

## Beyond the World Social Forum: the need for new institutions

By Ezequiel Adamovsky,  
Created 2005-01-20 00:00

For all the extraordinary variety of issues under discussion at the World Social Forum [1], each year there seems to be one fundamental question floating in the air. 2001 was mostly about establishing the source of our problems and naming our enemy – capitalism or neo-liberalism, as you prefer. 2002 was about presenting concrete alternatives to the neo-liberal order. 2003, having identified the enemy and discussed possible ways to change the world, was mainly about strategy – the political ways to make real the slogan: “Another world is possible”.

At Mumbai in January 2004, the most visible concern in some of the main events was arguably that of exposing the hidden link between neo-liberalism and the United States’s neo-colonial foreign policy. But strategy [2] is always the most contentious issue for social movements, so it is not surprising that it was again one of the main concerns in the fourth WSF. Within this wider field, Mumbai seems to have been particularly haunted by the question of what political institutions must we use to change the world; in particular, can we use or reform existing institutions or must we invent new ones?

**openDemocracy has published insight, analysis and reports from the World Social Forums in Porto Alegre (2003) and Mumbai (2004). See our “Globalisation / DIY world” debate [2] – and check out the site for more on the fifth WSF in January 2005**

**If you find our material on the social forum movement useful and valuable, please consider subscribing [3] to openDemocracy for just £25 / \$40 / €40.**

After the sad, scary results of the United States elections [3], I am afraid that the January 2005 meeting of WSF in Porto Alegre is likely to be mostly about “God, what do we do now?!”. Indeed, we need to seriously discuss how to defend our movements from the growing authoritarianism of the empire [4]. I hope, however, that the sense of disorientation and fear we all experience at the moment will not stop us from continuing our explorations on strategy and alternative organising. If we are to stop the ever-expanding violence of the capitalist world-system and change the way we live, we will need serious, effective ways to organise ourselves and act at the global level.

### Institutions for change

There is still little agreement among the movements regarding issues of strategy and organisation. For the kind of party-minded people described in Paul Kingsnorth’s reflection [4] on the European Social Forum in London in October 2004, for example, there is nothing new to invent: the key to social change is building and supporting traditional left-wing parties and internationals. But other ideas were available at the fourth WSF in Mumbai [4].

At least four kinds of approaches were presented there. Some proposed to reform the United Nations to make it a truly representative body with real power; others were in favour of creating an international (even world [4]) parliament; in several workshops, participants advocated transforming the WSF into a representative assembly of social movements, by using a federative structure with delegates able to make decisions and to design a common strategy for the global struggle.

A fourth grouping preferred to invest energy into organising and strengthening the informal networks of movements and activists that have emerged in the last few years; they believe that networks are a powerful instrument to change the world since they “anticipate” the features of the new world we want to build – they are decentralised, democratic, coercion-free, and radically non-hierarchical.

This debate on the institutions that can be the vehicle towards a post-capitalist future is only starting. It is likely to continue for a long time before concrete options crystallise. For myself, I do not believe in projects such as reforming the UN [4] or establishing an international parliament: these options would surely reproduce, at the global level, the problems and limitations that representative democracies currently experience at the national level. Besides, it is not likely that we will ever have such institutions if we are to trust an agreement of *national* governments to implement it.

Yet I do not believe that the key to social change lies either in the attempt to create (after so many failed efforts, and ignoring the lessons of history) the “truly” revolutionary party/ international, or in the let’s-get-one-of-us-elected alternatives. It should be clear by now that strategies based on seizing power by means of popular leaders and/or hierarchical political parties never work. Moreover, historical experience shows that the leaders/parties thus empowered often end up ruling for the existing elites, or imposing a new elite upon society, while they hijack and even sometimes deactivate the popular movements that helped them get to power. This is – to mention but one example – the hard lesson that Lula is teaching the Brazilians.

Would a Communist, Trotskyist or Maoist leader/party escape that fate? Considering how little they have changed since the times when they ruled extensive parts of the world (with the catastrophic results we all know), I really doubt it. A brand new New Labour or a group of new social democrats? Oh, please, get serious!

While the idea to transform the WSF into a representative body may be worth exploring, I think networks have an enormous potential to bring together social movements at the global level. True, we are still in the pre-history of network-like organising. But the current situation of existing networks may help us visualise both their potential and their limitations. My experience of observing the activities and evolution of three networks during 2004 – the Social Movements International Network, the Global Resistance Network, and Peoples’ Global Action – has left me with some thoughts on the path ahead.

### **Beyond an assembly of activists**

The first example concerns the Social Movements International Network (Smin [5]), which emerged within the WSF in 2002-2003 through the cooperation of a number of organisations – *Central Única de Trabalhadores* (Cut [6]) and the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST [7]) in Brazil; the World March of Women [8] in Quebec; Focus on the Global South [9] in Thailand; and part of Attac France [10].

Under the auspices of Smin, a group called the “Assembly of Activists” (AA) – the continuation of the “Assembly of Social Movements” created at the third WSF (also in Porto Alegre) – developed, seeking to attract more activists and movements. It held four meetings at Mumbai, which were highly publicised and which anyone was welcome to attend. Yet the AA’s performance was far less impressive than might have been expected: only 100-200 people came to its meetings – in a forum involving hundreds of thousands of people.

Why, for such a promising project, was the AA’s performance so poor? The basic facts about Smin remain obscure and its whole operation lacks transparency; we know that the network has an international secretariat [11] (quite perplexing in itself – networks are not supposed to have secretariats) controlled by Cut, but even basic information about its internal processes is unavailable to the public.

Despite these limitations, Smin (and its AA component) has helped produce some important political moves. The AA succeeded in reaching a consensus on a list of days of global action for 2004 (beginning with the worldwide demonstrations against the war on Iraq on 20 March) which many movements across the world supported; and Smin was at the heart of the appeal to the third conference of anti-war movements, networks and NGOs, held in Beirut in September.

This conference gathered representatives from over 200 organisations and movements from 54 countries (including strong delegations from Iraq and Palestine). As a result of the proceedings, an official statement was issued, which uncompromisingly condemned the American and Israeli “racist” attacks on the Arab countries, and categorically supported the Iraqi and Palestinian movements of resistance. Thus, thanks to this conference, the “movement of movements” came much closer to the struggles in the middle east – a fundamental step in the making of a truly global network of resistance.

Susan George & Ezequiel Adamovsky, two activists of the global justice movement, discuss the past, present and future of politics beyond neo-liberal globalisation; see “What is the point of Porto Alegre? Activists from two generations in dialogue” (January 2003 [11])

If such far-reaching decisions can be made by a small and hardly participatory organisation, what *greater* potential is there for a truly open and more transparent global network of social movements? In this respect, the people behind Smin share with the WSF organisers (and elements of the two groups are interchangeable) a curious situation: they are helping to unleash the energy of the movement of movements *despite* their reluctance to open their decision-making processes to wider participation. One can only hope that these people will come to understand the enormous responsibility on their shoulders, and act accordingly.

A turn towards such openness is made even more urgent by divisions within the organising committee of the 2005 WSF over the past year. As anticipated by many commentators (myself included), the influence of the most “moderate” NGOs, the Catholic church and social democrats is growing – a reflection of the resources and funding they can mobilise rather than any legitimacy they may have within the movement of movements.

Insiders’ reports suggest that – in an environment where Lula’s ruling Workers’ Party [12] has lost much of its interest in the WSF, and social movements in general are facing difficulties – the few social movements left within the WSF organising committee have been involved in a hard struggle over the draft agenda for Porto Alegre. One source suggests that the original list of issues proposed for discussion was so “moderate” that it would have changed the WSF into some tamed “celebration of diversity” and a “World Bank-like encounter of ‘civil society’”. The more radical members of the committee had to fight strong resistance to ensure that some more

“antagonistic” issues were included. They finally succeeded, but will they be able to hold out much longer?

The only way to counter the disproportionate influence of NGOs and other institutions without real roots in social struggle is to bring more social movements into the WSF’s decision-making process [12]. And the easiest way to do *that* is to open up Smin to the participation of all.

### **Keeping it radical**

The second example worth considering is that of the Global Resistance Network (RRG), a project conceived at the youth camp [13] during the 2002 forum in Porto Alegre and gathering together a handful of small global resistance collectives drawing on the experience of the camp. The purpose of RRG seemed initially to be to create the “youth chapter” of Smin, but the autonomous nature of the project soon became clear.

RRG maintained a ghostly existence during 2003, mainly as a (barely active) email list and set of informal contacts between activists. But a meeting at the youth camp in Mumbai, held with only one day’s notice, attracted over thirty young people from eighteen countries. Sitting in a circle under the stars, activists from Europe, Latin America and North America, India, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Australia, Indonesia, and elsewhere decided to endorse the global days of action proposed by Smin and to strengthen RRG by reorganising its internal functions and responsibilities.

On the whole, RRG did not become much stronger and better organised during 2004 (although it did hold two or three global chat-meetings on the internet, a simple and in its way significant “innovation”). The main point, however, is that this informal grouping has already played an important role by critically engaging with the WSF and producing some of the most interesting events in the forum’s short history.

The loose association of activists who would come together in RRG created the now-legendary “Intergalactika [14]” space at the 2002 forum – a platform to share experiences and debate new ideas between activists from many parts of the world. This in turn led to the creation of Intergalactika Buenos Aires (which organised another Intergalactika space in 2003) and to the *Village Intergalactique* during the anti-G8 protests in Evian [15]. RRG was also involved in the Hub established during the European Social Forum in Florence [15]. Now, some members of RRG plan to set up an ambitious project/space in Porto Alegre – a sort of radical “interface” between the youth camp and the rest of the forum.

These examples of mutual “contamination” – the circulation of ideas and experiences across the planet – help us visualise the power of networks, even when they are as small and poorly organised as the Global Resistance Network.

### **Reviving Peoples’ Global Action**

The third network I observed during 2004 was the “elder sister” of global networks, Peoples’ Global Action (PGA [16]). PGA was created in 1998 – to a great extent thanks to the efforts of the Zapatistas and their “encounters for humankind and against neo-liberalism” – and played a crucial role in the dissemination of the idea of “globalisation from below”, including the invention of the concept of days of global action.

In contrast to RRG, large social movements (mainly peasant and aborigine organisations from Asia and Latin America) as well as individual activists and small collectives are represented in PGA. And unlike Smin, PGA stands clearly against capitalism, and for decentralisation,

autonomy, and direct action. This makes the relationship between Peoples' Global Action and the WSF somewhat awkward.

I attended a PGA meeting in Mumbai in a small building five kilometres from the main WSF venue. There were over thirty-five participants from fifteen countries, representing organisations like the Anti-Privatisation Forum in South Africa, the National Alliance of People's Movements in India, peasant unions from Nepal and Italy, and anti-war organisations from the US.

As reports were presented on the situation of PGA in different continents, it quickly became evident that the network had not been very active during 2003, despite (or because of?) the fact that the movements composing it had been involved in many important local struggles. One long-term PGA activist suggested that the group was in a way "the victim of its own success" – having launched the global movement, it saw other organisations (like Smin and the WSF as a whole) adopting its initiatives.

There was consensus at the meeting that PGA was still necessary, especially to bring a radical and clearly anti-capitalist perspective to the global movement. But what was the reason for PGA's lack of activity during 2003? The same activist said:

"PGA has always had great difficulty maintaining communication and developing real working relations between convenors, precisely because the convenor organisations are not NGOs, but authentic grassroots organisations".

These organisations, he continued, are engaged in constant and highly demanding local struggles, which often means that they cannot spare people and economic resources to operate at the global level. As a result, they tend to keep functioning thanks to the initiative of the "support group" and of a few individuals, mainly from western Europe. But this unwanted situation was uncomfortable for people so consciously anti-hierarchical as those involved in PGA. The result was that, for fear of "taking too much the lead" and of unwillingly Europeanising the network, "the support group stopped taking initiatives to push the process. But so far, the convenors or other southern organisations haven't taken their place."

Some reforms of PGA structure were adopted to resolve this situation, and the meeting finished with general agreement among those present to reinforce the network during 2004. They decided also to endorse the list of days of global action decided by Smin, and to focus energies into organising actions for 17 April 2004 – the world day of farmers, a date particularly relevant for the Indian organisations represented at the meeting.

And in 2004, PGA seems to have experienced a kind of "resurrection". The many signs of vitality in its Asian network include a successful regional and gender conference in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and the food sovereignty caravan which culminated in Kathmandu, Nepal, in September (the fourth global conference of the PGA will be held in Kathmandu in 2005).

The European branch was also very active. Its third European conference in Belgrade in July explored new ideas, themes and organisational forms, and succeeded in connecting with local issues and struggles – Roma, refugees, Serbian gay and Lesbian collectives. Andrej Grubacic [17] reports:

"PGA organised a workers' assembly as part of the Conference, with participation of seven struggling workers' communities from all over Serbia. Some 200 workers attended the meeting. There was an interesting international debate with workers from Greece and Belgium. As a result, workers established a 'co-ordination for the struggle against the privatisation'".

For all such promising developments, however, Peoples' Global Alliance is still unable to organise action by large numbers of people and organisations in the global public space.

### **Creating institutions of a new type**

The record of these three networks in 2002-04 leads me to two conclusions. The first is that even informal and loose networks are producing some of the most important political shifts of recent decades. Through these networks and the events they organise – the WSF, days of global action, alternative spaces at the youth camp, Indymedia [17] – a new generation of activists and social movements are nourishing and inspiring each other. The traditional organisations of the left and workers' movement – parties, internationals and unions – could not have conceived and organised events such as Seattle or Genoa [17], or meetings such as the WSF. The importance and potential of these new political developments cannot be overemphasised.

My second conclusion comes with a warning. I believe that the networks of global movements and activists, and the WSF itself, are now at an impasse; without significant changes, they are unlikely to keep growing and strengthening themselves. Networks are suffering from “the tyranny of the lack of structures”, to put it in the words of the North American feminist activist Jo Freeman [18]. This “tyranny” means that the networks either develop informal and unacknowledged – but still very real and potentially harmful – ways of leadership and centralisation (WSF/Smin), or become frustratingly unable to mobilise an otherwise strong membership (PGA), or exist as little more than “virtual” networks (RRG).

In escaping from the hierarchical and authoritarian institutions of the old left [18], we often ended up rejecting the very idea of having basic rules, a sensible and transparent division of tasks, and a distribution of specific responsibilities according to our needs. That was arguably a healthy and necessary stage in order to get rid of the politics of the old left. But now we need to move forward [18].

I learned the same lesson from my involvement in Argentinean [19] movements, which emerged out of (and embodied) a huge popular desire to change society by means different from those of the state, the caste of professional politicians and their parties, and the authoritarian and unsuccessful methods of the traditional left. There, the movements [19] that sparked the imagination and hopes of so many people are suffering now from their own inability to develop transparent and non-hierarchical political institutions, and to cooperate with each other beyond the level of small collectives and local communities.

What, then, needs to happen? It is time to invent and explore *institutions of a new type*. By “institutions” I do not mean a hierarchy of authorities, or a building full of bureaucrats, but rather two things: a basic set of rules and procedures that everybody knows and accepts (such as how to become a member of a network, and how to balance the relative weight of an individual activist and a large movement), plus a reasonable, non-hierarchical division of tasks that formally distributes duties and responsibilities while ensuring accountability (such as who is to make which decisions between plenary meetings, who is to be media spokesperson, how are funds to be managed, how to avoid empowering individuals at the expense of others and of the whole network).

The common assumption among many activists that *all* institutions and rules are necessarily oppressive and ineluctably bring about a hierarchy of power is untrue. In fact, democratically-decided rules and procedures and non-hierarchical institutions are indispensable if we are going to reach a higher level of human cooperation (and we are definitely going to need a much higher level if we are to defeat capitalism and replace it with a post-capitalist society).

True, we still have little idea of how those institutions of a new type will look, although many interesting experiments are being carried out throughout the world as part of the struggles of social movements.

Most of the institutions we know follow a basic inclination of social life: centralisation. In spirit and design they mirror *the basic shape of power*, the pyramid. The modern state and private companies “imitated” the pyramidal structure of armies, and most other institutions followed the same blueprint: political parties, school, hospitals, professional associations, “official” unions, mass media and even most NGOs.

It is time to start conceiving institutions that “imitate” another fundamental inclination of social life: cooperation between equals. Many institutions shaped in the spirit of cooperation are already there, in the hidden spots of an otherwise hierarchical world. Surrounded by the pyramid and over-determined by power, these institutions cannot but play a subordinate (though still indispensable) role in society. Is it possible to expand these non-hierarchical institutions so that we get rid of those shaped by power? Is it possible to transform the current relationship between the two types of institutions – in ways that make use of some forms of limited centralisation, distribution of tasks, and (*if needed*) “soft” leadership, but which can ensure the predominance of cooperation between equals? I think it is; moreover, that is exactly what the anti-capitalist struggles are “instinctively” trying to do at the moment.

But this spontaneous pursuit faces serious limitations. In order to go beyond the level of local, face-to-face experiences of non-hierarchical self-organising, the movement of movements needs to develop new ways to cooperate on a larger scale. And this is when institutions of a new type become indispensable.

My guess is that, if we understand better what we are already (albeit unconsciously) doing, that may give us some clues as to how to design and build those institutions. We need to study and reflect on the spontaneous behaviour of networks and the phenomenon that scientists have recently called “emergence” - in Arturo Escobar's [20] words:

“...when the actions of multiple agents interacting dynamically and following local rules rather than top-up commands result in some kind of visible macro-behaviour or structure”.

We need to invent *political* institutions of a new type that “imitate” the *social* shapes and forms that networks and other forms of cooperation develop as part of their daily life. Only thus can we give solidity and effectiveness to our struggles beyond the small, local space, while at the same time preserving our organisations from the dangers of power, centralisation and hierarchies.

The invention of institutions of a new type will not be an easy task. The sooner we start, the better.

---

**Source URL:**

[http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-world/article\\_2314.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-world/article_2314.jsp)

**Links:**

[1] [http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/index.php?cd\\_language=2&id\\_menu=target=\\_blank](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/index.php?cd_language=2&id_menu=target=_blank)

[2] [http://www.ased.org/artman/publish/article\\_170.shtml](http://www.ased.org/artman/publish/article_170.shtml) target=\_blank

[3] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/registration2/donate.jsp>

[4] <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog/HAREMI.html> target=\_blank

[5] <http://www.movsoc.org/> target=\_blank

[6] <http://www.cut.org.br/> target=\_blank

- [7] <http://www.mstbrazil.org/> target=\_blank
- [8] <http://www.marchemondiale.org/> target=\_blank
- [9] <http://www.focusweb.org/main/html/index.php> target=\_blank
- [10] <http://france.attac.org/> target=\_blank
- [11] [http://www.movsoc.org/htm/who\\_we\\_are.htm](http://www.movsoc.org/htm/who_we_are.htm) target=\_blank
- [12] <http://www.lab.org.uk/?lid=1907&cc=1> target=\_blank
- [13] <https://www1.indymedia.org.uk/en/regions/world/2005/01/303544.html> target=\_blank
- [14] <http://www.all4all.org/2004/12/1359.shtml> target=\_blank
- [15] <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2003/12/282510.html> target=\_blank
- [16] <http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/en/> target=\_blank
- [17] <http://www.zmag.org/bios/homepage.cfm?authorID=181> target=\_blank
- [18] <http://www.jofreeman.com/> target=\_blank
- [19] <http://www.zmag.org/sustainers/content/2003-05/02adamovsky.cfm> target=\_blank
- [20] [http://www.unc.edu/depts/anthro/faculty/fac\\_pages/escobar.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/anthro/faculty/fac_pages/escobar.html) target=\_blank



Copyright © Ezequiel Adamovsky, . Published by openDemocracy Ltd. You may download and print extracts from this article for your own personal and non-commercial use only. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Contact us if you wish to discuss republication. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.