

**Porto Alegre 2003: Genesis of a Structured People's Movement of
Global Resistance**

**THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM
January 23-28, 2003, Porto Alegre, Brazil**

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'The world would be better-off without George Bush', Arundhati Roy

Introduction : Big is beautiful ?

'The keyword at this year's World Social Forum, which ended on January 28 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, was "big"', reports Naomi Klein (author of *No Logo*). The gathering was indeed twice as big as last year by the number of attendees. The third edition of the World Social Forum (WSF) was held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, mirroring the first two editions in 2001 and 2002. This year, though, in the midst of political disagreement over the war on Iraq, the WSF more than ever represented an alternative people's voice. The main goal pursued by a majority of participants was to resist globalisation, which is seen as a concentration of wealth/profits/power in the hand of the happy few, while social conditions should prevail over economic targets.

Facts

The scale of the event was considerably larger than the previous years. Over 30'000 delegates (twice as many as in 2002) and around 100'000 participants in total (NGO delegates and other participants) gathered in Porto Alegre. NGO delegates representing 5'000 NGOs and 121 countries participated and organised workshops and roundtables, whilst in total 100'000 people gathered to march in the streets, in protest against the war and globalisation. Therefore, chaos had to be organised... Around 1'700 workshops were held, in addition to conferences - -targeted at a wider audience, and testimonies. Press agencies reported that the computer system crashed down, so that the final agenda could not be printed out. Participants had to rely on the day to day programme which was distributed in the morning, in Portuguese.

Such limitations to organisation should trigger deep re-thinking of the event, in order to make it more efficient in gathering so many people. This year's WSF actually marked the beginning of an introspection about the necessary structure to be adopted by the WSF.

The city of Porto Alegre was chosen because of its particular mode of administration, much more participatory than any other city in the world, and as such, it is singled out as the UN's model of good government. Porto Alegre should therefore remain symbolically the centre of debates. When thinking of Porto Alegre and the WSF, the people of the world should now identify issues such as participatory democracy, social economics as opposed to neo-liberal globalisation, and the search for alternatives to war (this year).

Actors : individualities, no unity

US delegations were much more numerous than in WSF-2002 (only a few academics and NGO representatives had travelled to Brazil), mainly because of international tensions about the war on Iraq. US delegates were longing to prove that 'not all Americans followed Bush'. 'War gives impetus to find new alternatives to globalisation', it creates a momentum, since the war against Afghanistan and Iraq is the epitome of US unilateralist strategy and imperialism.

Discussions about war on Iraq also took other aspects. To some, the war on Iraq could weaken the position of developing countries in upcoming WTO trade talks. To others, this topic is so energy-consuming for the civil society, that it diverts the attention away from WTO negotiations on agriculture and services.

More and more individualities emerge from the WSF's annual meeting. Speakers such as **Martin Khor** (Third World Network), **Irene Kahn** (Amnesty International – Bangladesh), **Susan George**, **Noam Chomsky**, **Lori Wallach** (Public Citizen), have gained popularity over the years and attract thousands of listeners, yet the views they express are their own or those of the organisations they are affiliated with – never can they speak in the name of the WSF. The WSF has no legitimate representative so far. The International Committee of the WSF tackles organisational and logistical matters, however, it cannot speak in the name of the WSF as far as specific issues are concerned.

Goals

More obvious this year, is the willingness of organisers and members to be part of a long term process. Ideally, the WSF would become the decision-taking meeting, once a year, whilst regional and thematic forums would deal with the substance of various issue-areas. ATTAC, Focus on the Global South and MST (the landless farmers) insisted on giving a new architecture to the movement, feeding through a democratic agenda aiming at internationalising the movement that fights imperialism. **They called for the creation of a permanent forum**, but there are several strategies to set up a permanent forum, the following elements had to be taken into account in order to create a **permanent, yet flexible structure**.

The movement is broadening, in the sense that its geographical base is widening. Thanks to the multiplication of regional forums, the WSF is conquering new public spaces. One of the critiques addressed to previous WSFs was the under-representation of Asian and African delegations. Decentralisation thus acts as a catalyst for under-represented peoples, social movements and associations to participate in the world debate.

As a part of the re-thinking of the structure of the WSF process, the International Committee has decided to decentralise the WSF every other year, calling upon India to host the gathering in 2004. The International Committee will act as a Secretariat for the WSF, this entails thinking strategically and adopting a critical viewpoint. Four main guidelines have been laid down: **(1) the current trend of globalisation is not sustainable; (2) an alternative globalisation is under way; (3) dialogue between the two kinds of globalisation (economic vs. political; corporate-led vs. society-led globalisation) is pressing and must not be postponed; (4) responsible leaders of the WSF will be judged on the basis of their organisation skills, performance of the WSF and the way they are able to fulfil the objectives of the WSF, i.e. the ability of the new structure (world social network, initiated by the landless farmers and CUT, both co-organisers of the WSF) to lead to actual decision-making, and to articulate and drive a ‘radical, democratic, internationalist, anti-imperialist agenda’.** In essence, the International Committee must serve as a reference and as a tool for international mobilisation.

The third edition of the WSF represents an important moment in the movement’s history for the institutionalisation of the parallel forums accompanying the WSF. One would not speak of an ‘institutionalisation’ for the WSF itself, which would be counter its nature, but indeed, the

institutionalisation of regional or thematic forums achieve more precise goals than the WSF itself. Roberto Savio, member of the WSF's International Committee, calls for smaller, more in-depth forums. Otherwise, the lack of methodology and systematisation weakens Porto Alegre's WSF.

Similarities with previous editions of the WSF

'Global plenty vs. global need'

Diversity is a hallmark of each of the last three years' events - creative diversity, enthusiasm, hope, characterise the atmosphere of the event. Demonstrations look more and more like carnivals (featuring puppets, banners, drums, chants and songs), and meetings turn out to be fairly chaotic. Diversity reaches topics included in the programme and participants are invited to suggest roundtables and organise them themselves, such that the logistics become complex.

Participants overwhelmingly applaud anti-capitalist messages, targeting social justice and are convinced that 'another world is possible'. Davos, the meeting point of the World Economic Forum, and meetings called upon by the International Financial Institutions or the WTO, are all-time favourite targets.

Strategies repeat themselves from one forum to the other. Calls for resistance to WTO – led globalisation and agreements such as the FTAA gather unconditional support. The next WTO ministerial conference in Cancun, Mexico (Sept. 2003), triggers a call for lobbying, demonstrations, protests, NGO-delegates seeking accreditation in order to voice their concerns directly.

Those who follow the WSF from the beginning and in general those acquainted with international social movements will say that the actors are always the same: social movements, trade unions, academics, etc. Strong individualities have emerged as a result of the internationalisation of the movement, such as Susan George, Martin Khor, Irene Kahn etc., and media coverage builds upon those individuals that are able to draw massive attention and attract thousands to their conferences. This year's top star was probably President Lula de Silva (Brazil), although critiques argued about the meaning of his speech, since he delivered the same message both to the WSF and the WEF, casting doubts on his underlying intentions. In essence, his message calls for a new world economic order, shared development, new ethics: **Davos must hear the call from Porto Alegre.**

To some, the presence of 'big fish' is a proof of the hijacking of the WSF by political parties. Yet it is probably, on the contrary, a proof of the fact that **the movement is being taken more and more seriously by decision-makers.** Indeed, despite the presence of 'big names', there is no such thing as 'unity', nor is a 'doctrine' emerging from talks. How can this be ? No leader whatsoever can be as presumptuous as to 'lead the WSF' and speak in the name of this movement. The WSF is the sum of all individuals it is composed of.

Debates this year were organised under the headings of the following central issues :

- Democratic and sustainable development;
- Principles and values, human rights, diversity and equality;
- Media, culture and counter-culture;
- Political power, civil society and democracy;
- A democratic world order and the anti-war and peace struggle.

Hope and enthusiasm are key to the success of the WSF. Hope and enthusiasm are reflected in the motto of the WSF 'another world is possible', a message full of utopia, which brings together 100'000 people in Porto Alegre, who think they represent the interests of 'the poor', the 'under-represented', etc. And some do actually 'represent' a group, a minority and so on, however, the claim to represent 'the poor' overdoes it slightly...

What changes did WSF 2003 introduce ?

The substance of the WSF evolved quite a lot since the initial forum: in 2001, Porto Alegre's delegates analysed the world's situation; in 2002, they drew up a list of proposals for change; in 2003, strategies were at the core of all discussions. Account has been taken of the critiques, who blamed the WSF for too much babbling and not enough doing. Enough of endless discussing and debating, now the WSF has to make proposals for change.

At the core of the discussions, war on Iraq was a dominant topic, indeed, the international crisis context gives impetus to search for alternatives. Related topics such as fundamentalism and intolerance were also highly debated. Consequently, the geographic representation of social movements re-emerged, since the Muslim world is unequally represented at the WSF; this fact is

probably due to the lack of social movements in the Muslim world, but also to the fact that Christian communities were rather over-represented, the WSF being held in Latin-America. The over-representation of local communities seems to be a constant flaw to the debating process, and one way of avoiding this, is to adopt a more decentralised structure for debates, such a move has been taken at Porto Alegre 2003.

The growth of alternative media networks seems to be at the core of the WSF's new strategies. Independent media networks are actually a pre-condition for the communication around the forum's events to prove both adequate and efficient. Another issue is the qualification of 'independent' media, as opposed to what ? All Western media are supposed to be 'independent'. Therefore what participants are calling for is 'alternative' media, which can be just as independent as other existing media, but support alternatives causes. This debate cannot be avoided if the WSF's media are to be taken seriously. Alternative media such as Indymedia or IPS report on the forum and try to ensure complete coverage of the event, which CNN or Reuters happen not to be doing...

Participants finally acknowledged that it is difficult to deal with profound conflicts of interests within the WSF, namely, the fact that no 'poor' can ever afford to travel to Brazil in order to take part in the debates shows the limits to the claims set forth by the forum. Issues such as agricultural subsidies cannot be seriously debated, the interests of the European Union and those of the 'South' are diametrically opposed. Hugo Chavez brought up topics such as the Tobin tax, price controls and expressed views strongly opposed to neo-liberalism and dollarisation; needless to say, very few 'Western' governments would agree with him. Although 'propaganda' around the Tobin tax was initiated by Bernard Cassen (Le Monde Diplomatique, co-organiser of the WSF), who suddenly declared that 'our job is to mobilise, targeting the EU so that the lawmakers pass the legislation to apply the Tobin tax as France has done': slightly distorting the truth, Europe is far from applying this tax, there is no guarantee that the European Union will ever want to discuss this topic, which is economically controversial.

Religious communities, especially Christian communities, gathered in numbers at this year's WSF. Not only did they participate in the discussions, but they also gained importance in the organisation of the event. The CCFD (Catholic Committee against Hunger and for Development) finances part of the WSF. Also, this year's topics attracted religious communities, since fundamentalism, peace and tolerance were high on the forum's agenda.

To some, this over-representation of Christian movements comes as a reaction to Islamic fundamentalism world-wide, thus signalling a Christian reaction. However Christian groups cannot monopolise debates at the WSF and are very far from hijacking the movement. High attendance by Christian groups is probably due to the localisation of the Forum, in Latin America – which is mostly Christian - and where Christian groups have a long tradition of support to local communities. The ‘local bias’ probably explains most of the increase in the presence of religious delegations.

Strategically, it has become crucial for NGOs, unions or social movements to be part of the WSF. **Even Greepeace, for instance, joined the movement this year, opting for a new strategy of going global but not alone.** This new attitude strengthens the idea that the WSF has become the locus of global resistance.

Strategies and proposals for the new alternative

Clarity of the message, clarification of the structure of the movement

The WSF was preceded this year by a series of preparatory regional gatherings (Argentina, Florence, Asia, Brazil), that were called upon to discuss specific issues (against neo-liberalism, an education forum, local authorities for social exclusion). It gives the impression, that the campaign is being co-ordinated globally with an unprecedented precision, that all social movements get organised and wait until the WSF, the final stage at which decisions should be taken. This is certainly a way of strengthening the impact of the world social movement.

WSF 2003 will be remembered as the year in which the creation of an international co-ordination against war was decided, as well as a Global Media Watch (network to keep an eye on media independence, founding members will include professional journalists, academics/researchers, and members of civil society interested in the media), and the set-up of an international / global social network. The global social network establishes the architecture of the world social movement, thereby the WSF becomes a seriously organised process. The movement is now organised in a modern (Internet networks) and decentralised way, through regional and thematic forums held all year round.

Two major proposals emerged from the WSF. The first one had already been evoked on several occasions, **the people of the world suggest there be a second (parliamentary) chamber attached to the United Nations**, and this ‘people’s chamber’ could be an offspring of the WSF. Then the ‘nearest thing to a people’s UN’ would actually have a role to play, making the UN accountable to the people. This reasoning could be extended to other international organisations, such as the IMF, World Bank, the WTO.

The second proposal, in line with the fight against corporate-led globalisation, suggests the **creation of a permanent international court for multinational corporations**. Dragging corporate leaders in front of a specific court would be an additional step towards corporate accountability. This proposal was initiated by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights). Questions about sentences and the way of making them effective remain.

Finally, it seems that ideological consensus-building has succeeded in re-defining socialism as a message to put ‘society first’. The definition of the WSF as a global resistance movement seems to gather wide support.

Conclusion

Porto Alegre is ‘no longer an event, it has become a process’, the movement is strengthening thanks to the new structure it has adopted this year. In a way, the WSF is gaining legitimacy, since it has become the focus of all alternative movements, of all delegations who want to express alternative viewpoints. The World Economic Forum add onto this building up of legitimacy, since Klaus Schwab, its President, talks about the WSF, cannot ignore it, and the agenda of the WEF actually picks up various topic that are close to the debates belonging to the WSF’s agenda (e.g. bridging the digital divide, global warming). Klaus Schwab even went on saying that the WSF and the WEF are in fact ‘one and the same’... to him, both meetings have the same objectives, that is to create a better world. For the President of the WEF, much progress has been made in the dialogue between the WSF and the WEF. Yet inside the WSF, you can still tell there is a divide between reformers (dialogue is possible) and revolutionaries (dialogue will never occur).

Porto Alegre has a life of its own, the WSF is more and more broadly accepted as the locus for global alternatives, even though it may not be the ideal public space open to ‘the poor’, which it sometimes wrongly claims to be.

‘Another world is possible’ takes different meanings, depending on the people who spell this motto out. Utopians from ‘rich countries’ live comfortably and never starve. Some in Porto Alegre began to mention this discrepancy between those who speak up in the name of the poor and those who are actually poor. Those who voice the concerns of the poor are not poor, nor do they represent the poor... So Utopians, still, but they are getting more and more down to earth.

The people’s movement acknowledged its limits and sought an architecture in order to match economic globalisation with political globalisation. **Yet the rift between believers in the dialogue with global institutions or groups (WEF) and those strongly opposed to any kind of dialogue is not bridging, how the movement manages to deal with such a polarisation will drive the future of the WSF.** In fact, polarisation forces are also at work within liberal thought: neo-liberal advocates also exclude reformism and critical thinking within its own line of thought (cf. Joseph Stiglitz ‘marginalised’).

Some critiques will spell out the following question: Is gathering crowds the aim of Porto Alegre ? Part of the aim is to gain support, however from gathering numbers to building up a consensus, there is a long way to go. Gathering crowds cannot be the only indicator of success or failure... on the contrary, the impression one gets from Porto Alegre is that ‘all they do is talk’, which is actually untrue. Gathering crowds is risky though, it risks the dilution of the movement, very much like peace movements in the 1970s that never succeeded in preventing warfare. There is a strong need to rethink methods of opposition in order to prevent such a failure from happening. The WSF as it happens to be today, is doomed to failure. Additionally, if you think that its only aim is at changing the world, it sure is doomed to fail, but its re-organisation and new architecture must be watched with attention.

Nonetheless, the widest possible audience remains the WSF’s strongest ally: **the WSF has room for manoeuvre, because its approach is all inclusive.** Total autonomy of the WSF is guaranteed by the fact that it is exclusive to civil society, and independent of political parties and governments.

Once the methodologies and strategies are finally decided upon, its strength will prove colossal. The difficult part lies ahead though, methodologies and strategies that are to attract consensus at the WSF are still to be sought. How will consensus be reached? And if it is actually reached, will the strategies and proposals still be revolutionary?
