

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article474>



World Social Forum

From event to movement

- IV Online magazine - 2002 - IV339 - April 2002 -

Publication date: Monday 15 April 2002

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

THE second World Social Forum at Porto Alegre opens a new phase in the anti-globalisation movement. Both in political and media terms, the event was a success, with about 15,000 thousand delegates, 5,000 organizations and more than 50,000 participants.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/payoutmarch1.jpg>]

But the numbers indicate only the most visible part of the phenomenon. The forum is in reality a demonstration of the rootedness of the movement, of its being an active part of the world scene and of its capacity to influence events. The most incontrovertible proof of this is a comparison with the World Economic Forum held in New York at the same time: if in 2001 the two events enjoyed similar coverage, in 2002 there was no comparison. The event at Porto Alegre catalyses the hopes of the many and the fears of the few, constituting a true symbolic victory. In times of the paroxysm of symbology, this is no small thing.

But the forum represents above all the end of a nightmare, that of war. If after the attacks of September 11 the movement has been submitted to formidable pressure, with the attempt to portray it as equivalent to Islamic terror, Porto Alegre has drawn a line under that process.

THE movement has shown itself to be clearly against the war, despite the fears even of the organizers themselves. No one can believe that, just a few months after September 11, more than 50,000 people were ready to participate in this kind of demonstration, were ready to flock to listen to Noam Chomsky, according to whom "the true terrorists are the United States", to adopt an appeal of social movements in which the rejection of war and neo-liberalism are central.

None of this was inevitable. The type of forum that came into being at Porto Alegre might have involved a risk, an incentive to dispersion and fragmentation. And it is here that we find the second positive element: the Forum was not only the site at which scattered subjectivities or individuals came together, but a unitary place that allowed relationships between networks of movements that have consolidated themselves over a full year, rich in experience of action, and therefore the repositories of plans and a global vision much greater than that expressed at the first Forum. There has been a visible change of gear in the action of the main international networks which underpin the Forum and the international tenor of the movement like Via Campesina - an international association of peasants with about 60 million affiliates - and Attac.

The youth camp also functioned as a network, impelled by a very intense programme of debate and discussion, and shot through by a project defined as 'intergalactic', a first attempt to bring about a network of radical youth experiences, capable of representing within the movement not only the specific condition of youth, but also the form in which a new generation is participating in the global confrontation, in ways and according to dynamics that vary from country to country and from continent to continent, but animated by a shared passion, anger and need.

The final document

The forum of the social movements was one of the many within the world forum, by nature an open and composite space that is not organized vertically, but is a horizontal concatenation of thematic places - seminars, workshops - each of which is accountable only to itself and not to a predetermined programme. In reality the organisational structure of the Brazilian committee, made up of eight associations and the International council of around 60-70 members, defined a large part of the invitations and the sequence of the central conferences, those of the morning,

which were generally the most relevant and well attended. This year, moreover, certain political exclusions were also defined, like the Colombian FARC, not welcome at the Forum as they are expressions of armed struggle, while on the other hand nothing was said about those parliamentarians who after September 11 had voted in favour of the war against Afghanistan.

These social movements were the only organs to define their own final document. In the debate around the drafting of this document, which lasted four afternoons, some points of synthesis can be discerned.

The first refers to the war. All the subjects of the international movement had no hesitation in condemning it, understanding the intrinsic link with neo-liberal politics, defining it as 'another face of neo-liberalism, a face which is brutal and unacceptable'. On this point the discussion was very rapid and simple, signalling an advanced understanding within the most militant sectors of the movement. This does not automatically imply that the negative effects of the war on the development of mobilizations would suddenly cease: at the level of the masses and broad public opinion, the knot has still not been completely untied, but the determination of the movement to proceed with its own activities incorporating within them intransigent opposition to the war offers a guarantee of stability.

Second, the movements insisted on the importance of opening a second overall phase, emerging from the rhythms of the anti-summit demonstrations towards building campaigns, unifying initiatives and shared projects. This aspiration is still however only sketchy: in the final document, reference was made only to already familiar themes such as the Tobin tax, cancellation of the debt, environmental and food sustainability and participatory democracy. This is no small thing but in the discussion we faced for the first time the need to get to grips also with the 'national variables' of neo-liberal policies.

Here we refer mainly to Argentina effect which has demonstrated the close link which exists between the dynamic of global policies laid down by the international institutions like the IMF or WTO, that of the national policies pursued in this case by De La Rúa, Cavallo or Duhalde and that between other states; in the Argentine case, the role not only of the USA but also Spain, the second biggest external investor in Argentina.

From this understanding emerge questions relative to privatisation, defence of wages, public services and the welfare state. Above all concern and attention becomes stronger in relation to processes of regional integration like the FTAA or European unification. In effect these are the links that connect the power of the international bodies and therefore the dynamic of internationalisation of capital with its 'national interests', the use of states and governments as instruments of accumulation and as necessary organizers of repression and class domination, but at the same time the spasmodic attempt to establish supranational alliances which allow control on the political and institutional level of the effective dynamics of capitalist expansion. It is therefore no coincidence that the WSF decided to 'root itself' and enlarge itself through the organization of multiple continental or regional forums.

The forum of the Americas, at Quito in Ecuador, and that of Europe, in Italy have already been established; nor is it by chance that the main mobilisations of the next 2 years will relate to the FTAA summit in Buenos Aires and the EU summits in Seville, Copenhagen and Athens. The European Forum in particular may be the occasion to outline another idea of Europe, to realize a more stable alliance between the social movements of the old continent and therefore an expansion of the movement. But it also represents the opportunity for a relationship with the forces of organized trades unionism with the 'old workers' movement' so to speak, and to confront the role of traditional reformism which is attempting to insert itself in various forms in the new global movement. This is probably the most significant experience the movement will have in 2002, which may determine a further step forward: from itinerant movement to organized movement.

Crisis and rebirth of politics

The insertion of traditional reformism within the movement has been at one and the same time clumsy and determined. Many reformist socialist and frequently also liberal parliamentarians have sent signals of openness to the movement, hypocritically ignoring their most recent role on the war or the application of neo-liberal measures. In some cases, however, this availability has involved an element of self criticism - albeit never explicit - or has been accompanied by a new political positioning that chooses the terrain of the movement as that most suited for presenting oneself as an alternative to the free market forces and in any case as an occasion for rejuvenation.

Certainly there is no doubt that the reformist presence in the movement is a lasting and not occasional or episodic fact. And this brings with it a different kind of relationship with the traditional political forms, those of parties and institutional representation. The movement is undoubtedly gaining in political and symbolic authority, legitimating itself in ways unthought of until a few months ago - one thinks of the difference between Genoa and Porto Alegre - realizing the conditions of its enlargement. At the same time it becomes a possible target for a political raid and could run the risk of splitting.

This new insertion, however, relates to a more general contradiction, the crisis of the traditional political form - institutional representation in the first place and the party understood as something separate from the movement - which materialized in the development of the parliamentary forum. This was a real and genuine failure, presenting itself as a 'foreign body' in an environment capable of valorising any difference. The parliamentary forum was the only area of real contestation - in reality directed against the parliamentarians who in one way or another supported the war. There is a crisis of the bogged down politics of institutional mediation, of representation by the party or the trade union.

There is instead the rebirth of the politics of participation, of inclusion, of respect of pluralism and enrolled in a precise will for radical change, for determined struggle and, above all, of aspiration to a society which is more just, free and equal. At Porto Alegre the word 'socialism' resounded with some emphasis, in the youth camp as in the peasants camp, in the themed conferences of the Pontifical University where people queued up to listen to dissertations on the theme by Frei Betto and Michael Lowy - and in the meetings of the Women's March.

The new left

So a new politics is born, capable of resolving itself from the ruins and from the defeat. Its favoured watchword is 'participation', its space of action is the forum, its coordinates are opposition to the war and to neo-liberalism. It is a politics which, in rejecting the dominant system, and in the tendency, perhaps idealistic, to accept the division of the world into 'us' (the movements, the good, the future) and 'them' (the powerful, the bad, the past) tends to valorise the theme of 'counterpower', though according to different versions: The moderate one which proposes to influence existing power; and the more radical one which does not want to compromise in any way with existing power.

It is however the sign of a turning point, we don't yet know how great, but which cannot any longer be thought of as an episodic contingency but rather as a rhythm of historical magnitude. This new politics constitutes the precondition also of a new left: it is not enough to renew talk of socialism, but it is necessary to understand it in the light of a historic failure and in relation to the new needs expressed by a multiplicity of antagonistic subjectivities.

This new left was not yet expressed at Porto Alegre, nor will it express itself in the very near future, not least because it will not be the fruit of political alchemies or of forcing by the vanguard, but rather a process of social and political remixing in which all the residual forms of the twentieth century will be up for play.

From event to movement

A process that will not be simple, but is unavoidable. In any case, an interesting gamble.