

# **The 9th World Social Forum : new pathways and opportunities for the global alter-world project**

lundi 23 février 2009, par [MORAIS Leandro](#) (Date de rédaction antérieure : 21 février 2009).

The 9th World Social Forum (WSF) took place in Belem, Brazil from January 27th-February 1st, 2009. There were many hopes for the activities of the WSF, including the expectation to re-raise its international visibility and mobilization potential. From 2001-2004, the WSF successfully consolidated itself as an innovative network of left social movements and organizations worldwide to confront the neoliberal agenda. Since 2005, however, the movement has been unable to re-articulate its goal of society transformation within to the new international scenario of political and economical relations, marked by increasing militarization after the occupation in Iraq (2003). This has constrained the WSF's influence (especially since Porto Alegre, 2005). Belem, thus, was expected to allow the organizations within the movement to move ahead to start building an effective counter approach at this critical junction, now worsened by the crisis of the world financial system, that is capable of raising previous levels of mobilization.

The symbolic value of having the WSF in the Amazon region influenced the decision to choose Belem as the host city. The development project pursued in the region has raised great concerns, given its constant conditionality by the powerful forces of the capitalism system. Current levels of deforestation in the region are due to large-scale agro-business and mining companies in the region and unsustainable exploration of natural resources. Furthermore, social instability has been caused by the on-going process of criminalization of social movements, which has led to the murder of leaders of peasants and indigenous organizations in the region ; and the violent forces of an elite that has more power than the State.

At the micro-level, the city of Belem inspired the WSF participants to think about contradictions about our every-day life. Almost all the activities were carried out in the poorest residential areas of the city - the *Terra Firme* district. Contradictions included the fees applied to participate in the Forum, a fact that many pointed as a factor limiting the participation of local people, as well as to the actions of the police to monitor the area and to contain local residents movement during the WSF. For an area that faces constant poverty and violence, many residents questioned: why the government was now interested in using the police to "protect" them? With this context, the 9th WSF edition began to address the challenges of realizing its slogan "how another world can be possible"? {"Crisis of civilization", indigenous protagonist and Palestine cause: pillars for discussion} Across many of the almost 2000 activities organized during the WSF in Belem, the so-called "systemic" or "civilization" crisis crosscut discussions. Debates highlighted a profound crisis of the capitalist system based on challenges including economic/financial; environment; institutional governance (especially in multilateral organizations); militarization and immigration Under this framing, many discussions focused on central issues , such as i) cancellation of foreign debt in developing countries; ii) justice and climate change; iii) migration policies and

rights; iii) labour, xenophobia and human rights; iv) racism; v) gender; vi) re-appropriation of cities and urban policies; vii) media power and communication democracy. The outcomes of those activities raised critiques and challenges of the current system of economic and social organization, due to increasing forms of commoditization, emphasis in over-consumption and the mainstream policies of development. Additionally, the WSF saw the emergence of indigenous and other traditional communities as important protagonists in this process of dialogue, highlighting the value of indigenous livelihoods and culture for alternatives projects of social development, and also the challenges to assuring their rights represents within the process of conforming plural-national states. For the first time, indigenous and other traditional communities from many Latin American countries actively participated in the WSFs activities, organizing, at the same week, the Pan-Amazon Forum, an space considered for many as fruitful for developing partnerships and mobilization for the WSF in the region.

Also important were discussions on the increase militarization of international relations and impacts of this. The situation of “populations without state”, such as the Palestine and Kurd causes, were top issue for mobilization and debate Activists and related-organizations (such as the Stop the War) called attention to the WSF to increasingly address those questions.

### **Science and Democracy : a new issue for reflection and debate**

Belem was also important because of new initiatives and topics within the activities organized. Amongst them, the achievement of pre-Forums [1] deserve special attention. In its first edition, the World Forum about Science and Democracy involved considerable number of social organizations and academics in the field of science and society and encouraged a broad debate on the goals and roles played by scientific research and technology in the structure of the capitalist system. Recognizing that the values of scientific communities are shaped by and rooted in historical and cultural processes, the participants called for changes in the present context of research and development, *“where the interests of the market, corporate profits, the consumer culture and military uses are the main drivers of research, technology and innovation”* (S & D Forums Declaration) [[See on ESSF the declaration: [->art13044] ]]. The Declaration also pointed the importance of re-apropriation of social control in this area, through the involvement of citizens in decision-making processes on Science and Technology policies. Additionally, They agreed to have regional forums on Science and Democracy in January 2010 to prepare for WSF in 2011. {{Belem-2009: a balance of continuity or rupture?}} As highlighted by Eric Toussaint, member of the Committee for the Abolition of Third World Debt (CADTM) and of the WSF International Committee, this WSF represented a turning point in the Forums history, moving it from only a space for sharing experiences, building alliances and for strategic reflection of social movements and civil society organizations. He said : *“Despite persistent conflicts between some values, such as the importance of self-management activities and the necessity to bring functionality to them (avoiding duplicity), Belems outcomes explicitly express a “call for action”, in order to create pathways to reach the goal of change from the WSF participants with the achievement of real changes”*. A new methodology of work was put in place in Belem, encouraging participant organizations to set up Thematic Assemblies, with the aim of articulating common understandings and concrete commonalities in their field of work. Also, it established a Convergence Square, as a space to announce activities related to scheduled Thematic Assemblies. This helped to

*disseminate information about work by various organizations, and agreed proposals and strategies. It served as place for organizations mutual knowledge, which could lead to establishing new alliances. Finally, during the last day, the proposals of each Thematic Assembly were read in the Assembly of Assemblies.*

Most of the Assemblies faced difficulties in organizing themselves and many of them resulted in general political statements. Others proposed agendas and concrete actions. The Pan-Amazon Forum proposed the realization of a Pan-Amazon Countries Summit in June 2009 to address: proposals for the opening of boundaries in the region for the indigenous and traditional communities; measures against the criminalization of social movements; and preparations for the 5th Pan-Amazon Forum in 2010. The Assembly of Anti-War Movements called for: global boycott campaigns against Israeli products and companies; prosecution of Israel for war crimes in Palestine under the International Court of Justice; and global mobilization against the North-Atlantic Treatment Organization (NATO). The Migration Assembly strongly supported international recognition of the category of "environment" and "climate" refugees; demanded commitment from the Governments for the regularization of immigrants without documents and proposed May 17th as an official day for mobilization against migration policies in the European Union. The discussions on foreign debt in developing countries called on Governments and civil society organizations to carry out public accounting of the on-going debts, in order to identify irregularities and request compensations for abusive forms of debt and payments; and asked for developing countries Governments to abandon the G20 strategy. The Global Crisis Assembly called for the establishment of mechanisms for social control and radical changes in governance in financial policies and institutions ; and for international measures to smash "fiscal paradises".

The Assembly of Social Movements offered a comprehensive package of future actions. Its final Declaration included Global Week of Action against Capitalism and War from March 28 to April 4, 2009, covering mobilizations against the G-20 meeting (March, 28th), a Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People to promote boycott, disinvestment and sanctions against Israel (March, 30th) and mobilisation for the 60th Anniversary of NATO (April, 4th) ; a Day for Food Sovereignty (April, 17th) ; Global Mobilisation of Struggle for Mother Earth and "common goods", against colonisation and commodification of life (October, 12th) ; the Global Action Day for Climate Change Justice (December, 12th) ; and traditional days of mobilization (Women and Workers Days, for instance).

Also, as suggested by Eric Toussaint, "*participant organizations combined an analytical evaluation of the current context of crisis with principles and proposals to forge ahead the inherent paradigms of the capitalism structure.*" In its first paragraph, the Declaration of the Social Movements Assembly stress that "*anti-imperialist, anti-racist, anti-capitalist, feminist, environmentalist and socialist alternatives are necessary to surpass the current crisis*" [2]. This was the result of negotiations between two main groups : those in favour of neo-Keynesianism and those supporting a strong rupture with the bases of the different forms of the capitalism system. The outcomes of the WSF clarified the debate : now there is a more explicit inclination by the composing organizations to support a rupture with the notions of economic progress, consumerism and commoditization of everyday life that have framed recent developments in capitalism.

However, questions still remain. To what extent will the agenda be implemented ? Will the WSF sustain this momentum during the coming years ? This evaluation will be crucial, given that the WSF do not have appropriate structure to coordinate global actions : outcomes depend of voluntary efforts of organizations and social movements and their power of mobilization at the local and

regional level among further actors. Also, if the agenda has a potential to attract interest for mobilization worldwide, it is important to highlight that the current crises may limit actors' actions. The nature of this WSFs balance is under dispute by different sectors of political segments around the world and many have tried to minimize its role. Nevertheless, I believe that now it is a necessary time to reinforce the role of the WSF. In the context of the described crisis (a scenario which can be seen as even worst now, after the explicit failure of the Davos Summit to offer a coherent response to it), the WSF has filled a "blank" in this global agenda unable to present convincing alternatives to solve the current problems. The controversies of the old debate regarding strategies of "reform" or "revolution" between the left were not solved in Belem. However, this event demonstrated a clearer commitment to match theoretical convictions with practical challenges under an attempt to devote efforts towards a more unified strategy of action. By bringing new impulses toward a joint mobilization, this edition revealed the strategic importance of the WSF for the left around the world, while it also allowed a continuity with the spirit of diversity, dialogue and mutual respect that have oriented this space since 2001 in a struggle for a different world.

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## Notes

[1] Apart the discussion about Science and Democracy, in Belem it was organized Pre-Forums about Health, Education, Alternative Media and Culture.

[2] See the declaration on ESSF : [We won't pay for the crisis. The rich have to pay for it !](#)