

THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM IN BELEM DO PARÀ

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As is known the World Social Forum was created by an initiative of social movements in 2001, as a counterpiece to the World Economic Forum of Davos, a celebrated conference of the financial and political elites of the Western capitalist world. The WSF soon became an important planetary meeting place for popular movements - trade unions, peasant associations, women movements, ecological networks - NGO's, intellectuals and youth, united by their opposition to neo-liberalism - « The World is not a Commodity » - and their hopes for change : « Another World is Possible ! ». In reality, the Forum is only the most visible part of a larger current, the Global Justice Movement - *altermundialista* in Spanish or Portuguese - a world-wide « movement of movements » born in 1999 with the mass protests in Seattle against the World Trade Organization. After several meetings in the southern Brazilian town of Porto Alegre, the WSF moved to Mumbai, then to Nairobi and now returned to Brazil, but this time in the Amazonian town of Belem, capital of the state of Para (several times bigger than France).

Unlike the meeting of Nairobi, which was a semi-failure, this one was very successful: 130 thousand participants, 2.400 workshops, and many interesting debates. Half of the delegates came from Belem and the state of Para, some 30% from other areas in Brazil, and some 20% from other countries, mainly Latin America and Europe ; some Asiatic and African participants were able to come, inspite of the long distance and the expensive fares. Many of the delegates were youth and women, and there were, for the first time, several thousand indigenous people, from the Amazonian forest or the Andean mountains. In spite of the (terribly wet) heat, of the (torrential) tropical rains, and a lot of mud under the feet, the atmosphere was ludic and cheerfull. The Forum took place in two campuses, the Federal and the Rural University of Para, which

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were supposed to be near, but it was almost impossible to move from the one to the other; the only practical way of communication was through small boats in the river - an affluent of the Amazonas - who took you from one campus to the other. The most important activities took place under huge tents in the Rural University, which were distant several kilometers from the entrance of the campus ; fortunately, some « taxi-bicycles » were available for older people, like the author of these notes.

The most obvious feature of the Forum is its diversity: thousands of initiatives, from mass meetings against capitalism, to small workshops on Esperanto or Free Soft-Wares. Obviously, the issue of the Amazonian forest, and of the Forest peoples - indigenous communities, landless peasants - was central in the debates; the first day of the meeting was a Pan-Amazonian Forum. Some other issues were present in many meetings and round-tables: the financial and economic crisis, the ecological crisis, the food crisis; the idea emerged of a common root for all those developments: a crisis of civilization, a crisis of the Western capitalist/industrial modern civilization; this theme was developed, in their own terms, by the indigenous delegates, the ecologists, the marxists, the feminists.

Personally, I took place, as speaker and as listener, on several initiatives around ecosocialism, one of them a meeting under a huge tent attended by some 500 people. An international ecosocialist manifesto was distributed, in Portuguese and English, and many people wanted to join the Brazilian ecosocialist network.

Five progressive Latin American presidents attended the Forum, as invited guests: Luis Inacio Lula da Silva (Brasil), Hugo Chavez (Venezuela), Evo Morales (Bolivia), Fernando Lugo (Paraguay), Rafael Correa (Equador). Their participation obviously documented the social and political importance of the Forum. There was a common meeting with the five presidents, attended by ten thousand people, and the next day, a meeting of the social movements with the four ones considered to be atuned to the anti-imperialist and anti-neoliberal spirit of the event : the same ones without Lula, seen as too moderate and too favourable to big business.

The spirit of the Belem World Social Forum was quite explicitly anti-capitalist, in a more obvious way than in the previous meetings. The strong leftist currents in Latin America and the world economic crisis produced a certain radicalization among the participants of the

Forum. This was visible in the documents approved by the various thematic assemblies, which took place in the last day of the Forum, and in particular in the document presented by the assembly of social movements - Via Campesina, workers unions, Climate Justice, the World March of Women, etc - which says:

«We are confronted with a global crisis provoked by capitalism, which has no issue within this system. (...) This system is based on exploitation, brutal competition, the promotion of individual private interests against the collective ones, and the frenetic accumulation of riches by a handful of billionaires. It generates bloody wars, nourishes xenophobia, racism and religious fundamentalism; it intensifies the oppression of women and increases the criminalisation of social movements. (...) The process of social emancipation for the 21 century raised by the ecological, socialist and feminist projects wants to liberate society from the domination of capitalists over the means of production, communication and services, by supporting forms of property of social interest».

The document of the social movements called also for an agenda of international mobilizations, in solidarity with Palestine (March 30), against NATO (April 4th), for Mother Earth and against the commodification of Life (October 12).

Obviously the Forum cannot substitute the social movements, the political parties or the (leftist) governments; but it is a unique place where people of different origins and practices can exchange their experiences and learn from each other. It is the breeding ground for an international culture of resistance and struggle, for the discussion of practical propositions, and for the invention of utopias. The participants know that the Forum is not going to change the world nor bring down the powers that be, but they believe it may become a source of hope and inspiration for all those, around the world, that search for radical alternatives; in other words, become a small grain of sand in the gears of the System...

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