

REPORT ON SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The World Social Forum and the Rise of Global Politics

by John L. Hammond

SINCE 2001, ACTIVISTS FROM AROUND THE world who are opposed to neoliberal corporate globalization have gathered annually at the World Social Forum (WSF). The Forum



The crowd assembled for the closing ceremony of the 2003 World Social Forum in Porto Alegre.

brings together tens of thousands of people from the world's social movements and nongovernmental organizations in pursuit of varied agendas: for women's rights, small-scale worker-controlled enterprises, public health, community-controlled schools and a host of other causes. In the words of Naomi Klein, it's a movement of "one no and many yeses."¹ The phrase captures the pluralism and diversity of the movement, but at the same time makes clear that there is a core of unity about what it opposes. It also shows why it is difficult to analyze the movement.

The central point of unity in the movement is its opposition to the neoliberal model promoted by international financial institutions (IFIs) and transnational corporations. The IFIs condition loans to the governments of developing countries on a fiscal austerity that requires those governments to limit spending on their people's needs. And the corporations invest in manufacturing plants for export, driving down wages as they threaten to move their investments in search of cheaper labor. In the eyes of their critics, IFIs and transnational corporations perpetuate poverty in the Third World, while increasing

the steadily growing riches of the First. Indeed, the Forum's "Charter of Principles" broadly states that the WSF is "opposed to neoliberalism and to the domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism.... The alternatives proposed at the World Social Forum stand in opposition to a process of globalization commanded by the large multinational corporations and by the governments and international institutions at the service of those corporations' interests, with the complicity of national governments."²

They also join in opposition to the proliferation of free trade agreements through which developed countries subject underdeveloped economies to unfair competition. In the Porto Alegre meetings, the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) was a chief target. What's more, many fear that the FTAA and other trade agreements cement U.S. economic and political control over the region, exacerbating the ability of IFIs and U.S.-based corporations to exert pressure.

The Forum held its first three meetings in Porto Alegre, Brazil and the fourth in Mumbai, India. The fifth met in Porto Alegre from January 26 to 31, 2005, as this article went to press. The WSF has been a heady experience for its many participants. Imagine a gathering with tens of thousands of people (100,000 in 2003) successfully communicating across barriers of language, political orientation and issue emphasis. The scene bursts with energy as people who work on particular causes at home—feminism, the environment, indigenous rights, economic justice, human rights, AIDS treatment and prevention and many more—compare notes and strategies. Musicians and other performers entertain in the open air during breaks, and dozens of organizations and publishers promote their projects and publications.

Economic inequality features prominently in the discussions and debates. The Forum provides participants a chance to discuss strategies

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and programs for collective action. Against the belief in the free market prevailing in official circles, they seek to formulate a new discourse that will help them recover the ideological offensive. Rejecting Margaret Thatcher's oft-repeated injunction that "there is no alternative" to transnational capitalism, the Forum's slogan insists that "Another World is Possible."

Participatory ideology and practice are a common goal. Advocates argue that in a democracy, people should deliberate collectively and should, to the extent possible, determine government decisions directly rather than through elected representatives. This means participation at all levels of government as well as unofficial civil-society-based structures.

Participants also celebrate the great diversity among the people and groups the Forum brings together. They proclaim their respect for the varying opinions expressed and for the many cultures visibly present, and they defend the right of all to differ with one another.³

The WSF is self-limiting: its charter, adopted at the first forum in Porto Alegre, explicitly excludes political parties and forswears taking political positions or proposing actions.⁴ It is a space, not an actor: it opens its agenda to all the forces wanting to discuss the issues relevant to the struggle for a better world.

While like-minded activists attend hundreds of meetings in small rooms, they gather by the thousands in plenary sessions to hear prominent international activists such as Samir Amin, Noam Chomsky and Arundhati Roy. Some grumble that a democratic movement should not give so much space to celebrities, but against this, the WSF weighs the need to attract the international media and, to some extent, tailors the event to the media's demands. Though a double-edged sword, international media attention has helped the Forum communicate its breadth of demands and its broad opposition to neoliberalism.

These events bear fruit afterward. After meeting so many fellow activists from so many different places, people return home actually believing that another world is possible—in part because they feel they have experienced it. But it has concrete results as well. The Social Forum has inspired many replicas at the regional, national and local levels, and among specific interest groups organized around particular themes. The 2003 gathering contributed to organizing the massive February 15, 2003, demonstrations opposing the U.S. invasion of Iraq in which a reported 10 to 15 million people participated in cities around the world.

Organizers of the WSF originally conceived of the meeting as a counterweight to the World Economic Forum

(WEF), the annual conclave of the international capitalist class that usually meets in Davos, Switzerland. (The WSF times its meetings to coincide with those of the WEF.) In 2000, a network of Brazilian and French activists, NGOs and unions began organizing a meeting for the following year. Many of the Brazilian groups had indirect ties to the Workers' Party (PT), while the French activists were largely from the Association for a Tobin Tax for the Aid of Citizens (ATTAC, later renamed Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens), an international movement based in France to promote a proposed tax on international speculative capital movements, with the aim of making developing countries less vulnerable to capital flight.

As they conceived it, the meeting would be a starting point for creating proposals that would go beyond the growing protest actions against the neoliberal model whose promoters met in Davos. They drew on two broad currents of activism: the direct action movement that has mounted massive demonstrations against international summit meetings (notably against the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle), and the emergent worldwide civil society, embodied mainly in the nongovernmental organizations that have mushroomed throughout the world since the 1980s. These forces have been dubbed the "antiglobalization movement" by much of the press, but they generally reject the label. They favor a unified world, but one unified around common human values and respect for diversity rather than trade.

JUST AS THE WEF FOUND ITS HOME IN A LUXURY SKI RESORT in the Swiss Alps, the WSF's organizers chose Porto Alegre as an appropriate site for their gathering. Porto Alegre had been a longstanding PT municipal stronghold and a showcase for the PT's brand of participatory democracy. The most important exemplar of participatory governance in Porto Alegre is the participatory budget process, in which public assemblies decide how to spend each year's municipal budget. The process of deliberation is also a process of education, through which participants learn to respect one another's points of view and put the interests of the community above their own parochial interests.

The PT and the city government spared no effort in showing off the budgeting process to WSF delegates. Under the PT mayor, the city provided major financial and logistical support for the Forum in its first years, as did the PT governor of Rio Grande do Sul, the state of which Porto Alegre is the capital. When the PT lost the gubernatorial election in 2002, however, the state with-

REPORT ON SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

drew some resources from the WSE. And the party's loss of the mayoralty in 2004 further dampened the welcome in 2005.

The founders created an Organizing Committee with representatives from six leading Brazilian NGOs and the country's largest labor federation, the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT), as well as the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST). The NGOs are broadly progressive but nevertheless part of the national and international civil society establishment; the CUT hews closely to the moderate, pro-Lula line in the PT; only the MST is distinctly on the left within Brazilian politics. This composition puts the Organizing Committee on the center-left of the political spectrum. It later created an International Council of leading activists and intellectuals, mostly European and mostly to the left of the Organizing Committee. The two bodies have not always agreed.

The first forum brought 20,000 participants from over 100 countries to Porto Alegre from January 25 to 30, 2001. In the most dramatic incident of the gathering, the MST and José Bové, the French peasant leader and anti-McDonald's activist, led the occupation of a farm near Porto Alegre owned by the U.S.-based biotech multinational Monsanto. The company was allegedly developing genetically modified seeds on the farm. The takeover made some of the Brazilian NGOs on the Organizing Committee fear they had unleashed a monster they could not control. Consequently, they tried to moderate the tone of the second forum in 2002 to prevent a repeat of incidents like the Monsanto occupation.

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The meetings have grown spectacularly. Attendance has always exceeded expectations, roughly doubling from the first annual meeting to the second, and again from the second to the third. The meetings have evolved in theme as well.

At the third WSE, in 2003, the dominant issue was not originally on the agenda: the looming war in Iraq. Vehement opposition to the war became an ever-present theme of the large plenaries, smaller workshops and a massive protest march.

A highlight of the third forum was the presence of the newly elected Brazilian President, the PT's Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. While speaking of his "Zero Hunger" program to guarantee every Brazilian three meals a day, the charismatic former factory worker also responded to criticism of his previous announcement that he would proceed to the

World Economic Forum in Davos. While many in the audience shouted, "Stay here!" he promised to say in Davos "exactly what I would say to anybody here: that it is impossible to continue an economic order where a few can eat five times a day and many go five days without eating."⁵

The fourth Forum moved to Mumbai, symbolically staking in Asia the claim to be a genuine world forum. About 80,000 people attended, making it smaller than the previous meeting at Porto Alegre, but larger than the first two, and laying to rest the fears of some that it would be impossible to attract similar numbers from the many cultures and the extreme poverty of South Asia. The atmosphere was festive, following local traditions of including musical and dramatic performance in political demonstrations. The widespread Indian NGO network brought more poor people to the Mumbai Forum than were in evidence at any of the Porto Alegre meetings.

The same issues discussed at Porto Alegre were also prominent, along with some new ones responding to the local context: casteism, racism (not prominently addressed in the Brazilian meetings, even though half the country's population is of African descent), work- and descent-based exclusions and discriminations, religious fanaticism and sectarian violence.

Each forum has attracted parallel events. At Porto Alegre, self-organized world forums of education, trade unions, judges, peasants (Via Campesina, a worldwide confederation of national peasants' organizations fighting for land reform) and many more have all met concurrently. At the 2003 WSE, the youth camp, a tent city that sheltered some 25,000 people, had its own loosely organized, anarchic program of activities, though the campers also participated in the main events.

After the 2003 Social Forum, many of those who had celebrated it for the first two years began to complain that the WSE was not living up to its promise to serve as a model of democratic organization. Indeed, the forum now contends with four big issues of internal debate: internal democracy, political action, global vs. local struggles and class inequality. The first two issues have been debated extensively in the forum's councils and on the Internet. The latter two have not been so openly recognized.

Size and format conspire against democracy. A global movement has to be big, but the Social Forum bursts at the seams. It is a challenge for tens of thousands of people to come together in the same space for a short time and accomplish anything. The plenaries held in stadiums that seat 15,000 people only allow for one-way communication. Even the smaller workshops held in classrooms are

often impersonal. Most of them follow a hierarchical model: a panel faces an audience, gives prepared talks and leaves little time at the end for the audience to respond.

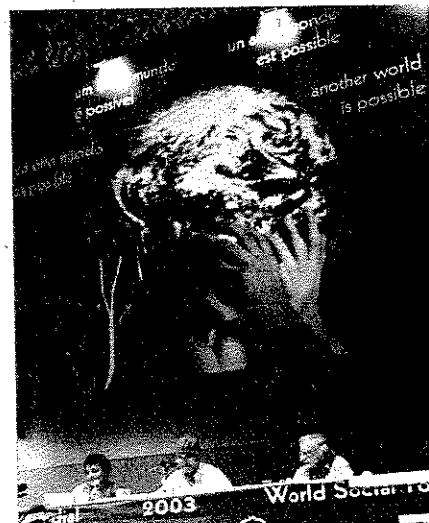
Undoubtedly, such a large event makes the full consultation of all potential participants impossible. It is difficult for such a process to function in an open, deliberative way or, even more, to give such a huge constituency a say in advance planning. Critics from the direct action movement, however, insist that anarchists have adopted consensus mechanisms that give representation and create unity among a large number of tight-knit affinity groups in massive demonstrations. According to David Graeber of the activist network, Peoples' Global Action, these mechanisms provide a model for democratic deliberation in large assemblies. But they have rarely been applied in anything more than short-term actions.

The debate over internal democracy has largely occurred among the participants from the North, or those exposed to the debate through their international NGO network connections. It does not much affect the thousands of participants who come from smaller grassroots organizations or who simply show up on their own. Those who come moved by a single issue can give their presentations, compare notes with others who share their concerns and be satisfied. In this way, what goes on in the small workshops and in the corridors is far more important to them than the decisions made ahead of time or the large plenaries. And those who come on their own, of whom there are many, come primarily as consumers of information. They rarely seek to influence structural decisions.

ALONG WITH THE ISSUE OF INTERNAL DEMOCRACY, THE Forum debates the strategic issue of its external projection: whether it can take concerted political action as a body. The Charter adopted in 2001 ruled out joint action, but many participants, including many on the International Council, want the Forum to propose and undertake worldwide political action. The political moderates, however, especially those within the NGO community, value the Forum as an opportunity for international networking and the exchange of ideas. They do not want the forum to go beyond its provision of a "space": it should be a talking shop for civil society and should steer clear of political intervention.

Other activists agree, but for a different reason: some fear that any concerted action coming out of the Social Forum will be marked by the same rigid, top-down organization that they criticize in the Forum itself. Naomi Klein, for example, would prefer the movement to remain rooted in decentralized communities, neighborhood councils and

Panelists, including Arundhati Roy and Noam Chomsky, at the closing ceremony of the 2003 World Social Forum in Porto Alegre.



land reform, "networked internationally to resist further assaults from the IMF, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization."⁶

Some on the International Council, on the other hand, see it as a waste to hold such a Forum merely to offer the like-minded a chance to talk among themselves. They contend that the Forum should seize upon its size and energy to offer a more coordinated challenge to transnational capital. The NGO-network model has "abandoned strategic programmes for the construction of a new type of society," writes Emir Sader, a Brazilian sociologist on the International Council.⁷ "They talk about thinking globally and acting locally, but the most they can do is resist." Instead, Sader calls on the Forum to frame "global alternatives to the big problems of the world" and present a unified challenge.

Here is a key dilemma: how can the forum's base act globally when it is so deliberately diverse and the priority of most participants is with their local and sectoral concerns? At the forum they discover that the problems are worldwide and learn about new ways to act locally, but they do not learn to confront the problems on a global scale. They believe that all their efforts will collectively add up to a global solution, but others argue that only a targeted struggle has any chance of success.

There is another largely unaddressed issue: stark class disparities pervade the Forum. Though the elite within the movement place themselves in solidarity with the oppressed, the Forum reproduces the hierarchy it claims to be fighting on a global scale. The class divide largely falls along the geographic division between North and South. It starts with who can afford to attend. Class differences create an internal hierarchy within the Forum

REPORT ON SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

that produces divergent positions on important global issues.

These distinctions are visibly present at the conference. In 2003 name tags clearly labeled people in bold capital letters as "invitees," "delegates" (those who had registered in the name of an organization) or "participants." Invitees enjoyed a VIP lounge, while mere participants were excluded from some sessions. And most of the leadership and the visible speakers are from the white, northern (mainly European) left elite, with the debates disproportionately reflecting their issues.

There is also a striking gender imbalance—not among participants but among speakers. Though some women who are stars of the international global justice movement, such as Arundhati Roy, Medea Benjamin and Susan George, have addressed the forum, many plenaries, panels and even the smaller workshops have only male speakers. It is paradoxical, of course, that such divisions and imbalances should weigh so heavily within a broad global movement dedicated to equality

and to an improved life for the marginalized and excluded of the world.

The Social Forum must work within these contradictions and overcome them collectively. It has exposed some of the problems inherent in mobilizing opposition to capitalism on a global scale. So far, internal problems have not been overwhelming. Activists rejoice in the opportunity to come together, meet and learn from each other. The Social Forum is inherently pluralistic. It would be hard to imagine an event of comparable scope and reach achieving greater coordination.

In any case, the debates are mostly waged not at the Forum itself but in print and on the Internet before and afterward. Most participants don't have to choose. They are happy to live the exhilarating experience of global solidarity, tangible in their interaction with others from around the world. They return home ready to fight against war and imperialism, energized to carry on the fight for social justice and popular sovereignty in their communities and in their countries. ■

