

The World Social Forum

A new framework for solidarities

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This contribution has been published in “Bandung 2005: Rethinking Solidarity in Global Society”. * It discusses only some aspects and political issues of the multifaceted process of the World Social Forum. Other aspects have been addressed in previous articles and reports. I hope to be able to prepare a more thorough paper in the coming future.

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The World Social Forum process, initiated in January 2001 in Porto Alegre (Brazil), represents one of the main attempts to build a framework in which old and new types of solidarities can dynamically combine. The success of the fifth World Social Forum, in January 2005, shows that this experiment is still very much alive. But it also shows that this process today faces new challenges and new tasks of coordination.

The World Social Forum (WSF) in Porto Alegre represented a significant step forward. The figures are impressive. Record participation, with 155,000 people registered, coming from 135 countries. For the opening of the World Social Forum (WSF) in Porto Alegre, there was a demonstration that was even bigger than on previous occasions (figures given go up to nearly 200.000). There were about 2,500 activities organised over four days. Such a numerical success must not be treated as a matter of course; it has to be explained.

In going back to Porto Alegre after having migrated last year to Mumbai in India, the WSF could have lost its momentum. And indeed there were many who announced that it was running out of steam, or even that it was in decline. The question deserved to be asked, insofar as the international situation is bad and the policies applied in Brazil by the Lula government could have had a demobilizing effect. However it very quickly became clear that there was a significant increase in the number of people registering for the WSF. The success of the Forum was thus foreseeable in November 2004, even though some people continued speculating about its failure right up until the opening day.

The particular success of the 5th WSF can partly be explained too by the Latin American context: the scale of neo-liberal attacks, coupled with the aggressive policy of intervention and of so-called “preventive” wars that Bush is so fond of, are creating profound instability and new phases or radicalisation, of politicisation. Demonstrating this politicisation, the debates over questions of orientation and strategy were particularly well attended at the WSF. It was apparently the first occasion for many Brazilian activists, in particular the young ones, to engage into broad and contradictory discussions on the evaluation of the Lula government’s policies. But the phenomenon is not just Latin American.

The process of social forums is spreading on an international scale. It resisted the ideological counter-shock of the attacks of September 11, 2001, as well as Berlusconi's repression at Genoa. It still expresses the offensive frame of mind that has characterised it since the beginning, in 2001, even though the bourgeoisie is still dealing severe blows against the workers' and peoples' movements.

Elements of continuity

Quite logically, the numerical scope of a social forum depends on the host country (in Europe, for example, it was smaller in London than in Florence or Paris). But since 2001, although not uniform, it is much more consistent than social or anti-war mobilizations; is even on the increase. This remains true at least when one condition is met: the range of organizations involved in its preparation must be sufficiently representative and diversified. In such cases, the forums fill a specific function.

The conception of the forums flows from the characteristics of the present period. It provides for both defensive regrouping faced with the universal nature of neo-liberal, anti-democratic and militarist attacks; and for the offensive expression of alternatives incarnated by new generations of activists. It gives an answer to an essential question: how to build links of solidarity and ensure convergences in struggle between very varied sectors of society (all of whom are hit by the ultimate "commodification" of the world) and much more varied fields of mobilisations than in the past.

A new answer to this question had to be given also because conditions of unity have changed since the 1970s (the previous period of international radicalisation). Beyond the student radicalisation, there was then the centrality of the labour movement (in the West mostly) and of (actual or potential) protracted armed struggles in the Third World. In some countries, the trade-union movement may still play a similar backbone role (for example, the KCTU in South Korea...). But overall, we today have to do without such organisational poles of attraction, of centralisation. This is not to say that the "new" forms of organisations eliminates and replaces the "old" ones. Many so-called "traditional" movements (like unions) are key components of the social forum process. But solidarities combine in a new way.

This new framework, among other reasons, explains the present function of the Porto Alegre type of Social Forums. They offer an "open space", a free space, where all types of organisations can meet and exchange, in a much less hierarchical way than in the past. A space where resistance to liberal economic policies as well as alternatives and aspirations for change can be collectively expressed. A militant space too, where unity can be forged, where international campaigns can be discussed and where a common calendar of initiatives can be elaborated. This combination between the "open space" of convergences and the capacity of the concerned movements to prepare actions proved to be very dynamic. The forums also provide a way of getting involved in politics at a time when the authority of political parties is being challenged.

For sure, contradictions are very much at work within this process. But the Social Forums embody a much more complex and rich process than traditional international conferences (of trade-unions or NGOs...), a new form of unity-building. They spread significantly at the world, regional, national and local levels. Porto Alegre 2005 has shown that their function remains essential today in Latin America. The resounding impact of Mumbai, last year, allowed the process to grapple with Asian reality. In Europe the European Social Forum is helping to define a common action programme on a specifically European level, which the unions, on their own, have been unable to do for the last forty years. The task is not simple, success is not guaranteed but it is highly significant that the question

is posed in the framework offered by the forums.

Nothing is eternal, not even the social forums; but clearly they remain extremely useful. In this sense, they have demonstrated, over the last five years, a high degree of continuity.

Evolution

Continuity does not mean immobility. Mumbai represented a turning point in the history of the World Social Forum. No other has been as popular as this one, with such an intense participation of grassroots organisations.

Porto Alegre 2005 benefited positively from Mumbai's experience. The forum represented an opening on many levels. Physically, by leaving the campus of the Catholic University, by pitching its tents by the side of the lagoon, by getting closer to the centre of the city and to the local population. In terms of generations, by placing the Youth Camp at the very heart of the site and not on the far fringes (it accommodated 35,000 people, especially Brazilians, followed by Argentinians). In terms of practice, by taking environmental questions fully into account in the way the site was conceived, using small producers for food supplies, using free software, without forgetting the role of the Babels network of voluntary interpreters - all these are examples. Organizationally, the priority was given to self-organized initiatives.

A new "methodology" (to use the vocabulary of the Forum) was applied. The programme was worked out after very wide consultation of base organizations. Eleven "axes", "fields" or "areas" were defined, so as to ensure the visibility of the major themes dealt with. All the movements were invited to check whether their initiatives could be regrouped, in order to reinforce dialogue and collaboration (the process known as "agglutination"). Every theme had to try to link reflection to proposals for actions and campaigns, to make a closer link between debates and mobilizations.

This new, complex, methodology was implemented in a very short space of time. A little time will need to pass before we can judge its results. But it seems really to have enabled networks of militants to discuss different approaches and to define, over and above political differences, common campaigning grounds. It also created a new balance between the themes of debate within the Forum and the Assembly of Social Movements, which in Porto Alegre remained the place where a common calendar for action on an international scale was worked out.

Expansion and articulation

North to South "traditional" solidarities remains necessary, so desperate is the situation in many third world countries. Present regional inequalities are no less grave than they were in the past, they even may be worse. Recent tidal waves in California did not kill, while the December 26, 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami provoked 300.000 deaths. In times of emergency, in the post-tsunami situation, the role of local grassroots organisations and people's movements proved to be essential; it is still true nowadays, on the decisive issue of economic, social and psychological reconstruction. At this occasion, links were tied and strengthened between social movements in the North and their counterparts in the disaster-stricken countries and "traditional" international campaigns were revived, like for the cancellation of the third-world debt.

But new "horizontal" solidarities are also blooming. Never in the past have the same (neo-liberal and anti-democratic) policies been applied by the same institutions in such a universal way: from East to West and from South to North, we are all confronted with the same deregulations, privatizations and

opening-up of markets, with the same attacks on civil liberties. "Preventive" war and "anti-terrorist" ideology appear as the counterparts of capitalist globalization. As a result we really need to build a common international front of resistance and of alternatives.

The social forums offer a framework where both types of solidarities ("traditional" and "horizontal") can be addressed. But, in the coming few years, there is a real danger of disarticulation between the process of the forums and the mobilisations.

The specific, thematic campaigns are again occupying a more important place, after the big "general" mobilizations of past years against neo-liberal policies: for the cancellation of Third World debt, against discrimination (see the publication by the World March of Women of a 31-point charter [1]) and against the war in Iraq, for example. That is in itself a good thing. But it also stresses the need to keep common rallying points where all the fronts of struggle can converge.

In the coming two years, the role of the regional forums will probably be reinforced in relation to the world forum. Struggles tend to be rooted at the national or sub-continental level (the question of Venezuela in Latin America, the question of the Constitution and of public services in Europe). In 2006, the World Social Forum will be "decentralised", inevitably taking on a more regional content than previously.

These evolutions are taking place in response to real developments and there is nothing negative about them as such; they are necessary. The problem is that the places where information and reflection are collectivised on an international level, where regional and thematic processes are articulated, are being weakened at the very moment when the movement as a whole is further diversifying. In its composition and its functioning, the international council of the WSF does not correspond to this need (it was not capable of concluding the very important discussion on the rhythm of the forums), even though its commissions can be more effective.

The organizing pole of the network of social movements has to be renewed, but how to do it is not at all obvious. The various so-called "intellectual" networks, which are trying to make the link between developing fundamental analyses and bringing answers to the needs of militants, have to co-operate more closely, but they are not yet doing so.

If we want to avoid the decentralisation of the movement leading to its disarticulation (and to a weakening of the capacity of collective resistance to liberal and military globalisation), new and concrete answers will also have to be found on this level.

NOTES

[1] "World Charter of Women for Humanity" adopted at the 5th international meeting of the World March of Women in Rwanda, 10 December 2004.

P.S.

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* Darwis Khudori editor, "Bandung 2005: Rethinking Solidarity in Global Society. The Challenge of Globalisation for Social and Solidarity Movements. 50 Years after Bandung Asian African Conference 1955 Preliminary Work", Ghadjah Mada University, Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Cultural Science & Yayasan Pondok Rakyat (People's Shelter Foundation), Action-Research Group on Urban Development, Yogyakarta, 2005.