

Critical Reflections On The Fifth World Social Forum

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1. The Fifth World Social Forum, which met in Porto Alegre, Brazil, between 26 and 31 January 2005, demonstrated once again the enormous strength of the global movement that became visible in the struggles of Chiapas, Seattle, and Genoa. 200,000 at the opening demonstration, 155,000 participants involved in 2,500 activities, a wealth of cultural events, the concluding Assembly of the Social Movements that took up the call for a global day of protest against the occupation of Iraq on 19 March - all of these are things to celebrate.

As two participants from Britain, we greatly enjoyed sharing all this, well as encountering once again the warmth and hospitality of the Brazilian people and the dynamism of their social movements. It is clear that the ideas and agenda of the global justice movement have as wide an appeal as ever. All the same, there was another side to the 5th WSF, one that raises serious concerns about its potential impact on the world-wide movement against neo-liberal globalization and imperial war.

2. Let's start with the most obvious thing. The famous 'Porto Alegre Charter' - the Charter of Principles of the World Social Forum - is much invoked in controversies within the movement because it bans 'party representations' from participating and forbids social forums to take decisions. The prominence of the parties of the radical left at the European Social Forums in Florence and London was strongly criticized for violating the Charter.

Chico Whittaker, one of the founders of the WSF, has justified the Charter in highly poetic terms: like a village 'square without an owner', a social forum is 'a socially horizontal space'. How then to justify the fact that, on the day the WSF proper began, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva addressed what was notionally a seminar, but was really a mass rally of the ruling Workers Party (PT), within the WSF? Lula is not only leader of the PT, but President of the Republic of Brazil. His participation in the Forum doesn't seem very 'horizontal'. It's as if the village mayor, followed by his retinue, thrust his way through the beggars in the square to proclaim his love of the poor.

Two issues are involved here. One is the question of principle. In our view it was a mistake to impose a ban on parties, since political organizations are inextricably intermingled with social movements and articulate different strategies and visions that are a legitimate contribution to the debates that take place in the social forums. In fact, the Porto Alegre Charter has always been circumvented, but the Lula rally has made the resulting hypocrisy absolutely flagrant. It would surely be more honest to amend or scrap this tattered ban.

The second issue is more urgent. Whatever he was in the past, Lula is now one of the global leaders of social liberalism, belonging to a political axis that binds him to Thabo Mbeki, Gerhard Schröder, Bill Clinton, and - terrible to say - Tony Blair. His government voluntarily adopted a target for the budget surplus higher than that demanded by the International

Monetary Fund and recently pushed up interest rates to levels condemned by Brazilian industrialists as serving the interests of finance capital.

In this context, the nature of the rally that Lula addressed is also instructive. It was supporting the Global Call for Action against Poverty. Lula's agenda seems identical to that being pursued by Blair and his finance minister, Gordon Brown, in the lead-up to the next Group of Eight summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, in July. Blair, discredited by his role in George W. Bush's war-drive, is trying to project himself as the saviour of the world's poor. He and Brown are trying to recruit the support of the leading non-governmental organizations, which in Britain have taken the welcome initiative of launching a powerful coalition, Make Poverty History, to pressure the G8 into seriously addressing the problem of global poverty.

The fact that even an imperialist warmonger like Blair feels obliged to express a concern for the plight of the global South is a tribute to the impact of our movement, whose origins lie in part in the campaign against Third World debt that gathered pace during the 1990s. But the transfer of resources involved in, for example, Brown's proposed 'Marshall Plan for Africa' falls far short of what is required really to change the lives of the wretched of the earth. More than that, every aid or debt reduction package comes charged with conditions that would introduce yet more of the neo-liberal poison that helped to produce the present immiseration in the first place.

Lula's intervention in Porto Alegre was part of this project to rebuild support for social-liberal governments by repackaging neo-liberalism as the way to help the world's poor. Responding to this Orwellian enterprise by building mass protests demanding a profound global redistribution of resources, starting with the cancellation of all Third World debt, is becoming a major challenge for our movement, particularly in the lead-up to the Gleneagles summit.

3. Maybe the domestic political pressures on the Brazilian organizers of the WSF were simply too great for them to resist the demand that the Forum itself should be a venue for the attempt of Third Way politicians to appropriate the agenda of the altermondialiste movement. But they must take responsibility for how the WSF itself was organized. Taking inspiration from the 4th WSF in Mumbai, they moved the Forum from its old main site at the Catholic University (PUC) to a specially dedicated zone along the right bank of the Guiba river.

This had the great advantage, compared to previous forums at Porto Alegre, of physical contiguity (although the walk from one end to the other, particularly in the summer heat of a city in the grips of a drought, was pretty arduous!). But this gain was undercut by the division of the site into 11 distinct 'Thematic Terrains', each devoted to their own political theme: Thus Space A was devoted to Autonomous Thought, B to Defending Diversity, Plurality, and Identities, C to Art and Creation, and so on. The effect was tremendously to fragment the Forum. If you were interested in a particular subject - say, culture or war or human rights - you could easily spend the entire four days in one relatively small area without coming into contact with people interested in different subjects.

This is, in our view, a potentially disastrous development. One of the great beauties of our movement - and of the forums that have emerged from and helped to sustain it - is the way in which people from all sorts of backgrounds and with the most diverse preoccupations come and mix together, participating in a process of mutual contamination in which we

learn and gain confidence from one another. This dynamic was greatly weakened by the thematic fragmentation and vast size of the WSF site in Porto Alegre this year – all the more so because there were no generalizing events to compare with the magical opening ceremony at Mumbai, when 100,000 sat listening to speakers like Arundhati Roy, Chico Whitaker, and Jeremy Corbyn against the velvet backdrop of an Indian night. We know from the experience of the European Social Forum in London that putting together collectively organized plenaries is painstaking work. But it is work that helps to hammer out priorities for the movement, and to give the forum focus and direction.

This effect of this fragmentation, particularly in combination with Lula's intervention, is not politically neutral. It runs counter to the trend in the wider movement to make connections between the challenges we face, between neo-liberalism and environmental catastrophe, for example, and crucially between corporate globalization and war. As Emir Sader, one of the leading intellectuals of the Brazilian left and a WSF founder, put it, 'while the Forum emphasizes secondary issues, there is no major debate about the most important issue of the day – the struggle against the war and imperial hegemony in the world.'

4, It would be a mistake to make too much of these weaknesses. The 5th WSF was the occasion for many successes. The Anti-War Assembly, for example, marked a real step forward in cooperation among activists from different parts of the world. An alliance of environmental groups managed to launch a much needed week of action against climate change from Porto Alegre. No doubt other thematic assemblies and networks were able to take initiatives, though the general fragmentation makes it hard to tell. The final Assembly of the Social Movements, though regrettably not publicized in the WSF Programme, did provide a real sense of diverse activists converging together on a common agenda of struggles. And there were, as far as we know, some good debates.

And we should acknowledge that some of the difficulties are a product of political disagreements. The giant meeting that Hugo Chávez addressed towards the end of the Forum was a rallying point for the anti-imperialist left, and as such a tacit answer to the Lula rally earlier on – the implicit confrontation between the two leaders was underlined by the fact that both spoke to equally packed meetings in the same Gigantinho Stadium. We need to continue to have forums and mobilizations where the followers of Lula and Chávez – as well as those of us who have reservations about Chávez too – can comfortably work together and debate.

But the purpose of drawing a balance sheet is surely to offer some guidance for the future. The WSF in India a year ago set a benchmark that others – the organizers of the last ESF in London, as well as of the latest Porto Alegre Forum – have striven to match. For all its strengths, however, the latest WSF doesn't offer a comparable model. In some respects, indeed – in particular the thematic fragmentation that we have described, its example is positively to be avoided.

All the same, however, the Fifth World Social Forum did throw down a gauntlet to us. The challenge that it posed is not simply to denounce and to expose the falsity of the 'rescue' of the global poor promised by Blair and Lula. Anyone can do that. What we have to do is to build a movement capable of showing that it has a better alternative.

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