

World Social Forum - Bamako: Impressions on the movement for global justice in Africa

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In January 2004, the World Social Forum (WSF) was for the first time held outside Brazil: in Mumbai, India. This year the WSF has been organised in polycentric fashion, in Bamako (Mali), Caracas (Venezuela) and - a little late because of the recent earthquake in Kashmir - in Karachi (Pakistan). The objective of this mobility is to root the dynamic of the movement for global justice among other peoples also confronted with the aggression of neoliberalism.

But, unlike the two other regional sites, the Polycentric World Social Forum (PWSF) in Bamako was a first on the African continent. Until now there have only been editions of the regional version, the African Social Forum (ASF). Moreover, this PWSF in Bamako is also the prelude to the 2007 World Social Forum, which will take place in Nairobi (Kenya). In other words, it was a trial run for the movement for global justice on the continent, responsible for the organisation and mobilisation for an effective popular participation. So, what impressions has it left?

Participation

The organising committee had hoped to attract 30,000 people, from Mali and neighbouring countries, other regions of Africa and the rest of the world to this West African country, where a regional version of the Social Forum had been organised and which has also been since 2002 the site of an alternative summit to the G8, the so-called Forum of African Peoples. Participation was smaller than expected: the figures vary between 10,000 and 20,000 people. The opening demonstration was a march of around 5,000 people, over 2 km, with a route largely distanced from the popular neighbourhoods and without any real manifestation of popular support.

This low participation can partly be explained by the social situation of the Malian population, 70% of who live below the poverty line. Time is thus more devoted to individual tactics of survival, while low incomes tend to be spent on the satisfaction of basic needs rather than the payment of registration fees (equivalent to at least two meals) for a Forum of discussion and exchange. This also in the light of recent local history, that of the "falsification of the victory of March 26" (the popular movement which overthrew the military dictatorship in 1990, at the price of human lives, has given way to a "democratic" regime of billionaires which is incapable of ending pauperisation).

Nonetheless, the people of Bamako intermingled massively with those attending the Forum at a concert (tickets cost nearly as much as the costs of registration) at the Modibo Keita stadium, by the

Ivory Coast reggae singer Tiken Jah Fakoly. At the concert refrains against the burden of the foreign debt and other misdeeds of neoliberalism were taken up. A proof of the sympathy of those who were absent for the work of the PWSF in the critique of neoliberalism.

Would a participation without registration fees have attracted more people in general, and in particular young schoolchildren, students and unemployed? Did the high rate of illiteracy (nearly 60%) dissuade the non-Francophones who feared being lost among the “intellectuals” and foreigners despite radio and television advertising in local languages?

In addition to the frustration caused by this low participation, there were problems connected to the fragmented localisation of the Forum, over a dozen sites, stretching from one extremity to another in a city deprived of an adequate system of public transport. As if the organising committee had no memory of the inconvenience resulting from the fragmented nature of the European Social Forum in Paris-Saint-Denis and the advantage of the concentrated localisation of the World Social Forum in Mumbai. This dispersal reduced the possibility of going immediately from one meeting or workshop to another and the possibilities of meeting and exchanges between participants belonging to different thematic networks. For example, few people were able to go from the House of Culture, the so-called “Universe of women” to the “Thomas Sankara” international youth camp, since they were situated at two extremes of the city.

On the global character of the PWSF

The PWSF was not simply a repeat of the last African Social Forum, held in December 2005 in Conakry (Guinea). Many of the most media-prominent figures in the movement for global justice were present, like Christophe Aguiton, Samir Amin, José Bové, Bernard Cassen, Susan George, François Houtart, P.K. Murthy, Paul Nicholson, Jacques Nikonoff, Riccardo Petrella, Ignacio Ramonet and Aminata Traoré. There was participation from delegations and individuals from outside Africa: Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Catalonia, Finland, Greece, India, Philippines, Uruguay and so on. The most visible non-African participation was from Europe and France in particular (No Vox, Sud trade unions, CGT and so on).

Nonetheless, some participants were not appreciated. For example, Federico Mayor, ex-director general of UNESCO, was judged unwelcome by the participants at a meeting of the organising committee, since he was partly responsible for the neoliberalisation of education and culture. The same was true for a representative of the French state, who intervened in a workshop organised in the youth camp on the theme “What youth to free Africa from imperialism? The case of Mali, from yesterday to today” to invoke the African passion of Jacques Chirac. Also there was the presence of the banner of USAID at the entry to a workshop of the said camp.

Even the presence of some big international NGOs through their African sections displeased some. Thus, some activists from the southern African social movements expressed hostility at the end of the opening march to the entry into the Modibo Keita stadium of camels carrying a banner favourable to fair trade. The issue here was hostility to Oxfam, supposedly responsible for the camels, whose opposition to neoliberal globalisation seemed to them ambiguous. It showed that some so-called NGOs from the North would merit rather the denomination of PGO (para-governmental organisations), because of their relations with the states of the North, from which they await some positive, morally motivated changes concerning its relations with the South. As if it was possible to put an end to the unjust relations which are fundamental characteristics of the present world order without challenging the class nature of its economic organisation.

As if the history of liberalism, a euphemism for capitalism, in the 19th and 20th centuries had known a

moment of truce in its predation, savagery and barbarism towards the peoples of the South: colonial imperialism, the so-called world wars, apartheid, the banana republics, neo-colonialism, low intensity wars, in the name of defence of "free trade".

If Rémy Herrera, from the World Forum of Alternatives, said he was in Bamako to defend two positions - "the necessity of passing from consciousness to anti-imperialist action... [and] beyond the anti-neoliberal critique, the more fundamental critique of capitalism" [1] - this tone is not dominant in the movement for global justice in general, in Africa in particular. Which partly explains the dependency of some local NGOs - under the pressure of everyday life and the dominant ideology, including the illusion of a capitalism of social justice, following the bankruptcy of "actually existing socialism" - on NGOs from the North, which are supposed to guide the peoples of the South towards development, capitalist of course.

On programme: the universal and the particular

On the eve of the opening of the PWSF the Third World Forum, the World Forum of Alternatives and other groups organized a celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Bandung Conference, which gave birth to the non-aligned movement, and is supposed to have contributed to decolonisation, particularly in Africa. Despite a very low attendance, this meeting, organised in thematic workshops, ended with a declaration called the "Bamako appeal", aimed at organisations who recognise "the necessity of passing from collective consciousness to the construction of collective actors", in other words to the construction of the "internationalism of the peoples of the South and the North faced with the ravages engendered by the dictatorship of the financial markets and by the uncontrolled globalised deployment of the multinationals... to the solidarity of the peoples of Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas faced with the challenges of the development of the 21st century... [of the] alternative political, economic and cultural consensus to neoliberal and militarised globalisation as well as to the hegemonism of the US and its allies"

As for the PWSF, it took place according to tradition, with a multiplicity of themes attempting to cover all aspects of the existence and relations of societies and individuals affected by neoliberal globalisation. Thus, the following themes were discussed in the form of meetings and workshops: wars and peace; the WTO; the Third World debt; agrarian and peasant questions; "the Universe of women"; international cooperation; the destruction of the ecosystems; migration and the criminalisation of migrants; raw materials; social struggles; communication and information, culture, the future of the WSF; good governance; alternatives; education; the critique of the UN as tool of the imperialist powers in general, the US in particular ; the impunity of African leaders, former and current, who torture their peoples and so on. Despite the intention of avoiding hierarchies, some themes drew more attention than others, principally because of their impact on the everyday life of societies, African in particular. That was the case, for example, with the theme of debt and its consequences on health, education, jobs and so on, which were principally organised by networks like Jubilé Sud or the CADTM.

However, numerous workshops were also devoted - quasi-exclusively in the "Universe of Women" - to questions of patriarchy in neoliberalism and the emancipation of women. While many still justify the oppression of women in terms of relativism or essentialist culturalism, in our day it is the product of an articulation between pre-capitalist forms (so called traditional, of control of bodies and exploitation of the labour force) and capitalist forms, neoliberal, among them: the strengthening of economic heteronomy (also through the unemployment of women, including educated women) and the massive falloff in the attendance of girls at school (a consequence of social measures of structural adjustment) which favour the development of prostitution among young girls, as

individual strategy of survival. This tendency is not getting any better in a time of neoliberal barbarism. However, it would not be controversial to say that mobilisation for fundamental sexual equality is not yet considered cardinal for the majority of the African movement for global justice, which is predominantly male. .

It should be said moreover that a workshop was devoted to the question of sexual preferences because this is virtually a taboo question in most African societies and one on which the movement for global justice is also not free of prejudice. Above all in relation to male homosexuality, with homophobia illustrated in recent times in Africa by the legal repression of gays in Egypt, the discourse of Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe, the press campaign against gays underway in Cameroon and so on. So its place on the agenda was entirely justified. However, nothing guarantees that it will be on the agenda of the next African Social Forum because the specific weight of prejudice in the societies and the repression underway does not favour the organisation of gays, confining them most often to a suffocating quasi-clandestinity.

Burning reality: immigration, land, rail...

Among the themes on the agenda particularly in synch with African reality were those concerning migration policies. The host country of the PWSF is a big centre of migration towards other African countries and out of the continent. Thus the drama of Ceuta and Mellila (covered by the media in a very ambiguous fashion) was taken up in a number of workshops as a symbol of criminalisation, particularly by the western states, of certain categories of migrants, fleeing poverty, war and the repressive regimes which emerge from neoliberalism. Which favours, moreover, the production of those “without papers” whose “illegality” allows their exploitation. What could be better for employers seeking superprofits and verging on nostalgia for the slave workforce of the first days of globalisation? Today, there are 80,000 Malian immigrants in France, nearly half of them “illegal”, and thus forced to work at the whim of their employers, and exposed to the threat of expulsion.

To denounce this policy of violation of the right to migration as well as racism, a peaceful march was organised from the International Conference Centre at Bamako to the French embassy. The mobilisation, was affected by the force with which Aminata Traoré, a leading figure in the African and Malian global justice movement intervened to denounce it, thus reducing Malian participation, without succeeding in having it cancelled.

Which illustrates the ambiguity of certain elites in the global justice movement. Some recalled that the African Social Forum, of which she is the main leader, was not associated with the organisation of the counter summit to the Summit of Heads of State of France and Africa held in Bamako in December 2005.

Among the most disappointed demonstrators were the hundreds of Malian participants at the workers and peasants’ conference who had suspended their work in order to participate in the march. This conference, largely organised through the Kayira network of community radios, seemed at the margin of the PWSF through its location, a big straw hut in the courtyard of the conference centre. However, it was a space of information and exchange on the social situation of the rural areas. At the end of this conference, a step forward in the area of coordination seems to have been accomplished. The Malian small peasants benefited from the support of peasant delegates from other countries, African in particular, who denounced the imposition of genetically modified seeds, food insecurity and expulsion from land. For their part, Malian workers were able to exchange with trades unionists from elsewhere, in struggle also against measures of flexibilisation, privatisation and its consequences. These struggles are particularly symbolised, in Mali, by the struggle against privatisation of the railways.

Some of those attending from South Africa drew attention to the setting up of an international network for the right to work, which does not exist on the continent, based around their national campaign "Make unemployment history. Demand the right to work" [2] But unemployment without benefits, in the Third World in general, in Africa in particular, seems to compromise the effectiveness of such a network. Such a network, demanding the fundamental right of everyone to a decent job, seems not to interest the big development NGOs, who often relay (despite themselves?) the neoliberal principle of the economic incompetence of the state and of salvation by capitalist private initiative which flows from it.

The necessity of a radical current

Others from southern Africa in general, and from South Africa in particular, placed the critique of the NEPAD on the agenda. They insisted on the specific role of South Africa, whose chief of state, Thabo Mbeki, is a promoter of the NEPAD, as main relay of imperialism in Africa. [3] Since the presidency of Mandela, but above all under Thabo Mbeki, the South African state perpetuates its nature as assistant to South African capital.

Yet this African expansion of South African capital, through the NEPAD, has found defenders among the participants. The president of the organisations of civil society from Guinea, Elhadj Farouk Tafsir Souhmah, defended the pan-Africanism of the NEPAD, arguing nonetheless for the necessity of a supplement of social soul, through the implication of African "civil society" in its realisation. Again an expression of the influence of neoliberal ideology.

In contrast to this pan-Africanism, (deliberately?) blind to the class nature of the African states and to the heterogeneity of often conflictual social interests in African civil society, youth attending the PWSF named their camp after Thomas Sankara [4] This latter, in spite of his faults (like the dismissal of 1,500 striking teachers on March 22, 1984) and limits, remains to some African youth the last African anti-imperialist figure.

Thus, a symposium (conferences, film, book exposition and so on), discussed Sankara's lone appeal for the repudiation of the foreign debt (made at an Organisation of African Unity (OAU) summit in July 1987), his critique of neo-colonial cooperation during the 1987 reception of French president François Mitterrand, in Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), and his concrete struggle for the emancipation of women in Burkina Faso For these youth, he was a precursor of the African movement for social justice. Next time it is planned to pay tribute to the leader of the liberation struggle in Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, Amílcar Cabral, another great radical figure of the recent African past whose spirit had contributed to the unfolding of the April 1974 Revolution in Portugal. The radicalism expressed by these youth - which is not shared by others, who identify despite everything with the African Union - is in synch with the desire expressed by others in the African movement for social justice to develop radical perspectives. An option which is necessary if we wish to attack the evil at its root, rather than simply its current appearance which is neoliberalism.

The dominant current in the movement, which often behaves as if the social situation of the peoples of the South was similar to that of the petty bourgeoisies of the North, indeed of the South unhappily scored some points in Bamako, with the very weak participation - around 50 people - at the Assembly of Social Movements and the non-adoption of the declaration of social movements. The Assembly was scheduled for the eve of the closure of the PWSF, at the same time as workshops and lectures which were also of interest to the social movements. [5]

In order for the articulation of the reflection and the passage to action to be more audible at the next WSFs, much remains to be done. The next meeting in Nairobi could be a stage in the clarification of

the process. The movement in Africa will continue its processes of clarification through social Forums at the national and sub-regional (southern Africa, West Africa, Maghreb and so on) levels, the Forum of Peoples and the African Social Forum but also through struggle and mobilisations on a daily basis against exploitation, oppression, repression and injustice. Thus the concrete road to a world of human equality and fundamental social justice depends on the degree of participation and organisation of consciousness of the wretched of the earth, everywhere, according to local and global rhythms.

NOTES

[1] "This day is a day against imperialism", in "Terraviva", independent daily of the Polycentric World Social Forum of Bamako number 1, January 20, 2006. However in the same interview, R. Herrera spoke of the "bourgeoisies of the South who serve the interests, not of their peoples, but of the establishment of the North". This recalls the illusion, criticised by Fanon, on the possible existence of emancipatory or progressive bourgeoisies in the countries of the south in general, in Africa in particular. Do the bourgeoisies of the North really serve the interests of their peoples?

[2] For more information, see AIDC, Alternatives, Vol. 3-no 17, November 2005, or on the Internet: www.aidc.org.za.

[3] Ishmael Lesufi, "NEPAD and South African Imperialism", Jubilee South Africa, 2006, p. 37. Pamphlet edited with the support of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.

[4] Thomas Sankara (1949-1987) was head of state in Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta) from 1984 to 1987. He was assassinated on October 17, 1987, during a putsch led by his number 2, Blaise Compaoré, who remains head of state today.

[5] The traditional declaration was replaced by the Contribution of the General Assembly of Social Movements in the World Social Forum in Bamako

P.S.

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