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Rio +20

# Fragmentation, convergences and strategic goals: some pointers from the Thematic Social Forum

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**Capitalist crisis, social and environmental justice was the subject of the Thematic Social Forum organised in the run up to the People's Summit of Rio+20, which was held in Porto Alegre from January 25-28 and brought together at least 60,000 participants in about 600 activities. (40,000 of them had officially paid registrations). This Forum, the first Thematic Social Forum held in Brazil, was a huge success in one of its goals which was to mobilize and involve Brazilian and international civil society in the process of the People's Summit that is already being discussed more widely. It also made it possible to intensify the dialogue with the Brazilian government about what is at stake in Rio+20: President Dilma Roussef participated in two activities; a private meeting with 90 leaders of movements and an open one at Gigantinho Stadium [1].**

The Thematic Social Forum saw a continuation of the organizational problems of earlier social forums (in this case, public agencies – which should act to assist the operation of the Forums – not coordinating properly and so creating organizational chaos). But its political sense is more complex, evidencing the challenges for the left in the new global conjuncture we entered from 2011 – with the capitalist crisis leading to a greater fragmentation of the world economy, the possibilities and difficulties of new anti-systemic convergences by emerging social movements, as well as unprecedented challenges for the advance (which is theoretically possible) of a new socialist left which can respond to our contemporary challenges.

## **A new historical period.**

There was general agreement about the main features of the world situation as we enter in the fourth year of what is probably the “great depression of the 21st century”, with very unequal impacts upon different regions. Edgardo Lander produced a text about the international situation - to be used as a framework for the work of the thematic groups of the Thematic Social Forum – entitled “A new historical period” [3].

This text offers a well-grounded description of the strong cyclical trends, which help to define the political challenges and the strategic axes for rebuilding the movement. While pointing to the huge stakes we are facing (characterized by an unprecedented “civilizational crisis”), the text is not marked by the disorientation of parts of the left - instead it points out the openings that the new situation brings for the struggle against the system. This viewpoint was shared by most of the organizations and movements attending the Thematic Social Forum.

## **Fragmentary dynamics in the market and in world politics.**

An element which was not discussed very much in Porto Alegre was the displacement of the dynamics of the world economy towards the emerging countries and the movement of the economic centre of gravity to Asia - an outcome of neoliberal globalization and of capital movements to those countries that offer more propitious conditions for capital accumulation.

The shift from Bush-era unilateralism towards a more and more multilateral world does not reverse the hostile global conditions for the working class and the popular sectors which have existed for the last three decades (reaffirmed

by the neoliberal politics in USA and Europe...), but at the same time geopolitical changes reverberate in other arenas. Everything points to a deep and long term crisis – especially for the triad countries (USA, EU, Japan) – and there is no answer, from these countries, to the growth of inequalities in the world nor to the increasing seriousness of the environmental crisis.

The structural conditions and political options in different parts of the world create different dynamics within this overall situation. The neoliberal consensus which has prevailed in the US since the Reagan period has been broken down by the eruption of the Occupy Movement and the radicalization of the republican rightwing towards the Tea Party; whereas in Europe you have had the rapid degeneration of democracy and social achievements as a result of the neoliberal push made by the elite under the guardianship of Berlin, combined with increasing xenophobia and the backwardness of the institutional left – without the Indignados being able to fill this political gap. China has continued to maintain high growth rates as have India and Russia and an increasing proportions of trade by the emergent economies takes place with Beijing. The popular upheavals in the Arab world have deepened the instability in the region (intensified by the recent threats to Iran), while South America has stabilised around Brazilian hegemony, with greater possibilities for social policies and the reintegration of this continent as a commodity supplier to China – a reality which is being challenged by the social movements (especially those led by indigenous people) that are day by day more involved with the socio-environmental critiques of developmentalism. Although a lot has been said about the strengthening of Brazil as a regional power and as an element that limits the impact of the United States's historic domination of the continent, it is the other members of the Triad that have felt the greatest loss of influence. Europe in particular is going through a long period of decline - which can only be seen as a positive thing by people from other continents but is experienced by the peoples of Europe as a huge reactionary offensive.

What is at stake in Rio+20? The Thematic Social Forum was a preparation for the People's Summit of Rio+20 and was the first real opportunity for the left to debate what is at stake at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, which is taking place during a full blown depression as well as after the failure of the COPs on climate change – the greatest challenge ever faced by humanity.

At the beginning two polar opposite positions were apparent: one that said this is a fraud and the result is irrelevant for dealing with the environmental crisis and the question of inequality in the world, therefore the core issue is to use this opportunity to denounce the capitalist crisis; and the other that said Rio+20 is an key part of the strategic rearticulation of part of the global capitalism, which needs to legitimate a new phase in the privatization and commodification of nature and commons.

But the discussion developed during the Forum and its outcome, while it didn't overcome these differences, did represent a significant coming together of these two positions in the way they see and work around the UN Conference and further struggle emerging from it. This approach is even more important because there is a common acknowledgement that this Conference should be used as an opportunity to mobilize movements and organizations from all over the world to the People's Summit.

A very important agreement took place between the sectors operating in the thematic groups of the Thematic Social Forum and those grouped around the ALBA of Social Movements. The 'minute' produced by João Pedro Stedille about these discussions ("We need unity and international social mobilizations") gives a good picture of the debate and the effort to find a synthesis [4] [5]. It will have to be consolidated and deepened in the process of the Summit's preparation, but it is worth highlighting that nothing like this has been achieved in the continent since the final campaign against the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The unity over the mobilization for the People's Summit was and still is the most important outcome of the Thematic Social Forum.

## The exhaustion of the antiglobalisation movement and the fragmentation of the international left.

The different dynamics at work in different regions of the capitalist world economy affect the forces organising against the system. There is an evident retreat in terms of the common frameworks that were accumulated in the previous period, even though social conflicts are on the increase. The antiglobalisation movement which developed at the turn of the century focused on the multilateral institutions (IMF, World Bank etc) which presided over the development of neoliberal globalization as well as the military offensive of international relations by Bush government. Today the problems are different.

The emergence of a new political generation in broad mobilizations has a contradictory effect of bringing new groups of activists into the struggle and delegitimizing or even dismantling old organizational forms and political forces of the left, especially those most integrated into the system. There is a fragmentation of the global left.

This affects not only parties and unions in most part of the world, but also the dynamic of the World Social Forum. There has been a real weakening of the European Social Forum and the Americas Social Forum (for different reasons, but with the dominant left forces moving, in both cases, towards a political dynamic of statism, which in the first case is very regressive, but in the second one is progressive). At the same time the process of the Social Forum keeps developing in North America and Maghreb, two strategic regions in the recent struggles.

There is, especially, a maturation of the preparation of the WSF 2013, which it has now been decided will be held in Tunis. The letter sent by Kamal Lahbib to the International Council of the WSF is an indication of this development. [6]. One problem with Kamal's letter however needs to be spelt out: the development of recent social struggles in Europe, United States and even in South America reinforce instead of weakening the Charter of Principals of the WSF. This points not to the strengthening of the currently dominant left parties (which are intergrated into the system), but to a wide structural recomposition around a belief in the need to go beyond capitalism, which is only possible in scenarios of huge political developments.

Anyhow, in the two regions where the left is historically strong the situation couldn't be more different: while in Europe the crisis represented the loss of strategic horizons developed by the reformist left, in South America there is a vibrant political and social force that moves both inside and outside the institutional process.

## The South American governments and "neodevelopmentalism"

The backdrop to the political differences present at Porto Alegre has largely to do with the appreciation of the role played by the more or less progressive South American governments in the current international situation, with a real tension between the advances achieved in some countries with these governments, and the need to overcome the paradigms of developmentalism and, for some, of statism.

As Raul Zibechi affirms – in reply to an article by Emmanuel Wallerstein highlighting the importance of left unity for it to advance – “in Latin America, during the last three decades, the anti-systemic movements have created new strategies to change society and build a new world... However, the central fact is that the left, more or less united, has done about as much as it could, however you judge the outcome of its action. The eight South-American governments we might call leftwing have improved people's lives and diminished their sufferings, but they have not progressed in building new societies. It is a question of looking at the facts and understanding the structural

limitations which suggest that along this path it is simply not possible to achieve any more ... The battle for a new world will be much longer than the duration of the progressive governments in Latin America and, above all, its outcome will be settled on ground stained in blood and mud" (see <http://outrapolitica.wordpress.com/2012/01/15/las-izquierdas-y-el-fin-del-capitalismo/>).

In fact, many of the social struggles taking place across the continent today are against "neodevelopmentalism" - and they are coming up against that part of the left which is integrated into this model and is in power - a regressive "developmentalism", based on redefining Latin America's role in the global market as a supplier of minerals and agricultural products to Asian capitalism. At the heart of these disputes is the struggle against extractivism and the increasing privatization and commodification of nature, in defence of indigenous and community lands and against the existing "national" state, struggles based on the activities of indigenous movements and highly active ecologists, who are capable of imposing defeats on these "progressive" governments from the left. This is the only region in the world where political and social forces push the traditional left beyond its historical limits - which gives them a global responsibility in the dialogue with the new democratic and popular movements that are emerging. The anti-systemic alternative is socialist and ecological - and although this is still not systematized as a global programme, it is already orienting many of the movements operating across the continent (commons, living well, plurinational states, people's control of their territory, etc - an agenda that emerged during the WSF process in Belem, 2009). To develop a vision of how developmentalism can be overcome was a second strategic goal of the Thematic Social Forum, which creates a strong dialogue with the indigenous, popular and environmental movements across the continent.

## **Possible convergences.**

One of the goals the organizers of the Thematic Social Forum set for themselves was to bring to Porto Alegre expressions of the new movements that have characterized the recent period. The four round tables of testimony from the "indignados", "the Arab Spring", "Occupy movements", and "the Chilean student struggles of the Chilean students" were indications of the sorts of demands and ways of organizing developed in these different movements. But the indignados/occupy movements do not have "representatives" and their forms of organization are very unlike those that the left is used to.

Not by accident, the most interesting discussions about the convergence of struggle did not happen in the formal spaces of the conference, but in the Youth Camp where the common elements among all these movements became clear: the adoption of direct democracy in the squares and streets, the transparency of its procedures, the building of horizontal relations through social networks, the suspicion of any delegation of power, which is only acknowledged as legitimate in mobilization, the strong presence of women, the centrality of demands arising from the economic crisis, the fight against privatization and inequality, for equality and social justice... But what was also clear is how far this is from the language used by most of the left today: political instrument, programme, strategy, building support, the struggle for state power, participation in elections, etc.

Travel plans were made from this meeting - Athens, Barcelona, New York - but this promise will only thrive if the internal dynamics of these various movement takes on these links as a central concern. In any case, further meetings later in the year are being discussed, during the People's Summit of Rio+20, in Rio de Janeiro in June, and also at the Maghreb Social Forum, in Tunis, in the middle of the year. A third strategic goal for the Thematic Social Forum and one which was only partially successful was to strengthen the convergence between these new movements

## Programme, alternative paradigm and recomposition.

The elaboration of a programme to overcome capitalism, based on a common understanding of the current situation, the tasks needed to carry this out and the strategy of fighting for power seems – even if we take into account the most promising movements of the day – a task far beyond our immediate reach. But important steps can be taken in this direction in two ways.

On the one hand, we need to confront the proposals to rearticulate the system with others that support an alternative paradigm for organising society. For the left, Rio+20 can be an opportunity to say: “there are alternatives and they have a global coherence”, and to give these ideas greater visibility. It is an important and urgent task to systematise these alternatives, precisely at the moment that new steps are being put forward in the commodification of life and of nature which the multinationals want to greenwash and prettify.

On the other hand, it has always been necessary to develop the widest possible dialogue between the experiences of the different political generations active in the movements of the day – something that has been done in the Social Forums over the years, especially between the activists that emerged during the antiglobalisation period and those from the left before the collapse of the Soviet Union. But now, with the bursting on to the scene of movements that clearly represent the emergence of a new political generation, it becomes even more important to systematize the most enduring elements of the antiglobalisation movement experience – something that the WSF never set itself as a task. The most comprehensive systematization over the past decades was that undertaken by the People’s Summit against the Climate Changes and in Defense of Mother Earth, in Cochabamba, April 2010 – which was thematically focused.

The organization of the Thematic Social Forum, building on the methodology of Cochabamba (organised around open, self-organized, thematic groups, but in dialogue with the general issues and aiming for convergence between them), was an ambitious experience. The late start meant that Porto Alegre became just a part of a process that will continue until May 2012 – when a seminar will conclude both the thematic elaboration and the process of convergence, helping – it is hoped – to overcome the left’s imaginative inertia. The result can provide both a fundamental underpinning for the development, at the People’s Summit, of an alternative paradigm to the one produced by the UN and by the governments for Rio+20, and it could also assist in the dialogue between the generations of the social forums and the “indignados”. This is a fundamental contribution which the process that involves the Thematic Social Forum and the Summit can offer to an urgent recomposition of the global left on a new basis, one which is capable of facing up to the deepening of the systemic crisis. Systematizing this possible alternative paradigm, starting from the experience of the antiglobalisation movement, was a fourth goal of the Thematic Social Forum and one which continues to develop in the process towards People’s Summit.

An exemplary campaign. One of the main tasks for the People’s Summit of Rio+20 is to ensure that a number of campaigns come out of it that can be taken up globally by all the movements, organisations and anti-systemic parties; campaigns that can help social activists to move beyond a defensive posture in relation to the current convergence of crises. Which campaigns will be adopted depends on political negotiations and agreements which need to be made during these next months.

But one theme directly related to Rio+20 acquired prominence in the discussions held in Porto Alegre, the question of the green economy. The opinion of a lot of people involved in the debates during the Thematic Social Forum is that progressive movements of the world urgently need to be alerted to those initiatives which are pushing to deepen the commodification of life and nature - and that are hoping the UN document contains a mandate to negotiate the regulation of this process. There was a consensus about the content of this campaign, although there is a semantic and political problem regarding the name: “no to the green economy”. In the debates the idea was clarified and

formulations like “no to the green economy of the 1%” was accepted even by those who judge that what is in dispute is the content of an economic transition. But attempts to improve the name are still underway – taking into account especially the different contexts in Europe and Latin America.

The launch documents of this campaign are already available and should gather momentum in the coming months, in the process of building the People’s Summit.

10. Rio+20 of Peoples. It's been a long time since any event with the political centrality and symbolic appeal of Rio+20 has been held. It will certainly be a frustration for those hoping to see governments come up with something similar to what happened in Rio92.. But the People’s Summit, which takes advantage of this moment of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, could be an unique opportunity, greater than the one offered by the WSF of 2009 in Belem and by the People’s Summit of Cochabamba in 2010, to discuss the dramatic situation of the planet and humanity and the alternatives from a socio-environmental and anti-systemic point of view.

The People’s Summit of Rio+20 is not designed to be a Social Forum, but a place where alternatives to the proposals of the official summit can be put forward and publicised, opening a real battle for global public opinion, and which can organize campaigns. In the view of many organizations, especially those that have been participating in the Assemblies of Social Movements, this presupposed an event that could take decisions. But, contradictorily, as it grew in political breadth, as wide or wider than the Forums, it started to face the same kind of political problems the WSF process faced.

The internationalization, decided in Porto Alegre, of the Co-ordinating Group (GA) of the Civil Society Organizing Committee for the People’s Summit, was an important step to create a political framework capable of dealing with the tensions arising from the tasks taken on by the People’s Summit. The Thematic Social Forum process offered and will keep offering many benefits to this process. It remains now for these set of forces that have committed to the People’s Summit, and their formal bodies, to define with more precision the political substance that it will have. This should be a goal for all the movements and organizations from global civil society that have the perspective of overcoming capitalism.

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[1] [[\\_>http://pagina13.org.br/archives/13036](http://pagina13.org.br/archives/13036)] - note that this document, with the speech of Jo o Pedro Stedille and the reply of Dilma, doesn't include the intervention of Pablo Solon

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[3] see: <http://dialogos2012.org/2012/02/um-...>

[4] see <http://www.rebellion.org/noticia.php?id=143865&titular=necesitamos-unidad-y-manifestaciones-sociales-internacionales>

[5] footnote The ALBA of Social Movements is an attempt to bring together progressive social movements from around Latin America, promoted largely by the Brazilian Landless Movement (MST), in parallel with the ALBA of progressive governments set up by Venezuela and Cuba. Joao Pedro Stedile is the central leader of the MST.

[6] see <http://outrapolitica.wordpress.com/2012/01/25/letter-for-the-international-council-of-wsf/>