

The end of the beginning?

By Paul Kingsnorth,

Created 2002-02-13 00:00

In January last year, ten thousand dissidents against the system we have been conditioned to call 'globalisation' gathered in the Gaucho capital of southern Brazil, the city of Porto Alegre. They came for the first ever World Social Forum (WSF). Timed to coincide with the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, the WSF was billed as the first truly global meeting in which alternatives to global capitalism would be on show.

Two weeks ago, the second World Social Forum, again in Porto Alegre, began: picking up where 2001 had left off, but in a very different world. After 11 September, Enron and Argentina, things were never going to be the same.

The same applied to the World Economic Forum, which moved from Davos to New York. The move was reported as a symbol of solidarity with Manhattan, but rumours abounded that corporate leaders were afraid to fly and that the Swiss government was no longer prepared to tolerate mass protests against the summit.

For the 'anti-globalisation' movement, the second WSF could become a moment of crystallisation. The movement was dismissed after 11 September as dead in the water. Supposedly born with the protests at Seattle, it had apparently been brought down with the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre.

Instead, this year at Porto Alegre the 'movement of movements' showed that, far from dying off, it had emerged stronger: it had even, in a way, grown up.

The number of attendees increased six-fold. The gathering of 60,000 caused real problems for the organisers. It was impossible to move fifty yards through the main conference venue in anything less than an hour.

What could easily have been a talking shop, or a gathering of cautious reformists, turned out, for the most part, to be a powerful collection of people, movements and ideas – an event which Noam Chomsky, one of the Forum's biggest draws, called "the first real promise of a genuine International".

In over a thousand conferences, workshops and seminars, some of the smartest thinkers in the movement – economists, trade lawyers, educationalists, philosophers, writers – laid out their stalls, laden with sometimes new, often exciting, occasionally unconvincing but almost always challenging ideas.

Representatives of grassroots movements and NGOs with support bases numbering millions talked about their work, made links, found common ground, discussed strategies for the future. Altogether, despite its limitations and problems, the second World Social Forum was a significant success. A success which shattered two of the most widespread myths about the anti-globalisation movement.

Myth One: we, the anti-globalisers

One of these myths is that this is an 'anti-globalisation' movement at all. Chomsky, in his forensic way, said what many others repeated over the six days of the Forum: "Every progressive popular movement's goal, throughout history, has been to create a movement of solidarity which is global, in the interests of the people of the world. In my view, Porto Alegre is the only globalisation forum. There's an anti-globalisation forum taking place in New York, which is trying to prevent this development."

This theme was touched on time and time again, as delegates tried to dismantle the myth, powerfully played upon by proponents of corporate libertarianism, that this movement is a collection of 'antis' opposed to an inevitable historical process.

Lori Wallach, the American trade lawyer who almost single-handedly launched the global campaign which wrecked the proposed Multilateral Agreement on Investment four years ago, took it up when she said, "the enemy labels us 'anti'. They are the antis – they are holding on to a failed status quo. We're the pros – we're pro-democracy, diversity, equity, environmental health. We must go forward as a movement for global justice."

Myth two: we, the anti-poor

The second myth, shattered at Porto Alegre by sheer numbers, is the idea put about by people and institutions as varied (and as similar) as the World Bank, the WTO, Clare Short, George Bush, Vicente Fox and Tony Blair.

It is the accusation that this movement is 'anti-poor' – a collection of ill-informed young rabble-rousers, neo-Luddites and protectionists from the developed world, driven by ideology, ignorance or self-interest to oppose a system which, through the spread of trade and industrialisation, lifts the world's poor out of poverty.

"Opposition to globalisation comes mainly from the rich world" wrote former IMF executive Stanley Fischer in *The Economist* recently, in a recent example of this spin. Fischer didn't come to Porto Alegre, where he would have witnessed tens of thousands of poor farmers, fisherfolk, industrial workers, landless peasants, indigenous people and slum dwellers who had come in far greater numbers than the representatives of western NGOs.

Via Campesina, the global peasant farmers union, was here in its thousands, camped in a local park. Members of Brazil's landless workers movement (MST), one of the organisations responsible for the birth of the WSF in the first place, slept in a local gym with other farmers and landless people from across Latin America.

Township dwellers from South Africa mingled with Thai rice farmers, Indian women about to be made homeless by the Narmada dam, Bangladeshi fishermen, Afghani women fighting fundamentalism, Palestinian torture victims, Quilombos from the free slave colonies of Colombia and Amazon Indians in t-shirts and feather head-dresses.

All were united in their opposition to an economic system which, in different yet strikingly similar ways, is making their lives not better, but considerably worse. Either the poor themselves are anti the interests of the poor, or Stanley Fischer and his kind are telling us fibs. The evidence in Porto Alegre was not on his side

Ways and means

So what, apart from rhetoric and sheer numbers, was on display at Porto Alegre? With the huge diversity of the participants – from Oxfam to a ragbag of communist parties, from local anarchists to global market reformers – there was never going to be any one line, manifesto, or agreed statement on a way forward.

This diversity is a strength which should ensure that what emerges will not be yet another, homogenising top-down blueprint for a new utopia – market- or state-based, old left or new right – but a collection of realities and systems operating within a single world.

But the diversity is also what has made it so difficult until now for the movement to focus on coming together around an agreed programme for the necessary steps to tackle the global institutional framework, regulate global trade and corporate power and take the democratic project to its next stage.

Nevertheless, common themes began to emerge at Porto Alegre, and it is this which suggests that the movement is maturing. One area of broad agreement was the concept of the ‘global commons’ – certain areas of life which are, or should be, public – common – property, protected in perpetuity from privatisation and commodification.

Such areas include the world’s genetic and biological heritage, basic needs like water, the atmosphere (which cuts out the use of ‘carbon trading’ to tackle climate change), public services (particularly health and education), the airwaves, and the land.

From such general agreement came the launch of the Porto Alegre Treaty on the Genetic Commons, put together by a coalition of scientists and advocacy groups, which will be taken to the Johannesburg (Rio+10) Earth Summit in September. It calls for the recognition that “the Earth’s gene pool ... exists in nature and therefore must not be claimed as intellectual property even if purified and synthesised in a laboratory.”

Reining in the corporations

Another common theme emerged around the issue of global economics. Attendees foresee the abolition of the Bretton Woods institutions such as the World Bank, IMF and the WTO, and a new charter for the radical reining-in of corporations.

Some of the most interesting proposals came from the San Francisco-based International Forum on Globalisation (IFG), which proposed unifying global governance under a restructured, genuinely democratic UN. Its agenda includes creating an International Insolvency Court, an International Finance Organisation and an Organisation for Corporate Accountability (which would impose tight rules on business lobbying, and oversee the banning of corporate donations to political parties). Corporate subsidies must be eliminated, business costs must be internalised, and directors and shareholders must take liability for corporate wrongdoing.

Some might observe that, far from being radically new, such proposals represent simply a neo-Keynesian solution to current problems. They would have a point. That such ideas are considered radical at all is perhaps an indication of how advanced the cult of corporate libertarianism currently is.

IFG founder and author of *When Corporations Rule the World*, David Korten, carried such ideas further when he argued for the abolition of capitalism. It should be replaced with a “true market economy”, in which companies would be rooted in local and national economies.

Multinationals and financial speculation would be banned, and the right restored to governments and communities to take whatever economic measures they deem in their interests.

“Capitalism”, he said, “is a word which originated in the eighteenth century to describe a system in which the few control production to the exclusion of the many. This is not the same as a true market economy, in which many small firms, rooted in local communities, compete with each other. Let’s be clear here – the idea is precisely to eliminate capitalism, and with it the institutional form of the limited liability corporation.”

Korten skilfully criticised corporate libertarians like WTO founder Peter Sutherland (recently interviewed by **openDemocracy**) for presenting a false contrast between the benefits of a ‘free’ market and the corrupt hand of ‘inefficient’ government. He explained that today’s markets, far from being ‘free’, are skewed by and in favour of the largest corporations, with a mixture of hidden subsidies, tax breaks, opaque lobbying, political donations, externalised costs and no meaningful corporate accountability for wrongdoing.

He noted that the extension of the current global economic system, far from lifting the poor out of poverty, is concentrating power at the top of the economic pile. With the support of the IMF, World Bank and WTO triumvirate, it is consolidating the privatisation of precisely those common resources – land, food crops, genetic inheritance, water and more – which the poor need to survive.

It would be interesting to see Korten respond to Sutherland’s challenge to “name me a country that hasn’t benefited from greater access to free (sic) trade.” There is little doubt he could do so without blinking.

The ideas keep coming

The now familiar idea of a ‘Tobin tax’ on international financial speculation was promoted heavily at Porto Alegre. But newer ideas, which have already been shown to work, were on show too.

In Porto Alegre itself, the city government has been running a successful model of participatory budgeting for ten years. Its citizens are given genuine control over how their resources are spent. Such models are beginning to link political liberty with economic liberty – genuine control of resources and spending by the people affected – which is becoming a key theme of the movement.

Economic liberty can be seen again in the concept of “food sovereignty”. This is explained by Paul Nicholson of Via Campesina as “the right of citizens to define the food they eat”. It includes removing agriculture from free trade agreements, banning GMOs and instituting radical land reform for the benefit of the poor.

Democracy, too, is in for a revamp, with ideas about community resource control, participatory democracy and the radical localisation of power doing the rounds on a daily basis.

Worth mentioning, too, are now familiar proposals often defined as ‘anti-’, but which, if carried out, would create a more positive world order. The unconditional abolition of Third World Debt, the abolition of the WTO Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement, the end of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) – such measures, though specific and reactive, would turn current realities on their head, which is probably why we should not hold our breath in expectation.

Problems

Porto Alegre 2002 was not without its drawbacks. The fact that the local governing Workers Party (PT) was co-organiser of the Forum led to disturbing displays of propaganda from the party, which faces a presidential election in September. The top-down nature of some of the conferences, with long lectures and little participation from the audience, went against the grain of the movement's lust for genuine democracy at every level.

This led to the organisation of counter-summits to this counter-summit by some more radical activists. A coalition of Brazilian unions issued a statement condemning the WSF as too reformist, and the lack of any final statement or agreed programme, understandable though it may be, left a sense of an unfinished project.

This, combined with the bad organisation of some aspects of the conference (the programme was notoriously hard to decipher, venues changed at the last minute, the building was too small and there was simply too much going on for anyone to take in) meant that unresolved stresses remained. Many will resurface next year.

Ultimately, though, the achievement of bringing so many people and ideas together cannot be understated. They made the official, almost unbearably overused slogan of the event – “Another world is possible” – begin to transcend its own cliché and move into the realm of truth.

Hunger and anger

There were other reasons to be at Porto Alegre, and one of them – perhaps even the most valuable – was to catch a glimpse of realities rarely covered responsibly in the media.

In [my last article](#) [0] for **openDemocracy** I reported on how across a number of very different ‘developing’ countries I have just visited, there is anger and resentment boiling up against the Western economic and social model. I tried to explain how the unlistened-to were channeling their rage, not through murder, terrorism and anomie, as Bin Laden and his twisted followers do, but through peaceful civil disobedience and attempts to build radically different systems of economics and democracy with the basic values which the WSF exemplifies.

Perhaps I didn't explain myself properly, or perhaps he wasn't concentrating, for Paul Hirst, in the recent **openDemocracy** debate with David Held on globalisation, declared that my article was “flirting” with violence.

He then went on to say, in a dispiriting display of defeatism, that “the wealthy countries, corporations, and bodies like the WTO must all be persuaded to help construct a more egalitarian world – which they alone have the power to do. We must work on the minds and consciences of the rich.”

It's a shame Paul Hirst wasn't at Porto Alegre. I hope he will be next year, for it may help to change his mind and conscience. For a start he would hear people like the Kenyan delegate from a mass-based fisherfolk's union confirm that “hunger equals anger”, and that that anger, across the world, is often aimed at those who promote the current model of development.

He might also have bumped into Susan George, the French-American economist, who wrote recently of the shattering of her hope that the US and its allies would respond to 11 September by following Hirst's prescription of becoming nicer people.

“Those who hold our futures in their hands”, she wrote just before the Forum, “are not serious. They see no further than the noses of their bombers. Frightening though the prospect may seem, citizens must accept the risk of being serious in their place.”

Who knows, if Paul Hirst does attend next year, he might even start to believe that swift and radical change, initiated from the bottom up, rather than the top down, is a genuine possibility. That, in a nutshell, is certainly the hope, and the intention, of this movement.

Inevitability and change

For nothing is inevitable in history. Time and time again, paradigm-shifts happen. Systems can be, and regularly have been, swept away by their own, often shockingly sudden, perception of illegitimacy in the eyes of their people. Radical change, as in nature itself, is the rule rather than the exception.

I'm not old enough to remember when Marxists trumpeted the "inevitable" triumph of labour over capital. But I hear the same logic being used for precisely the opposite system. The claim is equally false.

What happened at Porto Alegre opened up a space in which orthodox fatalism can be challenged and people can begin to see the possibility of testing alternatives, on a grand scale even, against the roughness and complexity of reality.

Nothing, similarly, is inevitable about the collapse of the current system, or the triumph of the movement against it. But now, more than ever, it seems a real possibility.

In just a few years, this movement has instituted a real debate about values, economics and power. Through our numbers on the streets, through the work of key dissident thinkers and through the actions of vast grassroots movements in the Global South we have gone from being ignored, or sneered at, to being grudgingly respected.

Already, less than three years after the "Battle of Seattle", we are at the stage where the president of the World Bank can be turned away from our Social Forum (oh, the joy!); at the point where the French government sends twice as many ministers to Porto Alegre (six) as to New York (three).

Something, it seems, is shifting our way. The Gap sells 'anti-capitalist' fashions; *The Economist* devotes a front cover and editorial to (badly) attacking *No Logo*; the WTO desperately, and unconvincingly, names its latest trade stitch-up a "development round".

Certainly the depression felt by many in this movement after 11 September has already almost fully lifted, and the collapse just before Porto Alegre of two of global capitalism's favourite poster boys – Argentina and the Enron corporation – lent a grim new confidence to those who have been pointing out the structural weaknesses of the system for decades.

It's not clear exactly what it is, but at Porto Alegre, everyone could feel it: something is in the air. A tide turning, a paradigm slowly shifting. Whatever it is, suddenly and inexplicably it seems that the future really could lie in the hands of the people gathered in Brazil, and not in the creaky, unstable, divisive cult of global corporatism championed by the delegates in New York.

For some years now, the rhetoric of this movement has insisted that things are shifting in our direction. I wasn't sure. But for the first time, at Porto Alegre, I felt that, somehow, it was beginning to be true.

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-world/article_263.jsp



This article is published by Paul Kingsnorth, , and openDemocracy.net under a Creative Commons licence. You may republish it free of charge with attribution for non-commercial purposes following these guidelines. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Commercial media must contact us for permission and fees. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.