

The World Social Forum 2003: a personal impression

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In many years of social activism, the World Social Forum ([WSF](#) [1]) held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, on 23-28 January 2003 was the first event of its kind I had ever attended. On its eve, preceding the formal opening ceremony, there was a huge rally of between 70,000 and 100,000 people full of energy and youthful enthusiasm. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of this WSF was the very high proportion of youth among its participants.

The old-established left organisations worldwide may have difficulties attracting the young to their meetings; not the WSF. Indeed, one of its strengths is that it has become a place where older traditions of progressive thinking on all kinds of subjects do receive a hearing (and some influence) among young people who are otherwise not so familiar as previous generations were with the discourses of Marxism, anarchism and socialism in all their forms.

A unifying enemy

In political and organisational terms, there were positives and negatives. For a long time the anti-globalisation movement and the anti-imperialist current had been going their separate ways. In the aftermath of 11 September 2001, many doubted the possibility of convergence between these two streams.

However, the new US push for war against Iraq has fostered a growing perception and anger at a power that seems neither to know nor want any restraints, refusing to abide by international norms and willing to pursue double standards in the most blatant ways.

As a result, what distinguished this WSF from previous ones is precisely the coming together of anti-imperialist and anti-neoliberal globalisation movements, with the US increasingly being seen as the unifying principal enemy in both respects. Both the huge opening and closing marches (which had the most incredible array of banners and participants reflecting the remarkable diversity of concerns) and the biggest of the collective [gatherings](#) [2] held in the (20,000-plus capacity) Gigantinho stadium expressed this growing political unity.

If this was the single most important political gain of this WSF, is there also a possibility that the *event* can become more important than the *process* such worldwide gatherings are meant to initiate and promote? Even, perhaps, a real danger that these annual meetings become more and more like a political jamboree where different groups 'sell' their respective political wares,

where the very fact of having such a meeting becomes an end in itself, a kind of routinised symbolic politics of 'global unity' whose unsettling impact on the cohesive guardians of international capitalism progressively declines.

This danger can only be averted if the arena provided by the WSF is used to generate a growing synthesis of understanding and analysis, and flowing from this a stronger programme of coordinated action (such as internationally implemented and effective days of action) on a global scale. Of course, this would not apply to all or even most participating groups, but it would require that wider subsets of participants come to the WSF not just to preach, listen to, or dialogue with each other, but to work with each other more and more.

Thus, even as the WSF continues to see itself as primarily an *arena* and not as an *actor* in its own right, its organisers have to think about how the current structure of conferences, seminars and workshops can be shaped and modified to promote such efforts at synthesis of thought and action.

Size is one possible problem. The bigger the WSF [3] gets every year, the more it becomes like a global pep rally. This is fine on one level – in these reactionary times, progressives across the world certainly need powerful morale boosters – but hardly enough.

The next WSF [4], likely to be held in India in 2004, affords an important geographical shift to another part of the global south. There, it should give priority to strengthening the process of alliance-building based on a more non-sectarian and inclusivist politics than much of the radical and progressive traditions have hitherto known.

The WSF dynamic was itself made possible because of the distinctive character of Brazilian politics. The Workers' Party (PT [5]) has itself grown out of a broad coalition of progressive movements, and retains a broad non-sectarian character quite unlike comparable parties elsewhere in the world. This is the challenge – not to try and replicate the PT or the Brazilian experience of social movements, but to build on the lessons of political inclusivity that this experience has thrown up.

The living tradition

On a more personal note, two things impressed me most. First, the WSF coordinators – whether located in the Brazilian-dominated Organising Committee or in the much broader International Council – encouraged an important symposium called 'Life After Capitalism' which should have been better publicised and attended than it was.

Here were some of the most interesting attempts to build a vision of what an alternative economic system could be like in practice, based on actual experiments in, for example, 'solidarity economics' such as the participatory budget planning of Porto Alegre itself.

The possibilities discussed were wide-ranging: a more ameliorative capitalism, centralised planning, market socialism, green bio-regionalism, participatory economics. Here was taking place, however tentatively, assessments of new practice and bold, exploratory thinking.

Secondly, it was wonderful for an ageing member of the 1960s radical generation to see Che Guevara [6] T-shirts outnumbering all other political T-shirts, personalised portraits or not, by at least thirty-to-one. True, the overwhelming majority of participants were from Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina and a few other Latin American countries. Moreover, being the continent closest to the United States, Latin Americans (even the more politically apathetic) have a cynicism about

the US that is not as widespread or as deep in other continents. But there were many others from Africa and Asia who were wearing, buying and selling such T-shirts.

The reason was obvious. No other figure in contemporary history stands as much as Che for committed, unselfish and heroic internationalism. Who else better to symbolise the collective global struggle of our times, embodied in the WSF's lodestar: 'another world is possible'.

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