

At the time of the Sixth World Social Forum

...That another world is possible

Friday 17 February 2006, by [MARTINS Antonio](#) (Date first published: 14 February 2006).

Recent criticisms against the World Social Forum have been made by well-intentioned people, but reveal reactionary thinking. They introduce into the alterglobalisation movement logics that marked the Left in the twentieth century and led it to a historic failure.

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“Much is expected from those in whom we trust a great deal”, Jesus Christ said once. It is possible that the same statement applies to projects that generate collective hope, like the World Social Forum (WSF). Just before its sixth edition, two articles that were published in journals of enormous visibility in the alterglobalisation galaxy, argued that the big world meeting of alternative movements is about to be over.

Their authors are connected to the history of the process that started in Porto Alegre. Ignacio Ramonet created the famous sentence: “Another world is possible”; François Polet is assistant to François Houtart, an important figure on the WSF International Council. The central arguments of both texts is very similar and can be summarised into three essential ideas: a) By unfolding itself, every year, in the form of thousands of activities and hundreds of ideas without hierarchy among themselves, the WSF keeps its participants fragmented and reduces itself to a folkloric parade of ideas and good intentions; b) The way to avoid this huge project losing itself is to make the Forum a great “general assembly of mankind”, where actions that have priority are chosen to be adopted by all participants; c) The first step was taken in Porto Alegre, on January 2005, at the Plaza São Raphael Hotel, when nineteen intellectuals announced a manifesto that put forward twelve ideas that alterglobalisation should defend so that it would no longer be “morally victorious but without being effective”. And in particular, at the end of his text Ignacio Ramonet suggests that it is only through government actions such as those being taken by Hugo Chavez that it is possible to avoid falling victim to neoliberalism.

The best intentions

There should not be a single doubt about the good intentions of Ramonet and Polet. Their speech is a resounding echo of the Twentieth Century revolutionary tradition. The present text intends to argue, however, that their diagnosis is false and its essential proposal disastrous. The alterglobalisation movement is not inefficient. As you will be able to see in the next article in this series [presumably in

Carta; Eds], it has promoted important mobilisation (some of which is widely known, and some less known) and helped to prevent the realisation of some of capitalism's most essential projects. Its most important conquest is, however, at the level of ideas. It is a space where it is possible to decide whether human beings are willing to build new social relations, or will be condemned to wait helplessly for a future that will come, despite their will.

Within a little more than a decade, alterglobalisation has decisively contributed to transforming the ideological environment of the planet, by rescuing the possibility of social emancipation. In the late nineties, the vision of an end of capitalism was seen as an outdated idea, and even a dangerous one. The collapse of Eastern European and Asiatic bureaucratic regimes (even though self-styled "socialist") had spread the idea that democracy and respect for freedom could only exist in societies that accepted being ruled by market forces ? meaning the relentless search for profit and the idea that individuals should only aspire for the satisfaction of their selfish interests. Privatisation, the deconstruction of laws and social rules that "prevent" investments, and the opening of economies to multinationals were seen as signs of modernity.

Ten years later, this enchantment is broken. An expressive and growing part of public opinion, in many countries, has adopted values whose anti-systemic potential is evident. A few examples: the fight for human rights is even more present in the agenda of societies but it has also gained another sense. Today, it means that the right to a decent life (in terms of its political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental aspects) must be assured for everyone, notwithstanding what they earn which is something that follows a logic that goes against capitalism.

Besides this, there is a growing feeling that "market democracies" are just empty shells. Decisions that really matter are taken without the people's representatives and against their interests. The US, the country that most embodies the capitalistic ideal, is now identified by most people as a symbol of injustice and brutality. Much is said about building direct forms of democracy and stigmatising the use of force, but these two ideas have meanings that are not compatible with alienation and inequality.

Why social emancipation revived

Two factors have conspired to produce this change in the landscape. Because of inner difficulties, which are the consequence of its ultra-conservative and excluding character, capitalism has rapidly contradicted many of its own promises. Multiple financial crises, and the sacrifices imposed on societies as measures to avoid the former, have destroyed dreams of prosperity and comfort. But an objective approach alone is not enough to explain such a deep change in this fight for hearts and minds.

If the idea of social emancipation has leapt from the respectable shelves of history into the carnival of social movements, it is because it is free from what linked it to the world of the dead. A new transformative project is needed to face capitalism of the 21st century. This is why the movement cannot be sustained by old answers ? failed answers -, answers that were given during past phases of the struggle.

Besides providing an open space for the articulation of common action, the editions of the WSF have been important laboratories of social science, where theories of transformation are being constantly re-elaborated. This power plant of ideas has at least two remarkable characteristics. It puts all emancipatory streams into contact with each other. Marxisms, Gandhism, feminism, liberation Christianity, Gaia theories, thirdworldism, humanism, and others all dialogue and enrich each other constantly. They are present, as theoretical influences, in the self-organised activities during the

Forums, where more and more we see the common factor is the meeting of participants from diverse countries and cultures. But this is exactly the second relevant idea: the debate of ideas does not happen only at an academic level, or within political parties. The Forum breaks barriers between intellectuals and activists. Intellectuals of international importance and leaders of different political streams debate, as every other participant, in the same environment, where there are no pre-established truths or leaders.

Instead of hierarchies, the great laboratory

Equally, this is where Social Forums and alterglobalisation are producing their first results. The refusal to repeat old formulas, the openness to learn from different points of view, and the reduced importance given to old political and academic hierarchies are allowing the birth of a new political culture. It is possible that the Portuguese social scientist Boaventura de Sousa Santos has been the first to identify its central point. It was in an article of his, published right after the first WSF, that he affirmed that for a new proposition of social emancipation, diversity would be a value as important as equality and that we could aspire to both of them simultaneously...

The new political culture tends to reject any attempts of creating hierarchy (that contest equality) or uniformity (that violate diversity) both directions that set it apart from capitalism and the ideas that come from the old forms of struggle against it. There are no "historic" social categories that are more capable than others to lead the world transformation. There are no campaigns that are a priori, more relevant than others. There are no directions ? either academic, or from political parties ? that are legitimised to define such campaigns in our names, outside our dialogue spaces.

The necessary search for common actions and strategies needs to be carried out through creative and steady dialogue among the social movements themselves, by identifying common objectives, by creating the tissue of common propositions that value the identities of each and every subject involved, instead of repealing and diluting them.

This ensemble of principles is not only a code of etiquette that Social Forums participants establish among themselves. It is possible that it also contains clues for a new emancipatory project.

A new utopia for a new capitalism

In its contemporary phase, capitalism promotes the hyper-concentration of wealth, through: financial accumulation and draining; massive extraction of value-addition in high-technology companies (and almost without workers); and the transformation of public services into products. Besides, it seeks to multiply its mechanisms of domination, once concentrated in the State. On the one hand, it appeals to international "free" institutions of democracy (the WTO, the IMF, and the World Bank, primarily) as well as to the diktats of financial markets. On the other, it tries to colonise our minds through the media, publicity, and entertainment.

Under such entirely new conditions, is there any sense in appealing to old strategies that reduce politics to the "conquest" of State power ? and because of that, emphasise the necessity of identifying "historical personalities" and building dominating political parties?

Will we not be legitimate, to the contrary, to use World Social Forums ? these magnificent laboratories of actors, common actions, sensibilities and ideas to reinvent the fight to overcome capitalism? And if, for example, it were possible to do this starting from "open forms": from multiple anti-systemic initiatives unleashed by social actors that recognise themselves in the WSF and see in

it not a space to “choose” priority campaigns, but to articulate, empower, and give a sense of commonality to the ones already underway?

Old hopes and new hopes

This wave of conservative criticism against the WSF practically ignores or despises the possibilities of this great laboratory. It is excited with the real advances by Hugo Chavez’ government in Venezuela, and by the series of electoral victories that the Left seems to be about to reach throughout Latin America. There is no reason to deny the freshness and relevance of this fact. Africa and Latin America were the principal victims in two decisive moments of capitalist globalization: during the colonial expansion that took place from the 16th to the 18th century and during the world colonisation that started in 1980. We are happy to see that, in one of these continents, institutional resistances are starting to also appear, maybe as important as the liberation revolutions that resulted in the birth of the Latin-American national states in the 19th century or, to use a more recent example, the national development plans that were put into action in the period between 1940-1970.

But why should such welcome possibilities require alterglobalisation to renounce the post-capitalist roads it has opened? Why should we rush into a “choice” of campaigns supposedly capable of “unifying” the world of Social Forums? Why should we propose them from small groups, re-establishing the barrier between those who think and those who fight and violating the simultaneous commitment to equality and diversity?

Le Monde Diplomatique, the Three Continental Centre, and the World Forum of Alternatives have been inspiring sources of alterglobalisation since its gestation. The criticism that they now make should be seen as intellectual stimulation to the world of the WSF. In the same way, this “criticism of the criticisms” is made while being sure that Ignacio Ramonet and François Polet will not renounce the journey at the first call of the sirens of the old traditions.

P.S.

* Original in Portuguese. Translation by Flavia Falcão and Eduardo. Tellechea; finalised by Jai Sen.