

The US and the European Social Forum: Strategic challenges for the WSF

by

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There is no World Social Forum in 2010. Instead, about 40 events are taking place all over the world in order to broaden the alterglobalist movement, to reflect on the crisis – whether it is called economic and social or ‘civilisational’ – and in order to prepare for the WSF in February 2011 in Dakar, Senegal.

The year started with a very successful event in Porto Alegre, birthplace of the first World Social Forum. This was in between the Copenhagen environmental UN-summit and the Cochabamba people’s summit in May 2010. The ecological issue gave a real boost to the Social Forum event, with many very motivated young people. The anti-capitalist and the environmental issues were successfully coupled and a new slogan emerged: ‘capitalism is unsustainable’.

Furthermore, Porto Alegre was a moment of reflection, 10 years after the first world social forum. It allowed for interesting debates on the ‘civilisational’ crisis, the state of neoliberalism, the political impact of the WSF and so on.

In May, a thematic social forum took place in Mexico. While the attendance was not overwhelming, in terms of content it was most interesting with seminars on agriculture, ecological issues, social issues, global taxes, gender, etc. For some, it may have seemed somewhat confusing, since it took place on the ‘Zócalo’ – the major central place of the city -, next to hunger strikes of electricity workers and of a Zapatista camp, both independent from the forum.

End of June a second USSocial Forum was organized in Detroit. For those accustomed to the social fora, this was ‘back to the old days’: an extremely enthusiastic crowd of 15.000 people, a very motivating opening march, a central

place where (almost) all seminars took place and people could meet, drink and eat. Diversity was very well respected with indigenous, white, black, latino men and women represented everywhere. All seminars and assemblies were very lively and participative. The organization was perfect, even with 'linguistic justice' in the form of interpreters and translators where needed.

One week later the European Social Forum came together in Istanbul and was a kind of anti-climax. While there certainly was a good closing march, very good seminars and good contacts, the ESF is clearly sliding backwards. After Firenze, London, Paris, Athens and Malmö one has to conclude that European activists do not appear to appreciate the formula. There were hardly about 2500 people present in Istanbul, with, proportionally, very few Turks. The organization was below zero.

I want to use these two last examples, Detroit and Istanbul, to compare and see what conclusions can be drawn for the future strategy of the WSF.

Detroit was different

What made the USSF so special? I can see four points that deserve to be mentioned:

Firstly, the whole preparation process was very elaborate. The starting point was, obviously, the charter of principles of the WSF and, consequently, the 'open space'. Nevertheless, since the 'open space' is not a 'level playing field', a long process of looking for the necessary partners was started. A long reflection was made on who had to be and those who had not to be inside. The organizers wanted to have the most marginalized people and groups included in the process. They then had to undertake another long process of contacts and discussions, because many of the groups did not know each other or never had talked to each other. It is this process of what they call 'intentionality' that made the USSF a real inclusive grassroots event, built on trust.

Secondly, the old controversy on 'space' versus 'action' was solved with 'people's movements assemblies'. These assemblies also started to work long before the event and about 50 gathered during the USSF. Their advantage is not only to bring together several thematic groups that work on the same topic and

allow them to network, but also allow them to adopt resolutions or action agendas. On the last day of the Forum, all resolutions were brought together, and many of them were presented in a plenary meeting. These people's movement assemblies took place alongside the more than 1000 self-organized seminars and workshops. Whereas these seminars can be seen as ends in themselves, the assemblies are nothing more than an event in a long preparatory process with a continuity in a process of implementation and further development.

Thirdly, the seminars and workshops that I attended were very participative and motivating. Panels were almost never physically separated from the public, people sat around in circles, no one talked for more than 5 or 10 minutes, participants spoke alternately with the performance of some piece of music, a poem, some dancing. The 'public' was constantly invited to intervene. Diversity was always scrupulously respected.

Fourthly, I noted a difference in personal attitudes in people. I do not want to be naïve and think there are no power relations within and between movements and people in the US, but the way they were dealt with was very attractive for a European participant. All ideas, wherever they came from, were collectively discussed and possibly adopted or rejected. But never was any suggestion dismissed a priori without any consultation. Everyone had the impression he/she was taken seriously. No one was ever hurt or humiliated. There was an openness and a willingness to listen to others.

The crisis in the European Social Forum

These two last points certainly are very different from what happens at the European level.

Seminars and panels were organized in an 'old-fashioned' way, with a mainly male participation and speakers who easily need 15 to 20 minutes to make their point. If you have 6 people in a panel, it means people have to sit and listen for an hour and a half to two hours. Interventions from the public are thus severely restrained. Diversity was extremely limited or absent, translation was mostly lacking or consecutive. The forum territory was fragmented, though less than in Malmö two years ago.

The major difference I experienced was in the attitudes of people, most of them knowing each other for many years and their common participation in the preparatory process. Most of them, knowingly or unknowingly, carry a label and are not listened to for what they are saying but from where they are speaking. The words that are used serve as markers for the place occupied. This severely hinders the emergence of new ideas and the potential for convergence.

Content-wise, groups are still separated along the old lines of 'revolution' and 'reformism'. Trade unions are welcomed but often blamed for not being radical enough. Criticism on European Union policies is either contextualized in an anti-Union approach or in an acceptance and opposition approach. Post- or anti-modernists are faced with modernists, both defending social and ecological justice but from radically different perspectives. As long as no intentional process of clarification and convergence is started on these different oppositions, the differences can become permanent and insoluble fault lines. More open discussions are badly needed.

Most of all, compared to the USSF, the European Social Forum is a more top-down process organized by a couple of leftwing trade unions and a small group of social movements, people who have known each other for some years now and who are defending their own positions rather than the process and its huge potential for convergence. I guess this is far from being an intentional process and most people are probably and honestly working very hard for the ESF, though missing its major objective. The question is whether they can succeed in bringing about a new political culture and in promoting the so badly needed political convergence.

These different points may explain why the attendance was so limited in Istanbul and why so few contacts were made with the Turkish friends. While the motivation of the participants was very high, the mobilization in Europe is clearly declining. Very few new and common agendas were decided on. The declaration of the final assembly calls for a mobilization on the 29th of September 2010, everywhere in Europe, in order to protest against the austerity policies, but there was no agreement to call for a massive participation in the trade union organized demo in Brussels on that day. This is really a shame, since only united actions and consequently some modest degree of compromise is needed when social

rights are being threatened. This state of affairs points to rivalry being seen as more important than cooperative action and power relations being seen as more important than content. Some leftwing radicals still seem to ignore how far the crisis of the left has eroded their power and how badly cooperative action is needed if they want to survive.

Lessons for the World Social Forum in Dakar

It is clear that the Africans have their own dynamics and are perfectly able to organize their own forum based on their own social, cultural, political and organizational resources. But since Dakar will host a World Social Forum in 2011, it will also have to cope with the influences coming from an ageing Europe, a very dynamic US, the experienced latino's and the limited number of Asians that now come to the WSF. Expectations and ambitions are high, since the first WSF in Africa, Nairobi in 2007, did not leave an unanimously shared positive memory. The preparatory work though is in very good hands in Dakar, and I trust the WSF2011 can be a major success. Much will depend on the capacity to talk and listen, to cooperate and share.

While this is easy to state, it may not be as easy to achieve. At this moment, there is a lot of frustration among the 'old' participants of the WSF, those who participate since 2001, 2002 or 2003. Concrete results in terms of struggles or in terms of real political change are still lacking, except in Latin America where some leftwing governments are trying to curb neoliberal policies. The old space versus action controversy is not solved, many networks have been built and consolidated and therefore do not need the WSF anymore. While convergence was easy in resistance to neoliberal policies, it is more difficult to achieve in proposing alternatives.

The current strategy debate in the WSF reflects these different oppositions and has to be linked to the objectives of the WSF. According to Chico Whitacker, one of the founding fathers of the WSF, these objectives are threefold: to create a new political culture, based on respect and diversity; to give political power to civil society and to organize political action and social struggles in order to overcome capitalism and neoliberalism. While these objectives are not worded in a hierarchic way, it should be clear that the first one is determining the success

of the second and the third one. The political relevance of the WSF, its potential to create new political content, to attract important intellectuals from all over the globe, to offer new alternatives to social movements and to create an emerging opposition to the capitalist and neoliberal world order depends on its possibility to constantly re-invent itself and create an attractive intellectual framework. While starting with the political action and social struggle may seem most important and most urgent, there is a risk of ignoring the rich diversity of WSF participants and their diverging demands, as well as overestimating the strength of our movements. The old left does not have a strong tradition of democracy and risks to overlook some of the new methods and ways of thinking of new social actors, less focusing on competition and more on cooperation.

This point helps to clarify the difference between the ESF and the USSF. The ESF is more oriented towards content and action, whereas the USSF is stronger in method and political culture.

These differences also explain the different proposals in the strategy approaches. At this moment, three separate strategic ways are being explored.

The first one is that of the Social Movements Assembly. It seems to be following a dual path, on the one hand to create its specific space within the WSF process, on the other hand to create a parallel structure to the IC and the WSF itself. The SMA clearly has created a coalition of some important global movements representing debt, gender, peasants, etc. However, their main objective seems to be to have a common action agenda, irrespective of the political content of its anti-capitalism or silently assuming a common political content.

The second one is the organization of a strategic debate on the website of the WSF2011, based on the different events of 2010, on actions of different social movements or on contributions of global intellectuals. The organization of e-debates around some major controversies of our times can help to clarify the challenges the WSF is faced with and hopefully also to clarify the ideas about strategies. Different contributions will help to discover the different strategic elements in social movements and events all over the world.

The third strategy could be the organization of factual real debates during the WSF2011 in Dakar and after, around some of the major issues proposed by the Organizing Committee or around issues emerging from the contributions on the website. Ideally, these would be 'co-organized events' in parallel with the self-organized seminars of the WSF. This could help to prepare the hoped for convergences, not in a directive or binding way, but pointing to possible links between topics, transversalizing themes, giving overviews of global debates and orienting towards major emerging topics. This formula has been very successful in Porto Alegre 2010, in the same way as was organized every day a 'plenary meeting' in Detroit. The major advantage is to give a continuity to the debates on some major topics and implicitly to inspire social movements as the conferences help to show the different opinions on a topic. In fact, it allows for combining different objectives, bringing together different strands of ideas on one specific topic or controversy, discussing and listening, and inspiring the self-organized events, clarifying what is at stake, preparing for future thinking and action.

These three strategies can be complementary and can help to create a political impetus and lead to a common agenda based on a common language and a common understanding of today's political and social realities.

The crisis of the left

The difficulty for the Forum and for social movements in general to re-define their strategies and to achieve or re-gain political relevance is linked to the crisis the left is faced with in many parts of the world, especially in Europe. This crisis is not only due to ideological differences, but also to the ecological crisis that has brought to the fore a major discussion on modernity. Since the left is a child of modernity, both are linked and urgently need some clarification: what exactly do we mean by 'modernity', what do we have to/want to reject, what do we have to/want to preserve? Can the problems be solved by giving a Marxist analysis of the ecological crisis? There is now a lot of discussion about a 'civilizational' crisis and 'occidentalization', development, growth, human rights, states, and so on.

While such a debate on 'modernity' can perfectly well be organized within the forum, it is clear it will be a matter of years in order to achieve some common – or divergent – understanding and to develop new strategies on that basis. Such a debate can be framed in the search for a new emancipatory universality as is proposed by the African friends organizing the WSF2011. It will necessarily be based on a respect of cultural and political particularities of all social movements and can lead to the definition of new values concerning the relationship with nature and of 'old' values in a new language.

If the left wants to survive, especially in Europe, it needs an innovative approach able to attract young people, focusing on rights and on democracy, reframing solidarity in a multilevel way, redefining the objectives of the economy directly linking it to the social and political world.

Conclusion

In this way, the WSF can help European social movements to re-frame their problématique and to leave the old oppositions that cannot bring about solutions for the current world. This does not mean ideological perspectives have to be given up, but they possibly can be framed in a different way. The WSF can also join the dynamic USSF in order to better mobilize and attract grassroots movements.

The WSF is a reflection of the social movements that participate in it. In Europe many of these movements have their roots in the state-related socialist framework. The financial and economic crisis has created a backlash for different movements who are again simply defending their orthodox Marxist vision, forgetting its known shortcomings and ignoring the global changes and the new political actors. The 'old left' is still one of the backbones of the social forum process but, if inward-looking, at the same time it is one of the major hindrances for overcoming its shortcomings.

The challenge for Dakar is to find a middle way between ESF and USSF, using first of all the dynamics of the African movements, the strength and capacities of the old left, and the innovative methodologies of the USSF. This is a difficult balance, and it is very understandable that the founding fathers remain very cautious, talking about 'open space' and 'civil society' and 'new political

culture' without ever defining them. The current discussion on the 'thematic axes' of Dakar 2011 show how difficult it is to touch on new topics and to integrate new visions.

Nevertheless, the WSF cannot afford to lose its 'old left' with its analytical capacity and its knowledge of the past. If the WSF does not want to lose its political relevance, some kind of 'surge' will be needed, in order to overcome the vagueness of 'civil society' and the risks of the 'open space', as well as the old competitive approaches of the old left . New agendas with new discourses are needed.

Today the WSF is a major civil society movement in the world. It is faced with a choice: either it continues to organize and bring together lots of movements without any content coherence. This choice perfectly fits with the desire to become some embryonic form of a global civil society representation. Or, it can try to foster the development of new ways of thinking and organizing in order to make new alliances possible that organize around content and try to have ideological alternatives that can lead to new common action agendas. Both solutions have a potential to innovate the left, though the second approach is more innovative in terms of political culture. It is about looking for a middle way between the social movement's assembly and the 'open space' approach.

The WSF was once described by Chico Whitaker as a 'common good for humanity', which it certainly is. But since it is nothing more than a tool for a transformative mode of political action, it constantly needs new people to modernize the tool, to allow for more innovation, to allow for progress towards another and better world.

The World Social Forum of 2011 in Dakar, Senegal, can be a huge success, thanks to the dynamics and the input of many Africans. Dakar can teach the Europeans to talk and most of all to listen and to direct them towards new agendas and discourses. Dakar can learn from the US Social Forum on how to combine the 'rules' of the WSF with more political content.