

## World Social Forum: the secret of fire

**Peter Waterman**

18 June 2003

*The World Social Forum in January 2003 represented a new stage in the unfolding project of the global justice and solidarity movement. An experienced observer of the WSF asks whether it can combine its multiple energies with the clarity needed to transcend old politics – while establishing its own forms of legitimate, transparent representation? Who governs the WSF and where is it going?*

### Dis/orienting introduction

In my corner of the third World Social Forum (WSF) in Porto Alegre in January 2003, there were simultaneous and contradictory feelings: euphoria and disorientation, stimulation and frustration. We found ourselves in both a uniquely international, and a frankly commercial, market place (both latter meanings contained in the Greek 'agora').

My angle of vision might be narrow, but I would like to think it is also significant. It is as novel and elusive of definition as is the WSF process itself. Both are in the process of rapid spread and evolution: people are already talking of the globalisation of the Forum.

My own vantage-point might be called 'libertarian', 'emancipatory', or 'post-capitalist' (to be distinguished from the negative 'anti-capitalist'). People like me are on a critical but committed edge of the Forum, significant because this space overlaps both with the

decision-making centre and its various leftist peripheries.

From here, the Forum seems out of control in three *negative* ways. It is too big; it is lacking in openness, transparency and accountability; thus, it reproduces the traditional politics of party and 'bingo' (big international non-governmental organisation) alike.

But it is also out of control in various *positive* ways. The centre (its initiators) can no longer control the process they themselves invented and developed, now that the *idea* of social forums is out of the bottle and subject to numerous and varied, local or specific (feminist, indigenous, intellectual-elitist, libertarian, social-democratic, nationalist, Leninist) claims, forms and inflections.

To say that this is 'positive', however, is not the same as approving of it wholesale. The resulting anarchy is riven with contradictions. Perhaps one should rather

use the word 'new': so, let us consider this 'new' world order.

### Keep moving

I argued at the second WSF with younger activists from Barcelona and Belgrade that what was about to call itself the 'global justice and solidarity movement' (GJ&SM) had at last discovered the secret of fire. This secret, I suggested, is 'keep moving'. For a century or more, Robert Michels's 'iron law of oligarchy' has afflicted social movement institutions – according to which any movement peak or plateau, any institutionalisation of the movement, will (or should, or could) be immediately challenged.

But now, the Keep Moving Emancipation Show is possible – thanks to the internet, and the accelerating shift of the site of power contestation, particularly at global level, from the political sphere to that of culture and communications, from the institutions to cyberspace.

This is the first such movement immediately to produce its own internal critics: the first in which such criticism can be immediately circulated to an interested public and beyond. This is now a matter of *Around the world in 80 seconds*.

In a movement that prides itself on opening the route from 'protest to proposition', the message goes out simultaneously *from* the movement and *to* the movement.

### The search for legitimacy

At the centre of initiative and decision-making within the Forum has been the Brazilian Organising Committee (OC) and the International Council (IC). The role of the latter seems to be to give international legitimacy to the OC; indeed the relationship between the two committees is quite unclear. Moreover, neither is subject to the principles of participatory or even representative democracy, nor accountable to their respective communities (mass organisations, NGOs, funding agencies).

They have justified their existence by pointing to the amazing new ship they have launched – an internationalist encounter within the civil-social sphere, targeted against neo-liberalism and capitalist globalisation, and increasingly concerned with proposing radical-democratic alternatives – a space

predicated on the necessary democratic dialogue between countries and cultures, ideologies, political levels, collective subjects and movements/organisations.

This space has never been either neutral or innocent (money and power are always with us and it is best to face up openly to this); nor has it been as far beyond the old politics and parties as it might have liked to suggest.

The OC consists of a number of representatives of social movement and non-governmental organisations: (two movements, six NGOs, seven men, one woman). The NGOs might address themselves to social movements and civil society, but they are answerable only to themselves. These bodies have been oriented toward the *Partido de los Trabajadores* (PT, Workers' Party), and/or to its recently successful presidential candidate, Luis Inacio Lula da Silva.

In the same way, *Rifondazione Comunista* (and other Italian political parties) publicised themselves at the European Social Forum in Florence, in November 2002. Such parties, and far less sophisticated and interesting ones, have often hidden their political lights beneath NGO appearances.

Moreover, the WSF has been a site to which various inter-state agencies have had considerable access. State-dependent funding agencies, national and international, and the massive private-capitalist US foundations, have supported the Forum itself, or various, selected, inter/national NGOs.

The IC was a top-down creation by invitation of the OC. It has 100-120 members, mostly NGOs and inter/national unions, about 8-10 are women's networks. This gargantuan assembly has no clear mandate or power; it thus acts for the OC largely as a sounding-board and international legitimator, giving no further consideration to the representative range of the members, nor the extent to which they are answerable to any but themselves.

Indeed, many of these members do no other work in the IC than turn up and fight their corner. In the same way, the maximum number of representatives within the central part of Forum programmes is in the hands of the OC.

*The NGOs might address themselves to social movements and civil society, but they are answerable only to themselves.*

The IC does not operate behind closed doors, but its proceedings are barely reported by its members, even to the interested public. There has recently been discussion about the role and rules of the IC, as decision-making shifts from the Brazilian to the international level. But while part of this discussion (actually more like an interesting *consultation*) is published on a publicly-accessible website, its existence is known to only a few. And only a dozen or so IC members have shown much interest in it.

The Forum itself is an agora in which there are some large, well-publicised and well-placed circus tents, surrounded by a myriad of tiny others (now maybe 1,700), proposed by social movements, political organisations, academic institutions and even individuals. These marginal events compete with the key players for visibility, for sites, for translators and other equipment. Often, they overlap with or even *reproduce* the topics of others. Whilst certainly adding to the pluralism of the Forum, they inevitably have less impact.

The result is domination by the official programme – one which has been conceived without notable public discussion. A concentration of power at the centre is reinforced by the presence of our own celebrities, who themselves may have to choose between appearance in a hall seating thousands, or in a classroom seating twenty-five.

#### Forward to the past?

In 2003, with 100,000 Brazilian and foreign participants to take care of, the WSF was too big for its hosts to handle. A number of experienced organisers had apparently been lured away to Brasilia by the new government, and the original PT sponsors had lost influence in both the city and the state. Unlike the previous year, the programme was never published completely in either English or Portuguese. A well-organised, North American, left-feminist group, for example, invited to run a five-day programme on *Life after capitalism*, found itself without publicity in a club unmarked on the maps and unknown to the information booths, a taxi-ride away from the main site.

There are those who demand that the Forum's decision-making bodies should consist of regional/national representatives. For the Forum is also slipping out of the hands of the original 'NGO elite' in the sense that it is beyond the reach of the centre, with regional, national, local and problem-specific forums

mushrooming worldwide. In addition, it is in danger of losing its 'social' profile, as major politicians and governments, recognising the importance of the agora, turn up invited (Lula) or uninvited (Hugo Chavez).

Whilst there was no way that the Forum could fail to invite Lula, no one gave him the right, in the words of a regional newspaper, to 'Start the dialogue between Porto Alegre and Davos'. The Forum's place as a focus for what I would call 'new global solidarity' is being jeopardised by those who seek not only to give it national but nationalist character. Witness the Asian Social Forum dominated by a particular Indian Communist Party, which issued a declaration attacking imperialist wars in Asia, with no reference to the Indo-Pakistani conflict – in which nuclear threats are issued by both chauvinist regimes (both enjoying US military co-operation)!

Given all these problems, there is a danger that the Forum will be overwhelmed by the past of social movements and internationalism. This was one in which these movements were dominated by the institutions they spawned, by political parties that instrumentalised them; in which the movements were state-oriented or otherwise state-identified; and in which internationalism was literally a relationship between nations, nationals, nationalisms, nationalists.

#### Relations with the trade unions

The third World Social Forum saw a growth and deepening of the relationship between the Traditional International Union Institutions (TIUIs) and the Forum, such that for the first time it was attended by the General Secretary of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).

Top officers of Global Union Federations (GUFs, formerly International Trade Secretariats) were also present, either prominently on platforms or quietly testing the water. Also present were inter/national union organisations/networks from beyond the ICFTU family (now Global Unions). This year, in addition to the radical union networks from France or Italy, there was an independent left union confederation from the Philippines, a Maoist union leader from southern India, and, no doubt, hundreds of movement-oriented unionists from other countries.

I noted also an increasing openness amongst even the most traditional of TIUIs. Whilst the first big union event was a formal panel, with only gestures in the direction of discussion (here, admittedly, reproducing a problematic Forum formula), another major panel

saw the platform shared between the Global Unions, independent left unions and articulate leaders of social movements or NGOs identified with the Forum process.

The unions, moreover, seem increasingly prepared to recognise that they *are* institutions and that it is *they* who need to come to terms with a place and process lacking in formal representation and often inchoate, that nevertheless has the appeal, dynamism and public reach that they themselves need.

The question, however, remains of what kind of relationship is developing here? From the first big union event, patronised by the charismatic Director of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), veteran Chilean socialist, Juan Somavia, what seemed to be shaping up was some kind of understanding between the unions, the Social Forum and progressive states/men, here embodied in the repeatedly-praised PT government and President Lula.

Somavia had just met Lula in Brasilia, and made explicit comparison between the ILO's new programme/slogan of 'decent work' and Lula's election slogan 'for a decent Brazil'. Insofar as the TIUIs appear to have adopted 'decent work', this implies a global neo-Keynesianism, in which the unions and their ILO/WSF friends set about recreating the post-1945 social partnership model, but now on a global scale.

This model seems to me problematic in numerous ways. The main one, surely, is whether the role of the WSF, or the more general global justice and solidarity movement is going to be limited to supporting a project aimed at making capitalist globalisation 'decent', or whether this movement should not have a project for labour that might at one and the same time be more utopian and post-capitalist as well as more realistic (morally challenging work-for-capital, appealing to 'non-workers', addressing related social and ethical issues).

How open to such questions will the Forums be when decision-makers of both the TIUIs and the WSF could have quite instrumental reasons for relating to each other, and there are about a dozen (inter)national union organisations on the IC, most or all of which are likely to favour 'decent work'?

### Gender, ethnicity, class and age

I was somewhat alarmed, in the hotels, in the panels, on the committees and on the platforms of Porto Alegre, by the number of people who looked like me: white, male, middle-aged and, evidently, middle-class. I do not know to what extent this bias applies to the decision-making committees, but it existed visibly on the various platforms and other public events. This does not, of course, mean that women, Africans, Indians, indigenous peoples, or the under-30s are excluded from the Forum or from the panels. But the youth were under canvas in the Youth Camp, the Argentinean *piqueteros* slept who knows where, and the feminists seemed less visible than they had been at the second WSF.

There are striking power/wealth differences between Forum participants, particularly visible in the case of the south. In two or three Latin American cases known to me, poorer participants travelled by bus, this sometimes meaning a four- or five-day journey with entry obstacles at various border-crossings. I was not going to abandon a hotel with an internet connection, but as the WSF elite has declared certain principles relating to liberty, equality, solidarity, pluralism and the respect of

difference, it might be possible to confront them (us) with the necessity of re-balancing the power equation. At home, the elites could then put their efforts into facilitating rather than dominating or controlling the Forum process.

About half of Forum participants have customarily been women. Powerful feminists on the panels and in the IC are quite capable of making the Forum a feminist issue, with numerous panels on gender and sexuality in both the central and marginal programmes. But despite a discernible shift in the international women's/feminist networks over recent years, away from the inter/state bodies and toward the public arena, I did not feel that they were yet making a public issue out of their marginalisation within the central bodies of the Forum. (The exception here was the Canada-based World March of Women).

This whole power/presence balance within the Forum might be corrected by two measures. One would be quotas for under-represented categories. The other

*Powerful feminists on the panels and in the IC are quite capable of making the Forum a feminist issue, with numerous panels on gender and sexuality in both the central and marginal programmes.*

would be an official programme structured according to collective subjects rather than, or as well as, major problems. Thus one could have major panels on labour, women, youth, indigenous peoples – even the old.

#### De/centralised networking ?

Two previous Forums have issued a 'call of social movements' at the prompting of various members of the OC and IC, some being recognisable social movements, others being recognisable NGOs. Both calls have been publicly presented and then signed by 50-100 other organisations and networks.

This year, the notion of a 'Social Movements World Network' (SMWN) was widely circulated on the web and discussed at two Forum public discussions. This eventually produced a declaration proposing a continuation of discussion about the nature of such a network, with further meetings to take place. I was struck by the modesty and caution of this proposal.

There are good reasons for such caution. The call – like other Forum bodies and initiatives – is surrounded by mystery. Given overlapping memberships, are we to understand it as a device for going beyond the Forum's self-limitation on making political declarations? Why did it take seven or eight months for the signatories of the second call to be publicly identified (at least on a website), when those of the first call were published instantaneously? What, for the purposes of this initiative, *is* a social movement?

I am actually enthusiastic about the creation of such a network, which would be unique internationally. It would provide information and ideas on a continuing basis, including to those people/places otherwise excluded from the periodic Forums. In so far as this will have an existence in 'real virtuality' (Manuel Castells), it may go beyond a WSF that remains largely earth-bound and institutional. But the question remains: is the network going to be primarily political/institutional or primarily communicative?

In the first case, a 'banking' model of information is likely to operate, in which maximum information is collected, to be then dealt out to customers in terms of power and profit. In the second case, there can operate the principle of the potlatch, or gift economy, in which individual generosity is understood to benefit the community.

Even in the best of all possible cyberworlds, however, there remain questions of appropriate *modes*

(information, ideas, dialogue), *form* (printed word at one end, multimedia at the other) and *control* (handling our own home-grown fundamentalists). There do exist various relevant, if partial, models of international social-movement, civil society, anti-globalisation networks – earth-bound or cyberspatial. Indy Media Centre (IMC) has got to be the most important here, and needs to be reflected upon both for what it can do and what it doesn't. Finally, any SMWN is going to have to recognise that networks do not exist on one, emancipatory, model.

In the end, however, it does not too much matter precisely how the SMWN takes shape. The existence of the web, combining low cost of entry, wide reach and great speed, provides the assurance that such a network will be supplemented or challenged by others.

#### A new communications model

The FSM website (*Forum Social Mundial*) remains weak – promoting year-old ideas (chosen by whom?) in its meagre library. Trying to reach a human being on this site, to whom one could pose a question, reminds one strongly of Gertrude Stein on Oakland, California: 'There is no *there* there'.

The only FSM daily is *Terra Viva*, an admirable effort by the customarily unaccountable NGO, but which this year seemed to me to add to space-limitations, delays and superficialities a heavier bias toward the Forum establishment.

The professional, regional paper, *Zero Hora*, gave wide coverage, but only in Portuguese. For background information and orientation one was this year dependent on free handouts of *La Vie/Le Monde* (marked by a certain French social Catholicism?), and *Ode*, a glossy, multilingual, New Age magazine from Rotterdam, with impressively relevant coverage (and a useful source for this article).

Overall, the FSM is something of a shrine to the written and spoken word. At its core is 'the panel', in which five to ten selected panellists do their thing in front of an audience of anything from five to 5,000, the latter being given a few minutes at a microphone: the lucky ones!

At the other end of the Forum's narrow spectrum of modes there is 'the demonstration'. Here euphoria is the order of the day: how can it not be when surrounded by so many beautiful people, of all ages, genders and sexualities, of variegated nationality and ethnicity, convinced that *Another world is possible*?

But here there is a relevant distinction made thirty years ago by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, between mobilisation and mobility, as related to the old organisation and the new media: 'When I say *mobilise* I mean *mobilise* – namely to make [people] more mobile than they are...Anyone who thinks of the masses only as the object of politics, cannot mobilise them. He wants to push them around. A parcel is not mobile; it can only be pushed to and fro. Marches, columns, parades, immobilise people.'

'The new media are egalitarian in structure,' Enzensberger continued in his essay *Constituents of a Theory of the Media*. 'Anyone can take part in them by a simple switching process. The new media are orientated towards action, not contemplation; towards the present, not tradition. It is wrong to regard media equipment as mere means of consumption. It is always, in principle, also a means of production. In the socialist movements the dialectic of discipline and spontaneity, centralism and decentralisation, authoritarian leadership and anti-authoritarian disintegration has long ago reached deadlock. Network-like communication models built on the principle of reversibility of circuits might give indications of how to overcome this situation.'

#### Conclusion: the secret of fire

I am concerned, but not worried, about the future of the Forum process. Pandora has opened her box, the

genie is out of the lamp, the secret of fire is an open one. Already in Florence, young libertarians were whispering: *Another Forum is possible!*

This possibility is not only a matter of information and communication technology (which has yet to produce an English/Spanish translation programme with an appropriate vocabulary). It may be the combination, precisely, of this with youth, given that urban kids have grown up with cellular phones, playing arcade computer games, and therefore with an affinity for other computer technologies, and a healthy disregard for attempts to corral them.

For the rest, these are the things that have inspired me: energetic and innovative social protest, and original analyses of the local-national-global dialectic in Argentina; the belated appearance in Peru of a network, Raiz/Root, which clearly has some feeling that the WSF is more than an NGO jamboree; the Kidz in the Kamp who were discussing under a tree, and with informal translation, how to ensure that the emancipatory and critical forces had more impact on the Forum process; the struggle, against all odds, of the US Znet people to mount 'Life after capitalism', an event of post-capitalist *propuesta* within the Forum; finally, the increasing number of companer@s, of various ages, identities, movements and sexual orientations, who believe that, in the construction of a meaningfully civil global society, transparency is not only the best policy but the right one.

---

*Peter Waterman is an independent researcher and publicist who lives in The Hague, Netherlands. He has edited and contributed to numerous publications on trade unions, globalisation and the World Social Forum. Longer versions of this essay have appeared in Voice of the Turtle and the People's Global Action site.*

---

Copyright © Peter Waterman, 2003. Published by openDemocracy Ltd. You may download and print extracts from this article for your own personal and non-commercial use only. If you are a library, university, teaching institution, business or media organisation, you must acquire an Academic License or Organisational License from openDemocracy, or seek permission directly from the author, before making copies, circulating or reproducing this article for teaching or commercial purposes.

---