they want and are much more united and better organized than we are.

But this dominant class has weaknesses too; one is that it has an ideology but virtually no ideas and no imagination. Their programme since the 1970s, usually called 'neoliberalism', is based on freedom for financial innovation, no matter where it may lead, on privatization, deregulation, and unlimited growth; on the supposedly free, self-regulating market and free trade that gave birth to the casino economy. This economy has failed spectacularly and is now thoroughly discredited, at least in the public mind.

Most people ask for no further proof; they can see that the system works neither for them, nor for their families and friends, nor for their country. Many also recognize that it's bad for the immense

majority of the earth's people and for the earth itself. The sole response of the Davos Class is to keep the old world order ticking over a bit longer, with a free pass for all the institutions which created the crisis to begin with. It won't work, not even on their own terms.

I believe that 'we' - the decent, honest, so-called ordinary people I meet all the time - have the numbers (and thus also the votes) on our side. We have the imagination, the ideas and the rational proposals as well as most of the skills and the scholarship - meaning we know what needs to be done and how to do it. We belong to a huge variety of formal and informal organizations struggling for change in this or that institution, this or that domain. Collectively, we even have money. What we do not have is the unity or the organization of the adversary, and we all too often lack the consciousness of our own potential power.

The Occupy Wall Street Movement in the United States and the Indignados and others in Europe have identified the huge inequalities that prevail in our societies as "the 1 percent" and the "99 percent" that roughly coincide with the Davos Class and the rest of us, although the former is closer to one-tenth of 1 percent. In other words, they have identified the adversary, the class that maintains a rotten status quo. Our task now is to build a vast coalition of all those who agree with the diagnosis, all those who want to fight for their future but also for a fairer society, a better world, a healthier planet. Such alliances, which must become at once local, national and transnational, won't happen by magic—they require conversations, debates and the concrete recognition that whatever our minor differences of opinion or emphasis, we are all on the same side.

If not us, who? If not now, when?

Susan George, 24 January 2012

P.S.

* <http://www.tni.org/article/davos-class>

* This article is adapted with minor editorial changes from Susan George's recent book *Whose Crisis, Whose Future?* (Polity Press and John Wiley & Sons, 2010)

Footnotes

[1] Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, Book III, Chapter IV, p. 512 in the Pelican Classic edition, Andrew Skinner, ed. Armondsworth & New York, 1974