

The World's Fair

By Susan Richards,
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A Flemish Fair, by [Jan Brueghel](#) [1] the Elder (1568-1625)

Every January, for three years now, people from all over the world have been pouring into the southern Brazilian city of Porto Alegre; staying four days to attend the World Social Forum ([WSF](#)) [2], then melting away. The first year brought 30,000; the second year, twice that number. This year I was among more than 100,000 people attending.

We came and created no violence, left no litter, picked no municipal flowers, boosted the local economy. My first impression was of a global university summer school whose ebullience borrowed something from the Brazilian genius for carnival.

The event is timed to coincide with the [World Economic Forum](#) [3], which brings together the leading representatives of the global financial institutions, great economic wizards and multinational corporations in the Swiss ski resort of Davos. For three years now, the world's economic summit has been saddled with this clown-like shadow, not so much a summit as a base, drawing in its multitude of nobodies.

They say that the mood among the powerful at Davos this year was gloomy. In Porto Alegre, on the other hand, it was irrepressible, despite the almost apocalyptic darkness of its agenda: war with Iraq, the grotesque and widening gap between rich and poor, climate change, the privatisation of the basic elements of life – water, seeds, DNA.

A crisis of legitimacy

This contrast in mood between the two forums highlights something significant. On the one hand, despite neo-liberalism having encountered no opposition since the long, slow public death of socialism, a crisis of legitimacy faces the established world order; stock exchanges take the big-dipper down plunge and the US declares the right of pre-emptive war, ending half-a-century of international rule-making. On the other, a global hothouse has now emerged for bringing on seedling alternatives to that order.

A photograph carried in the Porto Alegre newspaper. Against a crowded background, a row of young women and men are stripped naked, in order to elude attempts by the police to arrest them. The incident took place at the end of a great march organised as a protest against the Iraq war. I had been at the march. It had been a moving occasion, carnival in spirit, serious in intent. The Amazonian Indians had played their pipes, Christian Aid waved banners, the Western Saharans marched silently, pale blue and green robes billowing out behind – Argentines, Italians, Sufis and transvestites, they had all trooped past.

At the end, everyone had gathered in an empty parking lot near the city centre, where an improvised grandstand had been set up. There we had danced. Suddenly the holiday mood of this grand finale was killed off. A group of mainly Latin Americans rushed on to the grandstand, seized the platform and started ranting. I did not need Portuguese to recognise the thundering ideological cadences of the hard left. I left in disgust, in silent protest at their sectarianism....

They were the strippers in the photograph. Later I learned that they had planned a putsch on the WSF. Their goal was to force through a change in the forum's unique charter, which precludes it from becoming a single political movement, or from making policy statements and recommendations.

What that little group failed to understand is that the WSF is not a summit, or a failing state where power can be seized, as Lenin's Bolsheviks seized it in the Russian Revolution. Power is not like that at the WSF. They could seize the microphone, but not the power.

The strength of diversity

The WSF is significant at this juncture for this very reason. It is strong in its diversity. It brings together landless peasants and Parisian editors, Indian novelists with western non-governmental organisations (NGOs), African environmentalist activists with South Korean trade unionists, Churchmen and Leninists, social workers, physicists, yogis and students. Whether their approach is environmental, political, spiritual or social, all these people are focused on the urgent need to change the nature of global power.

There must have been other groups at the WSF who shared the dream of capturing the forum. And as the years go by, as the forum grows, there will more attempts to do so. But I think they will fail.

Because this extraordinary event is not like a swollen conference or political rally, but rather like a revival of the great medieval fairs, which used to take place annually or sometimes once every two years across Europe and the Middle East. Only here it is not grain and fruit, horses, pigs and threshers that are being traded, but ideas and arguments, pleas and perspectives, testimonies and fresh research. These come out of the ongoing work of NGOs and trade unions. They come out of forums which have been meeting throughout the year, locally, nationally and regionally. For the WSF is more than a single event. It is only the largest of a network of networks, straddling the globe.

The currency at this global fair of ideas is not money, but time. The day before the forum starts in earnest, time seems to be in plentiful supply. At the impressively modern, gleaming Catholic University, which is the forum's main venue, people walk slowly along the wide paths connecting the different buildings. They are old and young, black, yellow, brown and white. They walk in the sunshine open faced, smiling, peering at each other's name badges, introducing themselves to strangers whose interests intersect with theirs, meeting up with old friends, stopping to listen to hawkers of ideas who are addressing the crowd.

It is this open energy – you don't have to be invited, you only need to want to trade – which makes the WSF so different from Davos. Oddly enough it is here that the market thrives, while the Swiss resort seems positively Soviet!

But as soon the forum gets going, there is pressure on the currency; time becomes the scarcest resource of all. At any one time there are 100 seminars and workshops to choose from. Some bring intellectual stars together in vast arenas which normally host pop concerts. Others offer anyone interested the chance to hear about the consequences for their lives of the latest developments in nanotechnology; about the impact on the lives of actual people in Tanzania and Sri Lanka of decisions taken by the European Union.

It is not possible for anyone to attend all the discussions that interest him or her. In addition, given the organisational challenge posed by this intellectual Babel, it is not unusual to struggle to reach a particular discussion only to find when you arrive, slightly late, that the podium is empty.

Global house of cards

These are the moments when people turn to their neighbours and introduce themselves, confident that whatever difficulties of language remain to be negotiated, their interlocutor is likely to have knowledge to share about water, migration, or human rights, or whatever it is that has brought them to that room. When the formal arrangements break down, the informal ones take over; information is traded, cards exchanged.

For another currency underpins the WSF. Cards. On my return journey, I made the usual rough calculation as to what it was in my luggage that I could not afford to surrender to the corrupt inferno of the airport baggage handlers. And I realised that the wealth I had accumulated was all there in the stack of cards as thick as a blockbuster novel, which I had collected. All the rest I could lose.

Each of those cards is a thread which now connects me electronically with a person in the Philippines, Senegal, Santiago, Morocco or Budapest, a person with whom I have just eaten or taken a bus, a person whom I may never get to visit, but who carries another network of contacts, nationally or internationally, through NGOs or trade unions, a person who from now on will be my correspondent.

This is what has charged this week in a city in Brazil with the potential for change. I have attended plenty of international conferences. Usually I was meeting people like myself, well educated, middle-class, from the developed west. Now, in the palm of my hand, I carry threads which connect me with an utterly different network, of people for whom the concept of 'global justice' is not the subject of a dull university essay or a pious op-ed, but rather a potential remedy to the force which has shattered their particular community; for whom climate change is not the subject of some tiresome charity appeal but the phenomenon which has resulted in the death of their people's flocks.

Victor Youmbi, poet, carries no card, but he does have access to an email. He works among the poorest people in the vast shantytowns which surround Douala, of which I had never heard before, in Cameroon, a country which had scarcely crossed my mind before this year WSF. 'Every time I come back home, they ask me, my people: "Why have you come back, when you could have stayed there, in the land of the advertisements?" What can I say? Sixty-five per cent of my fellow countrymen dream of nothing but getting to Europe. I go back because ... well, because of them.'

Abdelatif's card – in Arabic and French – takes me to the largest map of the Sahara I can find. There I track down Guelmine where he lives, and I can even see the Saharan oases he has crossed the world to represent. Dimly, I have even begun, through listening carefully, to imagine what it is like to live there, to face the water wars that have broken out in oasis after oasis and the threat posed to their whole way of life by the new disease, which has killed half of their date palms already.

The road to global citizenship

The first newspaper I picked up on my return home contained a sour tirade against this year's WSF by, of all people, [Naomi Klein](#) [4]. 'Big' is the word with which she chooses to damn it. It had sold out, become too big, too concerned with powerful (male) stars and political grandees. Well, Klein should know better by now not to draw conclusions about an event on the basis of press releases.

Yes, Noam Chomsky did address 15,000 people, and Venezuela's beleaguered President Chavez held a press conference, but among the many stalls of the WSF, such events have room to come and go without disturbing the mass trading in ideas and connections which is the forum's chief business. Yes, all such gatherings have their carousels and clowns – it's human and welcome.

Only once was the forum stopped in its tracks by a star appearance, and that, appropriately enough, was when 75,000 of us flocked to hear President Lula, Brazil's newly-elected Worker's Party leader. What he had to say was less significant than the fact that he flew from Porto Alegre straight to Davos; he had already seen Bush, to engage with the economic forces which govern our world.

If any issue divided this year's forum it was this decision of Lula's. The cheers that were heard at the Gigantinho stadium in Porto Alegre when Lula's face appeared on a live video-link from Davos, were countered by the pie that was hurled at the president of Lula's party, José Genuino, in resentment of the 'betrayal' which many felt.

Whether or not to engage with power remains the great dividing issue within the WSF and amongst all those who want a different, better world. openDemocracy is not an advocacy site, we are like the WSF in that we host global arguments in a new way and don't tell people what to think. But, as our [Editor's note](#) [4] celebrated when Lula was elected, we are with Lula, in that we are committed to dialogue and engagement including with those who admire and defend the existing order. Let the best argument win!



The dream of Joachim, by [Giotto](#) [5] (real name Ambrogio Bondone, 1267-1337)

So in the end, how much does it matter, this WSF? Naomi Klein is right when she insists that significant changes in global politics must start with engagement at the grass roots, but she is wrong to think that the WSF has lost touch with that goal. In the short term, this forum of nobodies has no 'real' power to change anything. But it has the potential, like art, to change the way we see the world.

For just as Giotto allowed us to see depth on a one-dimensional plane, this forum has already started to give global politics its proper depth. The only true local politics today must involve a redefinition of what 'local' means. It could help us learn to see our own locality in a global perspective; to develop a depth of awareness of the consequences of our activities, of the thread of global connectedness behind the purchases we make, the financial decisions we take, and those we allow politicians to take on our behalf.

If that is not power, I do not know what is.

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