Rethinking progressive and conservative values:

Spain's new economy workers and their values

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on interviews carried out with workers in the new economy in Madrid, this paper argues that the dichotomy 'individualism versus collectivism' is inadequate to describe their value systems. It proposes instead an alternative typology based on distinctions between 'personal' and 'organic' values and 'diversified' and 'non-diversified' interests. The development of these values is placed in the context of the specific history of industrialisation in southern Europe, which, along with eastern Europe, differs significantly from that of the economies of northern Europe which industrialised earlier and whose working classes developed different models of solidarity.

Some years ago, the communist East German writer Stephan Hermlin, analysing the failure of socialism in eastern Europe, wrote:

'When I was fifty years of age, I made a horrible discovery. Among the sentences whose meaning has seemed evident for me for many years was the following: "In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association in which the free development of all is the condition for the free development of each". I do not know when I began reading this sentence as it is written here. I read it this way because it corresponded with my understanding of the world in those days. My astonishment and even fright was enormous when I found out, many years later, that this sentence from Marx in the Communist Manifesto actually says exactly the opposite, that: "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all".' (Hermlin, 1979:23)

Stephan Hermlin's confusion was, and still is, quite prevalent within the socialist movement. It is not the product of a theoretical misunderstanding, however, but has deeper roots.

Solidarity, individualism and the transition to capitalism

The deeper explanation for this confusion between individual and collective interests is the fact, that during the first three quarters of the 20th century, most recruits to socialism could be described as 'new proletarians' - those parts of the population who were quickly drawn into modern industrial and state capitalist (and in the later period, Fordist) employment in regions that were rural or dominated by traditional industries. This

process was extremely rapid and traumatic in the Mediterranean countries and in eastern Europe (those regions east of the Elbe)¹. In this context, the dominant values were, and could only be, those that had characterised traditional, pre-capitalist societies: family and community ties based on hierarchical structures. These ties, which remain strong even to this day, were important political and ideological resources that could be counterposed to capitalism and market ideology. But they were (and still are to some extent) based on forms of solidarity that were not democratic but asymmetrical, forms that can best be described as ‘organic solidarity’. Within these regions there was a strong collective involvement but also a rather unequal distribution of power, knowledge and authority. Charisma was primarily based on male domination, with an emphasis on the importance of physical strength for obtaining an income, and also on a strong rejection of individualistic attitudes, because these posed a serious risk to the reproduction of the entire social and economic system.

In these regions, many pre-capitalist family and community-based practices survived for a long time, including the extended family form known as *zadruga*; the peasant communities known as *obschtschinas*; and the collective use of land (*the mir* in eastern Europe, or *tierra comunal* in the Mediterranean). This created a socio-economic situation and a system of values in these regions that were quite different from those that prevailed in northern Europe. In the south and the east, this situation endured well into the second half of the 20th century and fed into revolutionary movements, producing the dominant substratum of socialism in Europe during the 20th century.

Both Fordism and state-oriented socialism were able to exploit these ideological and cultural traditions for their own purposes, but they also helped to bolster the authoritarianism and corporatism that arose in Portugal, Spain, Italy and (to some extent) Germany. The huge cultural gaps between east and west and between central and southern Europe, which were systematically exploited for political purposes by the theorists of the cold war, can be partly attributed to this historical and structural social reality. This regional diversity also explains the loss of hegemony within Marxism of the discourse of personal emancipation. It also has something to do with the occupation of this space by political liberalism after 1968, which led to a decline of the left in Europe.

Only a minority within the left tradition insisted on the strategic importance of individual freedom encapsulated in the slogan ‘the free development of *each* is the condition for the free development of *all*’, a minority that was politically isolated within the large European socialist and communist parties. During the 1980s, this led to an exodus from the revolutionary left to political and economical liberalism.

This trend seems, however, to have halted since the erosion of the Fordist paradigm (see, for example, Bouffartigue, 2004). This aim of this paper is to discuss the meaning of this change and explore the dialectical relationship between individualistic and

1 Europe can be divided in the three zones (A, B, and C) depending upon how it made its transition to capitalism, its dominant type of labour and property during the long journey from feudalism to modernity, its family structure and the speed and nature of its industrialisation and urbanisation processes. The core of the A zone is England, Benelux, north east France and parts of Germany. In this zone capitalism arose early but did not generate the most revolutionary workers’ movements during the twentieth century because it also created social mobility and rapid productivity growth. The B Zone stretches east of the geographical line going from the Elbe river to the Trieste peninsula and the C Zone includes the regions of the Italian peninsula south of Tuscany, those situated south of the Duero-Ebro river in the Iberian peninsula and some parts of the Balkan peninsula (Steinko, 2004).

collectivist values and its implications for a modern emancipatory perspective. In order to do so, it draws on some empirical research carried out in 2004 amongst employees in the so-called 'new economy' in Spain, as part of a more general study entitled 'the limits of boundaryless work: research on new ways of working' financed by the German Ministry of Science².

The study

Between February and June, 2004, in-depth interviews were carried out with ten new media workers in Madrid, two of whom were also active in their trade unions, plus one academic expert on the sector. All but two of these were interviewed twice, with an average total interview time of three hours. Their occupations ranged over a broad field including graphic design, creative direction, body shopping services, network and services management, product distribution, software consultancy, technical consultancy, database administration and programming. Most were somewhat older than the average for the sector, with ages ranging from 28 to 43 and a median age of 37. Three were computer science graduates and one a fine arts graduates, with the remainder having either dropped out of university or not attended university at all. Two still lived with their parents, three were married with children, with the remainder living alone or with partners. Three were working in small firms (20-30 employees) and two in large organisations (a telecommunications company with 5,000 employees and a public research institute with 2,500 employees) with the remainder in firms with 200-300 employees.

Work in the new economy in Spain

For the purposes of this research the 'new economy' was subdivided into three subsectors: multimedia, software development and internet firms³. The new economy is supposed to be a trendsetter in the evolution of work within the neo-liberal organisation of work and society. It is a sector that is extremely sensitive to business cycles, stock exchange fluctuations and market competition. It is also subject to rapid changes as a result of mergers, strategic alliances, and speculative takeovers or sales of whole firms or holdings in them. Alternations between periods of boom and bust can radically alter working and living conditions in a matter of months. More than in any other sector, it is in the new economy that boundaryless work and self-exploitation (extra hours, weekend working and almost no regulation of working conditions) are most likely to be found and indeed to be regarded as normal.

2 Spread across several institutes, this project whose work had a number of separate components. Its outputs include, *Work within Project Networks*, Freie Universität Berlin – Institut für Allgemeine Betriebswirtschaftslehre (Prof. Dr. Jörg Sydow); *New Forms of Labour and Changes within Gender Arrangements*, Universität Bremen – Zentrum für Sozialpolitik (Prof. Dr. Karin Gottschall); *Firms' Needs for Autonomy and Labour Law Re-regulation: the Case of Salary Regulation*, Universität Oldenburg – Juristisches Seminar (Prof. Dr. Thomas Blanke); *New Forms of Industrial Relations? Changes in Work*, Ruhr-Universität Bochum-Lehrstuhl Organisationssoziologie und Mitbestimmungsforschung (Prof. Dr. Ludger Pries); *Work Organisation within Knowledge Industries between Autonomy and Linkages*, Soziologisches Forschungsinstitut e.V. Göttingen (SOFI) (Prof. Dr. Michael Schumann/PD Dr. Harald Wolf); *Effects on Social and Work Psychology of New Forms of Contract-Management*, Universität Bremen – Institut für Psychologie und Sozialforschung (Prof. D. Birgit Volmerg).

3 The multimedia sector was coded A, the software development sector B and the internet sector C in this research; these codes can be used to distinguish where the interviewees quoted in this paper worked.

The impacts of these forms of work are especially acute in Spain, which is the OECD country with the longest experience of high unemployment (mainly among people under 35 years of age), the highest proportion of the workforce on temporary work contracts, and one of the lowest levels of social spending in Western Europe.

The prevailing attitude to work in this sector reflects its use of mainly young workers who are perfectly aware of how volatile their working contracts are, and how temporary their economic privileges. They realise the necessity of accepting any work that is available, whatever the personal relations, until they find another job or manage to climb (temporarily) up the firm's hierarchy. Because the welfare state is underdeveloped, the family is the main institution providing social protection and social embeddedness. This is a situation that relies for its support on the values of solidarity between generations, genders and family members with indefinite and temporary labour contracts. Since the work culture is so strongly short term in character, it is very difficult to develop long-term plans for their own lives, to become independent or to 'grow up' as autonomous individuals.

This situation leads to a political crossroads. On the one hand, it can encourage infantilisation – a voluntary assumption of subordinate roles based on asymmetrical power and authority structures. These values tend to generate conservative attitudes even among young people, leading to uncritical acceptance of neo-liberal policies. These asymmetrical power and authority structures are not only present within families but also within most of the firms in the new economy which are typically very small and unprofessionally organised, based on a sort of pioneer mentality, with a company director who acts as a father, concentrates all the power and shows favouritism towards one or another of his children (employees). Family life and firm life are very much linked to each other and this facilitates an overspilling of attitudes from one institution to the other. Protest, trade union activities and rebellion are almost impossible within these spaces, not just because of the objective situation but also because of the personal nature of the relationships.

On the other hand, this situation can also lead to a protest against this state of things and to a more critical and sceptical attitude. This does not have to mean a rebellion against the parents' values as it did during the 1968 era; neither does it necessarily result in trade union organisation. More usually it leads to a strong desire to become independent, to refuse identification with the aims of the family/firm and to leave the parental home, even if this means that life will become economically harder and there will be less time for leisure because it is no longer possible to rely on their mothers' cooking and the household chores being done by the parents' domestic workers. The pursuit of personal goals and the development of individual values forms part of such a reaction.

What are the factors that determine which of these options is adopted? The results of this research suggest two groups of closely inter-linked reasons, objective and subjective. Values have a certain autonomy, which means that even when the objective conditions are similar, individual values can vary, as a result of which political attitudes will also be different. Objective conditions also play a determining role (for example whether there is a mortgage to pay, whether the employee has children and a range of

other factors which it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss. Nevertheless, critical attitudes only seem to develop where certain values are in place.

The values of Spanish employees in the new economy

All the interviewees were motivated by the high dynamism of the sector with its culture of constant innovation. They enjoyed the way they were always being presented with new challenges, ranging from cracking secret Microsoft codes or discovering a programming error to the knowledge that their work was from contributing to a television advertising spot that would be seen by millions of people, or a movie that would be premiered with a splash in a prestige cinema. Nevertheless, their values did not fit neatly within conventional schemes, traditionally captured (especially by the left) in the dichotomy between 'individualistic' values on the one hand and 'collective' or 'solidarity' values on the other. Whilst it is undoubtedly the case that the dichotomy between progressive and conservative values still exists as before, the best way to explain it is not in relation to individualism versus collectivism but as a result of other dichotomies such as those between *diversified* and *non diversified* interests, *personal* and *organic* attitudes, and *consumeristic* versus *non-consumeristic* values.

Diversified versus non diversified interests

Within this group of interviewees, the personal factors that seemed to lead to a broader range of interests were age and maturity, marriage or an informal stable relationship and living away from one's parents. However work-related factors also played a part, with professional recognition leading to a broader range of interests. Although they might be very interested in them, this group had a less extreme attachment to work and computers. Compared with those with narrower interests, they had more 'other things' going on in their lives which meant that they had become less exclusively job oriented and developed a more diversified way of thinking and living. Those with diversified values had developed more distance from their work and this had opened up the possibility of formulating a more questioning attitude.

Because the workers are strongly motivated and the work is generally absorbing, not having diversified values has a major effect on political attitudes: the predisposition to endless work does not just grow because of the individual's social and economic ambitions and necessities, but also because of the absence of other things to do. In developing this all-encompassing focus on work, they are playing into the hands of neo-liberalism. This does not mean that employees with diversified interests do not like their jobs; just that they also like to use their time for doing other things and being with other people besides their work mates.

Examples of interviewees with diversified interests include A1⁴ who is doing a doctorate in fine arts and desperately wants to find more time to finish it. Because his research topic has nothing to do with computers, he mixes with completely different people in his academic life. A2 has rented a studio to paint in, not only to diversify his sources of income by selling his paintings, but also to have something in his life apart

4 Interviewees were coded according to the subsector they worked in.

from work and family. This gives him a more critical and personal perspective on the sector and its rhythms. B3 likes to retreat to his little country house, enjoy nature and do some traditional construction work. C1 says that he would like to have a more intense political and social life and attend book launches, public lectures and other events. In the case of B4 (a woman with a child) the reasons for wanting to diversify her life have more to do with family relationships.

'I love my work, but I have another life apart from it. I like to do things with my boyfriend and I like languages and so on, but I have to discipline myself not to come home too late, not to do just this one thing, but also to spend time with my boyfriend. I am not very sure that it will be always possible to do this. When I was at Arthur Andersen I worked even more than now for less money. There, you really did not have a private life at all; you weren't even supposed to want one. When it reaches that point, you start losing control of the outside world although, in exchange for it, you do get the chance to control another little world.' (B4)

Diversified interests were more evident in the multimedia sector than in software or internet firms. They were also more common among those with artistic skills and jobs involving interaction with clients (A1, A2, B3) than among those with more purely technical skills and occupations (C2). They also seemed to be more prevalent among those who could be defined as 'middle-middle class' than those who were categorised as 'middle-lower class' and were more linked to *less consumeristic* than to *consumeristic* attitudes. B3 used the phrase 'yokel profile' (*'perfil paleta'*) to describe the unidimensional non-diversified type, which is culturally narrow and almost exclusively interested in technical issues. This is a Spanish expression that sums up a combination of low culture with a way of life that is consumer-oriented (and therefore believed to be a very 'modern') but also very narrow minded and simple.

'I think this yokel profile is much more common in exclusively technical jobs. When people have to travel and to meet with other people from outside their own little world, they should be broader minded and have an opinion about more than just one thing. And this is not a question of being a graduate or not. I once went on a business trip with a younger colleague. She was a telecommunications engineer and had done a masters degree whilst working at Arthur Andersen in the USA but it was simply impossible to find anything to talk about except computers and computers.' (B3)

Employees with non-diversified interests tend to concentrate almost all their intellectual and time resources on their work, but not all of it. According to recent studies, employees of the Madrid region who have a job (63% of the population of the Madrid region is less than 45 year old⁵) have a 'work hard and play hard mentality'. However, the search for amusement is not so much a sign of diversified interests but of a hedonistic and consumeristic night life (e.g. in bars and discos). It involves going out with money in their pockets with other work mates of the same age, partly to talk about work issues. A strong career orientation and competitive mentality are

5 Indicadores municipales de la Comunidad de Madrid (http://www.madrid.org/iestadis/fijas/estructu/general/otros/im00_02.htm)

characteristic of this group who also showed a strong interest in the value of money and social climbing. Employees with more diversified interests were usually older, more sceptical towards technology, with a broader and more critical view of the sector in which they worked and more personal opinions about general issues such as society or technology in general, the Iraq war or other topical issues. However, age alone does not provide the only explanation. As one interviewee put it
'There are some 50-year-olds with no diversity at all.' (F1/C3).
Other values must also be taken into account.

Personal versus organic attitudes

Employees whose attitudes are more *personal* tend to develop their own points of view and criteria for making decisions and organising their work and social lives. By contrast, those whose attitudes are classed as more *organic* do not present themselves as assertively and assume the values, aims and rationalities of the institutions they belong to, mainly the family and the firm. Organically oriented attitudes do not necessarily demonstrate more or less social awareness; they simply express a primary orientation towards micro-institutions and a lower capacity for – or a lower interest in – thinking in a broader way and viewing the firm they work or the technology they use in a wider context. Social life and social awareness are present, but their focus is narrowed to the circle of friends and family, to the project team or to the family-firm that employs them. When it comes to solidarity, the 'others' are just the members of this small group, including the family but not larger groups of people or society as a whole. It is not correct to regard them as 'individualists', because they have a strong group spirit. But the collective values they share are of a type that precludes thinking in terms of justice, social contexts or humanity.

Conversely, having more personally oriented values does not necessarily mean holding individualistic or even egotistic attitudes. It describes a capability for seeing things in a more distant way, from a more individually developed personal perspective. Among these interviewees, 'having your own ideas' can mean being able to keep a sense of perspective (both intellectually and in practice) in relation to issues like technology, clients, projects or competitiveness which might otherwise become overwhelming. It enables them to see these as part of a broader (social) system, and not as all-encompassing issues affecting all aspects of their lives, even including their health. This attitude is threatening to employers who do not like their employees to have their own ideas outside the general frame in ways that give them a critical perspective on concepts like competitiveness, modernity or technology. They prefer to define these unilaterally for the whole firm/family. Trade unionists interviewed for this study said that they have constantly to remind the employees who come to them for help that
'You should not forget that the firm, the work and the project are not your children – that you and your family exist apart from them.' (F1/C3)

In doing so, they are trying to persuade these workers to develop a certain distance from the work and to follow their personal interests and needs and not only those of the firm, the clients or the project. In other words, they are urged to liberate themselves from this kind of organic solidarity that transforms them voluntarily into slaves of

their work. These trade unionists describe employees who are strongly conscious of the high unemployment and volatile security in the sector, with many younger people waiting behind them for a chance of a job and are ready to 'give all of themselves' when they are assigned to a project. They do not only do this for objective reasons but also for subjective reasons (C3, C4). The factors that seem, from these interviews, to contribute to ending these organic attitudes include growing older, establishing one's own household, engagement and marriage, each of which stimulates the urge for personal development and the pursuit of individual interests and goals.

The computer industry is certainly full of organic attitudes but the phenomenon is deeper and more general than this: it is part of the south European social system. Because workers typically live with their parents until they are over 30, and because so many firms in this sector are very small and family-like, this kind of attitude spreads from the family to the firm and to work life in general. Employees do not question the decisions of their managers or the meaning of a project they are working on in the same way that they would not question their fathers or their university or technical college teachers. This is the 'plot mentality', the culture of the small community in which everything is assigned its own place, with no scope for questioning the inner rules and hierarchies.

'In technical colleges nobody disputes the opinion of the professor, even when there are unfair things going on, nobody really protests. You have to study too hard to have time to think about general issues. When you complain you have the feeling that you are a black sheep.' (B4)

There is no doubt that there is a relationship between personal attitudes and diversified interests. Diversified interests tend to give employees a broader view of their own lives and make them see their work as only one part of their existence. In this process their preferences become multidimensional instead of one dimensional (Marcuse, 1964). This attitude makes it possible to develop more personal attitudes and to build up a certain distance towards their 'own' firm, project, or even parents. Without at least some element of these values, it is very difficult to develop a critical perspective towards neo-liberalism or the prevailing norms in the new economy. Conversely, the development of such values brings a greater individual maturity, a maturity that makes it possible, for instance, to question government statements on issues such as the war in Iraq.

Conservative versus progressive values

A number of features of work in the new economy lead to a propensity for more individualistic attitudes than are found in Fordist work cultures: salaries and working conditions are negotiated individually; there are extremely high rates of job turnover and movement between firms; and there is a strong emphasis on the importance of personal values and attitudes in this sector. This seems especially to be the case in the software and internet sectors; rather less so in the multimedia sector. It is more prevalent in smaller firms, grappling daily with the hyper-competitive pressures of the market, than in large firms that are global players, where the corporate culture and more regulated work relations often

create a feeling of a 'corporate community' which goes beyond the 'plot mentality' of the small, family-like firms.

This individualism, however, is quite unlike the purely individualistic attitudes described in the methodological literature, neoclassical economic models or concepts of liberal citizenship. It coexists with other elements that push towards solidarity which seem to force their way through. Organic attitudes are only one, politically conservative, example of this. One reason for this is that the objective reality of work in the sector is too heavily based on teamwork, social interchange and day-to-day interdependence. Absolute individualistic and competitive attitudes or values that are simply anti-collectivist (in the sense of Walter Lippmann, 1955) are therefore neither functional nor desired by anybody, including the management, since they often go against efficiency, health, organic firm cultures and common sense. An example of this apparently contradictory value trend is the difficulty companies experience in developing coherent incentive policies. On the one hand, they need to establish bonuses for all the employees of the firm linked to global performance because work is more and more collective and impossible to fragment into individual performance achievements. On the other hand, they also want to ensure that there are individual incentives in order to maximise individual performance. Such contradictions are not easily resolved (A2).

But there are also other, more progressive anti-individualistic elements emerging. Spanish and Mediterranean societies contain strong elements of a collectivistic culture that transcends ideological differences and does not exist in the same way in northern and western Europe. There are close interconnections between personal and non-personal relationships and between individual and communal causes and life experiences, even within the competitive new economy sector, especially, and precisely in those firms whose cultures are the least directly linked to multinationals, global players and the 'American style' (B3), in other words in the (mainly Spanish) small and medium sized firms. To those in the transplanted and so-called 'modern management cultures' linked to the core of the neo-liberal culture, trans-national capital and 'one best way' practitioners, such attitudes are 'not very professional'. But the fact is they are one of the bedrocks of the Spanish competitiveness model because they generate considerable flexibility and are very prevalent both at work and within the social system surrounding work (family, friendship and so on). It is therefore not uncommon to see employees not only working well together, helping each other with computer problems outside working hours and sharing 'soft working times', but also co-operating to organise night life, vacations and parties together (A1, B1, B4, C1). *'At work we all share a lot of knowledge among ourselves but not so much with the bosses. There are a lot of email lists, all the time you are asking your work mates questions; they tell you their opinion, and you do the same. There is a lot of mutual help; the sharing of knowledge is constant. This is very motivating and creates a good atmosphere.'* (B4)

This explains why all the interviewees considered the atmosphere to be good or very good where they worked (A1, A2, B4, C1, C2) even though they all also admitted that the stress was enormous. When the atmosphere is regarded as less good (as for B3)

this is attributed to the 'narrow-minded' and 'yokel' atmosphere related to a culture dominated by employees with non diversified interests. In a significant number of cases, personal relationships developed at work even lead to engagement and marriage.

What we observe here seems to have not only elements of a traditional way of living and working together based on collectivist values but also a way of life that is distinctively post-Fordist, an expression of a youth culture resulting from the low average age of employees in the sector. Individual attitudes and identities are formed with reference to the peer group, hierarchies are not accepted between people of the same age (although they are when there is an age difference), and there is shared curiosity about discoveries involving complicity within the 'gang', whose members are perceived very differently from 'outsiders'.

'When you keep yourself apart from the group and, for example, you do not join in a card game, they look at you with mistrust. This means that there is an implicit drift to come together even outside work. Nevertheless, everybody is very discreet about what they earn. In fact they are nice people, but when I decide not to go with them, what I want is to have more time for myself, to develop other interests and cultivate other relationships outside work... Now I am working on a translation of the Communist Manifesto of Karl Marx, I am taking out all these horrible Latin American expressions nobody really understands; I am looking for examples from our time to explain its meaning and so on. I also want to separate those elements, which are not valid any more from those which are still very real.' (D2)

The spontaneous rejection of individualistic attitudes does not mean at all that younger people tend, for example, to organise themselves collectively to defend their interests or that they are automatically progressive, anti-war or against neo-liberalism, although it is likely that they could very well become so if political organisations and trade unions manage to find a formula for interesting them in a more intense engagement. It just means that the traditional dialectics of collectivism versus individualism are not suitable for defining their position. Such concepts can even can generate confusion if they are applied in the traditional way to political values following the script that collective values are supposed to be progressive in and of themselves themselves whilst individual values are intrinsically conservative. It is this sort of confusion that led to Stephan Hermlin's misunderstanding of the Communist Manifesto along with thousands more socialists like him in the 20th century. The reality is far more complex than this, and probably always was. individualistic values can be associated not only with more progressive attitudes but also with more conservative ones and *vice versa*.

As an alternative to the simple terms 'individualistic' and 'collectivist' values, it seems more accurate to make internal differences within both categories, or, as in this case, to oppose 'personal' attitudes to more 'organic' ones. The first of these concepts can be related to what we can call 'new versions of progressive values' and the second to 'new versions of conservative values' (neo-liberal hegemony). To be more personally oriented and to have more diversified interests can mean being more idealistic,

having a preference for content over form, being less utilitarian and having less consumerist attitudes (Stiglitz, 2003:118). These can contribute to the development of a modern, progressive, anti neo-liberal or altermondialist⁶ culture and value system.

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6 The term 'altermondialiste' was developed in France as a preferable alternative to 'anti-globalisation' in order to distinguish demands for an alternative form of globalisation based on democratic values from more reactionary and xenophobic anti-globalisation demands.