

WORLD SOCIAL FORUM¹

by Marc Becker

Every year at the end of January, the world's corporate and government elite gather in the Swiss resort town of Davos for the World Economic Forum to plot the future of corporate-led globalization. In 2001, community organizers, trade unionists, young people, academics, and others began to meet in Porto Alegre, Brazil, to rethink and recreate globalization so that it would benefit people. From these humble beginnings, this alternative annual meeting called the World Social Forum has quickly grown into the world's largest meeting of civil society. Under the slogan "Another World Is Possible," the forum provides a dynamic and important political venue for activists to discuss strategies of resistance to neoliberal globalization and to present constructive alternatives. As the same time, it has been an arena for perennial discussions regarding the relationship between civil society and political parties in organizing a social movement.

Every year since 1971, the world's corporate and government elite have gathered at the end of January under tight police security in the Swiss resort town of Davos for the World Economic Forum (WEF) to plot the future of corporate-led globalization. In 2001, community organizers, trade unionists, young people, academics, and others began to meet in Porto Alegre, Brazil, to rethink and recreate globalization so that it would benefit people rather than capital. From these humble beginnings, this alternative annual meeting called the World Social Forum (WSF) has grown into the world's largest meeting of civil society. With the slogan "Another World Is Possible," the forum is filled with speakers, workshops, panels, debates, marches, and cultural events. The forum provides an open platform for activists to discuss strategies of resistance to neoliberal globalization and to present constructive alternatives. Although little known or recognized in the United States, the WSF has quickly grown into one of the most dynamic and important political events in the world.

NEOLIBERALISM

The WSF emerged as a response to corporate-led neoliberal globalization, which critics have condemned (in the words of a Billy Bragg song) as “making the world safe for capitalism.” A common textbook definition of neoliberalism is:

The policies of privatization, austerity, and trade liberalization dictated to dependent countries by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank as a condition for approval of investment, loans, and debt relief.²

Neoliberalism built on classic nineteenth-century liberal ideals of individual rights, civil liberties, and private property and applied these to a late twentieth-century global economy. It provided freedom for capital instead of people, and proclaimed a gospel of emerging markets, free markets, free trade areas, and privatization. In the 1970s, neoliberalism began to gain acceptance as an ideology of development as hegemonic discourse began to turn away from Keynesian models of government involvement in the economy. Advocates saw state structures as ineffective and inefficient, and proclaimed that a privatization of government services and a reduction of trade barriers would lead to economic growth.

Neoliberal reforms built on the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWI) developed after World War II in order to avoid future financial crises like the 1930s Great Depression, which some economists and political leaders saw as the cause of the war. Two organizations grew out of this meeting: the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), both based in Washington, D.C. The World Bank began in 1945 as the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development to fund reconstruction of postwar Europe and Japan. It subsequently shifted its mission to focus exclusively on economic development and poverty reduction programs in developing countries. Critics accused it of imposing economic policies that primarily benefited Western industrial nations. Similarly, the IMF originally promoted international monetary cooperation with the goal of facilitating the expansion of international trade. In the 1970s and 1980s, it became more involved in internal economic policies, particularly in the context of debt crises. Subsequently, the IMF often required draconian Structural-Adjustment Program (SAP) policies such as privatization, devaluation, and deregulation of prices that countries

experiencing balance-of-payments difficulties had to adhere to as a condition for short-term loans. The result was often an opening of internal markets to foreign trade and an emphasis on exports based on a country's "comparative advantage" of cheap unskilled labor and natural resources. Critics condemned neoliberalism as a tool for rich nations to dictate economic policy to the developing world, leading countries to sacrifice national sovereignty for exchange stability. They maintained that these policies resulted in a dramatic increase in inequality between the rich and the poor.³

This neoliberal model has become known as the Washington Consensus, and it raises significant issues. Economic policies do have consequences, and WSF participants argue that it is important to consider who makes decisions about those policies, and who wins and who loses from implementing them. Jeffery Paige notes that "the unrestricted workings of capitalism are, once again, creating unprecedented wealth for the few at the expense of the general impoverishment of the many."⁴ Ernesto Cardenal, a leader in the leftist Sandinista government in Nicaragua in the 1980s, blasts capitalism as providing a success for only 10 or 20 percent of the world. "For poor countries and the poor of rich countries," he states, "capitalism is a catastrophe."⁵ It is an inhumane model, opponents argue, that puts pursuit of money above spiritual and social needs, and leads to greed and eventual economic and societal collapse.

GLOBALIZATION

Neoliberal economic policies are closely related to, but significantly distinct from, the concept of globalization. "Globalization refers in general to the worldwide integration of humanity and the compression of both the temporal and spatial dimensions of planet-wide human interaction," Richard Harris writes. It has aggravated many of the Global South's "most chronic problems—such as the pronounced degree of economic exploitation and social inequality."⁶ While corporate-led neoliberal economic policies are largely a phenomenon of the late twentieth century, globalization has a history that stretches back at least five hundred years to European conquests of Africa and Latin America.

The WSF grows out of what some term an antiglobalization movement, but it also proposes alternative and positive examples of globalization to benefit people rather than concentrating wealth in the hands of fewer and fewer people. Many WSF activists maintain that

globalization in and of itself is not necessarily a negative influence on the world. Only when it was combined with the forces of corporated neoliberal economic policies did it diminish environmental, labor, human rights, public health, and food safety policies with a corresponding erosion of culture, democracy, and sovereignty throughout the world. One of the challenges facing the WSF, then, is to recapture the forces of globalization to benefit people rather than corporations. As Njoki Njoroge Njehu from the Fifty Years is Enough campaign noted, the movement for “global justice is not anti-globalization, because we support the type of globalization present at the World Social Forum: people-to-people globalization.”⁷

In contrast to a neoliberal version of globalization, the WSF championed the power of civil society, which proponents termed “the world’s second superpower.” It rejected economic policies that theoretically advocate economic growth but through privatizing social services and shifting government resources away from education and health care have empirically resulted in a dramatic increase in inequality between the rich and the poor. The WSF also opposed militarism and imperialism, especially the Bush administration’s unilateral and illegal war and subsequent occupation of Iraq. But much more than what it opposed, the WSF was marked by what it affirmed. Rather than resigning itself to Margaret Thatcher’s claim that “There Is No Alternative” (TINA), it embraced the slogan “Another World Is Possible.” As stated in its Charter of Principles, the WSF is “an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a planetary society directed toward fruitful relationships.”⁸ Sometimes termed a “movement of movements,” the WSF empowers civil society in its struggle for social justice.

GLOBAL SOUTH

The WSF has its roots in earlier organizing efforts that emerged out of the Global South such as the 1992 Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In 1996, the Zapatistas organized the First International Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism in Chiapas, Mexico. The consolidation of civil society across diverse ideological, class, and national boundaries took a dramatic step forward in the 1999 protests in Seattle,

which shut down the World Trade Organization (WTO) talks. In January 2000, only two months later, protesters traveled to Davos with the idea of similarly shutting down the World Economic Forum. An invitation-only annual gathering of corporate CEOs and trade ministers, the WEF describes itself as:

an independent organization committed to improving the state of the world. Funded by the contributions of 1,000 of the world's foremost corporations, the forum acts in the spirit of entrepreneurship in the global public interest to further economic growth and social progress. The forum serves its members and society by creating partnerships between and among business, political, intellectual and other leaders of society to define, discuss and advance key issues on the global agenda.⁹

At this meeting, 50 intellectuals from around the world organized an "anti-Davos at Davos" with the object to "sink Davos." Tight police security, however, hindered assembling the large masses that characterized the Battle in Seattle. Instead, the idea emerged of organizing a counter meeting driven by three main points: (a) the meeting should be held in the global south; (b) it should be called the World *Social* Forum; and (c) it should maintain the symbolism of meeting at the same time as Davos.¹⁰

The first meeting of the WSF was held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in January 2001. Organizers expected 1,500 participants, but 10,000 people (mostly from Latin America, France, and Italy) came to talk about creating "globalization from below." Community organizers, trade unionists, young people, academics, and others met to rethink and recreate globalization so that it would benefit people, putting human rights, social justice, and ecological sustainability before profits. This was part of an important shift from antiglobalization to alternative globalizations. From these humble beginnings, this alternative annual gathering grew into the world's largest meeting of civil society. While the WEF remained a closed event that only drew 2,000 people, the WSF grew by leaps and bounds with 50,000 gathering in 2002 and 100,000 meeting in 2003 and 2004, and 155,000 in 2005. The open spaces for civil society that the WSF created provided a dramatic contrast to the exclusive and closed door meetings in Davos. The WSF rapidly moved out of the shadow of the WEF, and participants spoke of Porto Alegre rising while Davos fell.¹¹

PORTO ALEGRE

Porto Alegre was a logical and conducive location for the WSF to meet, both because of municipal support from the governing leftist Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT, Workers Party) that was rooted in a history of trade unions and social movement organizing, and because its practice of participatory budgeting formed a positive model for civil society.¹² Two massive street protests against neoliberal economic policies and the U.S. war on Iraq bracketed a week of keynote speeches, panels, workshops, and intensive debates. The struggle against neoliberal economics and U.S. imperialism, in many people's minds, became intimately linked together. Tariq Ali, a Pakistan-born writer and political activist, eloquently argued that not only was U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf an attempt to exert U.S. economic hegemony over the region, but it was also part of an imperialist history against democratic and nationalistic governments. Beyond these twin themes, delegates debated a broad variety of issues including those of land rights, racism, gender, labor, and the media.

The largest event of the 2003 forum and a highlight for many was a brief appearance by Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. As a meeting of civil society, politicians acting as representatives of a political party were explicitly excluded from the forum, but nevertheless Lula was an overwhelming presence—both as one of the original instigators of the forum and as Brazil's newly elected popular leftist president. He gave a talk to more than 100,000 people at the outdoor amphitheater Pôr-do-Sol on the edge of the Forum's activities. Although he was begged to stay, Lula announced that he was leaving for the WEF "to demonstrate that another world is possible; Davos must listen to Porto Alegre." He said that "the world does not want war; it wants peace and understanding." After only three years, the WSF had "constructed the most extraordinary civil society experience anywhere in the world."¹³ His presence at the WSF underscored a dance between civil society and political parties that has long characterized social movement organizing. Is state power most beneficially engaged on its own turf through traditional political mechanisms or through mass street protests?

In Davos, with the WEF being held under heavy repressive police presence, Lula became a star of the show. He declared that rich countries should invest money in development and fight hunger rather than wasting money on lethal military conflicts. Back in Porto Alegre and without a police presence, linguist Noam Chomsky noted how Davos and Porto Alegre are related—while the WSF is rising with hope and

optimism, the mood in Davos was dark, with the WEF falling in strength and significance.

MUMBAI 2004

Although 100,000 activists participated in the 2003 meeting of the WSF in Porto Alegre, about 80 to 90 percent of those were from Brazil.¹⁴ In order to make the WSF a truly global movement, the WSF International Committee (IC) decided to move the 2004 meeting to India. The result was a dramatic change in the flavor of the event. Gone were the ubiquitous Che T-shirts in Porto Alegre, replaced instead with endless banners championing a myriad of local Indian causes. Some observers feared that internal fractional disputes within the Indian Left would cause the WSF to implode. Others worried that the lack of municipal support and funding that the forum had enjoyed in Porto Alegre would hinder its success. Instead, the forum overcame these barriers and emerged as a more vibrant and solidified expression of civil society.

The Mumbai forum opened on the evening of January 16 with a series of speeches and cultural celebrations. Significantly, the Pakistani rock band Junoon, known for its progressive politics, was the first group to take to the stage in India, which is its nuclear rival. Writer-activist Arundhati Roy called the Bush administration's war and occupation of Iraq "the culmination of both neoliberalism and imperialism" and encouraged participants "to become the resistance in Iraq." She urged activists to identify corporations that benefit from the war and to use the unified power of organized civil society to "shut them down."¹⁵

Over the next four days, delegates participated in a variety of plenary sessions, conferences, panels, roundtables, seminars, workshops, cultural events, solidarity meetings, and rallies. As in Porto Alegre, the vast majority of delegates in Mumbai were local activists from India. Rather than being a limiting factor, this strengthened ties between the local and global in what some term a "glocal" movement for social justice. Before planning started in Mumbai, not 200 people in India had even heard of the WSF, but now at least 30,000 Dalits (untouchables) and Adivasi (Indigenous peoples) attended. They raised new issues for the forum of communalism, casteism, racism, and patriarchy. The breadth of topics led some in the media to conclude that the WSF did not have a message. But that diversity of views and concerns *was* what the WSF was about—the creation of spaces for social movements to present and debate a broad range of issues. The Indian presence was

complemented with a strong Asian contingent, including a large and vocal South Korean group advocating a global campaign to defeat Bush in the 2004 elections. Moving the forum to India helped to broaden and globalize the World Social Forum.

The Porto Alegre forums had opened and closed with massive street rallies, and at first the absence of these official-sanctioned events seemed to be a noted omission from the Indian program. Instead, the main street through the grounds that housed the Mumbai forum turned into one massive and constant rally with a variety of local groups forwarding their issues. Some of the rallies so clogged the street that it became difficult to move from one event to another. The constant beating of drums competed with, and sometimes drowned out, the panels and roundtables housed in tents set up for this purpose. In fact, there were two parallel and complementary meetings of civil society: the official organized sessions convoked in the meeting rooms, and the informal encounters between groups outside the tents.

Organizing an event with more than 100,000 participants can be a logistical nightmare, and some wondered whether with limited funding the Indian Organizing Committee could pull it off with only a year during which to organize it. The local committee performed admirably (especially since it did not count on municipal financial support), with only small bumps in an otherwise smooth event. The hot and humid weather put extreme pressure on the water supply, though somehow the local water provider managed to keep up. Dozens of local groups set up food stalls, which made nourishment plentiful, convenient, inexpensive, and tasty. From this experience, a "solidarity economy" with an emphasis on fairly traded and locally produced items became a key aspect of future social forums, putting into practice theories that were discussed in the panels and illustrating the lasting influence of Mumbai on social movement organizing strategies.

PORTO ALEGRE 2005

Stretching for several kilometers along the open spaces of Porto Alegre's Guaíba riverfront, 155,000 participants from 135 countries returned to Brazil in January 2005 for the fifth annual forum. The WSF had grown so large that it became impossible for one person to comprehend the scope and extent of activities carried out under its umbrella. Activists used this meeting to debate many different proposals and to launch various campaigns and actions. For example, a new campaign for a

Currency Transactions Tax (CTT) attempted to stop currency speculation and redirect funds toward economic development. A series of panels on “Breaking Down the Ivory Tower” examined the role of universities in the creation of another world, and formed a transnational network of scholars and activists to promote collaborative actions around common concerns.¹⁶ In total, delegates participated in 2,500 activities in 11 Thematic Terrains under the Southern Hemisphere’s summer sun.

Alongside the main activities, 35,000 people gathered in the international youth camp. Some considered the youth camp to be the truest expression of the social forum. Participants disposed of hierarchy and privilege as they worked together in a common project to transcend race, class, and gender barriers. At the edge of the WSF activities, 400 delegates from 100 Indigenous groups met in a “Puxirum of Indigenous Arts and Knowledge.” In the Brazilian Tupi-Guarani Indigenous language, Puxirum means “a joining of efforts for a common goal.” Their meeting ended with a declaration that “Another World Is Possible, and we are part of that world.”¹⁷

POLYCENTRIC WORLD SOCIAL FORUM 2006

After meeting four of the previous five years in Porto Alegre, the forum moved in 2006 to a new “polycentric” model of meetings in Karachi, Pakistan; Bamako, Mali; and Caracas, Venezuela. The meetings originally were planned to be held simultaneously, but finally the Mali and Venezuela forums were held sequentially in January with the one in Pakistan postponed until March because of a devastating October 2005 earthquake. The Venezuela forum (also known as the second Americas Social Forum, after a similar hemispheric meeting in Quito, Ecuador, in 2004) drew about 80,000 people representing 2,500 organizations. Participation of U.S. activists in the forum had been small but growing, and this was the first year that they had a noticeable presence.

Setting the tone for the Caracas forum and reflecting its central issues, the leading slogan at the opening march was “No to war, no to imperialism, another world is possible, another America is possible.” The dominant discourse at the forum, however, had radicalized. Rather than talking about war and globalization, the language increasingly changed to a rhetoric of anti-imperialism and anticapitalism. Reflecting this shift, volunteers greeting delegates at the airport sported shirts with the slogan “A better world is possible, if it is socialist.” Another common slogan proclaimed “Another world is necessary, and with you it is possible.”

Although a broad range of issues and concerns drew activists to the WSF, the overriding themes continued to be a confrontation of neoliberal economic policies and opposition to the U.S. war in Iraq. These issues unified diverse activists from Brazil to Palestine to Korea. The enemy has a name, some participants observed, and that name is George W. Bush. If the enemy has a name, perhaps so does the people's champion, and for many people at the WSF that name was Hugo Chavez.

HUGO CHAVEZ

In 2003, Hugo Chavez was a less than welcome visitor to the World Social Forum. With the emphasis on civil society, political parties and military organizations were excluded. As the president of Venezuela, Chavez could not formally participate. Instead, he had to meet with his supporters in a small auditorium away from the main events. Ironically, that same year the largest and arguably most significant event was the rally that sent Brazilian president Lula da Silva off to Davos for the competing WEF. While Lula was not on the formal program, organizers engaged in intellectual gymnastics to open a space for the popular Brazilian who appeared to represent the best hopes and aspirations of the Latin American left.

How much difference two years could make. Both presidents again came to Porto Alegre in 2005, and their receptions were radically different—both from each other as well as from two years earlier. On the second day of the six-day meeting, Lula headlined an event at the Gigantinho stadium packed with fifteen thousand people—one of the largest meetings of the forum but small compared to the estimated 100,000 people who had turned out to cheer him in 2003. The purported purpose of the meeting was to launch the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (see <http://www.whiteband.org>). The real purpose, however, seemed to be an attempt to shore up his support from a civil society that had become skeptical of his increasingly neoliberal policies. The spectacle turned into a shouting match between supporters sporting red “100% Lula” T-shirts and a radical left opposition that wanted to hold Lula to the platform that rejected IMF adjustment programs.

On the second to last day, Chavez packed to overflowing the same Gigantinho stadium with his own show. For Chavez, this event was much larger and more significant than his meeting two years earlier. Like Lula, Chavez was not formally on the WSF program, though organizers permitted the Venezuelan president a much more visible

presence in the forum. Many activists were rethinking the relationship between social movements and political parties. Thomas Ponniah from the Network Institute for Global Democratization noted that

Social movements produced the greatest global demonstration in history, but they did not stop the war. However, Spain elected a Socialist government, and they immediately pulled their troops out of Iraq. Political parties cannot mobilize the public the way that social movements can. The parties could not have as successfully organized the 2003 February 15th demonstrations. However, the movements cannot stop the war, while governments can. Clearly we need a new relationship between social movements and political parties that will allow us to catalyze the best of both agents.¹⁸

Such insights triggered ongoing and evolving debates within the WSF over the role of traditional politics and state structures in realizing fundamental social changes.

“I’m not here as president,” Chavez noted in a seeming acknowledgment of the forum’s roots as a movement of civil society. “I’m Hugo. The presidency is just a crappy job I’ve been assigned. I’m really just a peasant, a soldier, a man committed to the struggle for a better world.” As had become common, Chavez engaged in a strong anti-imperialist discourse. He cast his message as “the South stopping the destruction of the Bush doctrine.” Chavez strongly condemned neoliberalism and imperialism that took resources away from the poor in order to benefit the wealthy. “All empires will come to an end, including that of the United States,” Chavez declared. He pointed to significant victories, including the failure of the United States to implement the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) on January 1, 2005, as planned. “Venezuela is resisting North American imperialism,” Chavez stated. “United States imperialism is not invincible.” The empire’s engaging of brute force in Iraq and elsewhere was a sign of weakness and decline. “There are no good and bad imperialisms,” he argued. “They are all bad.”

Chavez explicitly contrasted his reception, his political positions, and the situation in Venezuela with that of his last visit in 2003. At that point, his government faced a recall referendum and an employer strike from the state-owned PdVSA petroleum company that had paralyzed the economy. In 2005, Venezuela had begun to consolidate a revolutionary process including advancing a social agenda of redistributing wealth to the poor. Reflecting a radicalization of his policies and language,

he pointed to the failures of capitalism and argued that it could only be transcended by socialism through democracy. He also spoke of his dream for a unified Latin America, now made more real with leftist presidents Nestor Kirchner and Tabaré Vasquez in power in Argentina and Uruguay. Chavez noted that the World Social Forum is the most important political event in the world. Venezuelans, he noted, "are here to learn from other experiments."¹⁹ The WSF provided a solid platform for debate of issues that would lead to advances in the Venezuelan process.

CARACAS 2006

Holding the American part of the 2006 forum in Venezuela was controversial, and it reflected ongoing debates over the relationship between civil society and party politics. On the one hand, Hugo Chavez's government was engaging in a process of social change in line with the goals of the WSF. As such, Caracas was a logical venue for a debate on how to construct a better world. On the other hand, from the beginning the WSF was designed to be an expression of civil society that explicitly rejected the participation of political parties or armed groups and statist solutions.

As in 2005 at Porto Alegre, Chavez headlined the largest event, although this time as leader of the host government, and so WSF regulations permitted and sanctioned his presence. His speech reflected the consolidation and radicalization of the Bolivarian Revolution. Chavez proclaimed that "this century we will bury United States imperialism." Capitalism is destroying the planet, he said, which leaves only two alternatives: socialism or death. Chavez argued that the forum should take advantage of its momentum to build a political struggle, and that it was important to support governments like that of recently elected Evo Morales in Bolivia. He noted that the concrete advances in Venezuela would not have been possible without taking political power. Some participants resented Chavez injecting himself into one of the key debates in the forum. Chavez, however, argued that even if he were not president he would still be present advancing these ideas. "I am just one more person like the rest of you in forum," he stated.

There was a lingering skepticism among academics of state-centered development projects such as that in Venezuela, as well as fears that Chavez was a populist leader who ultimately would sell out the people for his own political and economic advances. While Lula was the hero of the 2003 forum, by 2005 he was loudly criticized and Chavez

became the hero of the day. Would Chavez also be dismissed, and if so who would be the hero then? Lula's decline pointed to the danger of too much reliance on political heroes who often prove to be transitional.²⁰ Nevertheless, in the meantime Venezuela's subaltern masses embraced him as their champion. His government emerged at the forefront of challenging neoliberal economic policies and presented concrete alternatives to corporate-led globalization. Ironically, a government was implementing policies that for five years international civil society had desired but believed states structures were incapable of successfully realizing.

Although an expression of civil society, the forum could not succeed without external support. In Caracas, the Chavez government provided significant logistical and institutional assistance. While the forum also received state and municipal funding in Porto Alegre, due to the polarizing nature of the Chavez government this collaboration became even more overtly apparent and controversial in Venezuela. A week before the forum opened, a bridge on the freeway between the airport and Caracas showed signs that it was on the verge of collapse and had to be closed. The government diverted traffic onto an old winding road through the mountains and poor neighborhoods separating the airport from Caracas, turning a safe and quick fifteen minute trip into a potentially dangerous trek of at least two hours and often much longer. In response, the state oil company PdVSA provided free and safe shuttle service between the airport and the city. Once in the city, the government provided free transportation on the metro system, tents for the meetings, and even bottled water for participants. The government also waived visa requirements and airport taxes, facilitating the participation of as many people as possible. Chavez seemed to recognize this balancing act. "We have helped with forum and are willing to do so in future," he stated, "but its work is completely autonomous."²¹ Some argued that the forum should return to its original vision of providing nongovernmental alternatives, while others maintained that governments (like globalization) are not inherently good nor evil but value-neutral and that Chavez's actions demonstrated how state structures can be used to advance goals of social justice. Who should be responsible for organizing and administering an enormous event continued to be a pressing issue.

THE FUTURE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

The concept of holding social forums as a meeting of civil society that presents positive alternatives to neoliberalism and militarism has gained

wide appeal throughout the world. Civil society has become empowered and revitalized with new ideas. Local and thematic forums have begun to pop up all over the world. Increasingly, local and global struggles are linked as social movements engaged in the praxis of combining theoretical reflection with political action. Even in the United States, the fundamentally subversive notion of organizing a social forum is taking hold and leading activists to rethink fundamentally how to organize civil society. These gatherings were an inspiration—that another world was possible, one free from war, hunger, exploitation, and fear, in which people could work together to make it a better place for everyone.

Nevertheless, the WSF continues to face a series of problems and engage a series of issues that will determine its future. From its conception, the WSF has focused on civil society and eschewed involvement with political parties or forming a popular front. The WSF has emphasized reflection, not action. The idea was to leave the latter to member groups. John Holloway in particular argued quite adamantly that “the world cannot be changed through the state.”²² Others advocate that the forum should take advantage of its size and momentum to press a political agenda, perhaps even becoming another “International.” Hugo Chavez, for example, contends that the forum should unite under a common global socialist program or risk becoming no more than a folkloric festival.²³ Chico Whitaker notes that maintaining the forum as an “open space” is a way to avoid the dangers of either falling into a Leninist vanguardism or degenerating into absolute dispersion.²⁴ Roberto Savio argues that the WSF needs to be in a process of constantly reforming its political strategies or risk becoming irrelevant.²⁵

In addition, the forum faces a risk of reproducing various hierarchies (race, gender, class, generation, education, geographic, etc.) that it is presumably combating within the wider society. Ongoing debates question the internal structure and the funding of the WSF—how democratic and how independent should it be? Has the forum become too big and cumbersome? Does it need to develop a representative structure? Does the WSF practice what it preached? How can the WSF become a more horizontal process? Who should be included in, and excluded from, the forum? Its internal structure and functions have never been very transparent or democratic. As Immanuel Wallerstein noted, someone makes decisions when and where to meet but no one consulted him on that decision. He noted that there are 150 insiders in the International Council who make decisions, a couple thousand more who follow the discussions but do not actively make decisions, and then hundreds of thousands of

participants who merely abide with those decisions. This leads, Wallerstein argued, to a widespread perception that the WSF is a top-down organization. He advocated making the decision-making procedures more clear, transparent, and democratic.²⁶

During the first four forums, a variety of “stars” such as Noam Chomsky, Arundhati Roy, Eduardo Galeano, and Joseph Stiglitz headlined the main events and dominated the discourse. To attempt to make for a more egalitarian meeting, in 2005 the WSF quit organizing huge panels with “celebrities” and instead relied on member groups to organize sessions. While it helped reduce the distance between presenters and participants, there were still divides between academics and activists, and between NGO activists and grassroots activists. Often these divisions were represented in how panels were set up, with (often male) speakers as “experts” up on a stage and an audience (sometimes largely female) as passive observers.

In Porto Alegre, the forum’s official languages were the four main colonial languages in the Americas (Portuguese, Spanish, English, and French). The international flavor of the event was marked by its multilingual aspect, and those who were merely bilingual were at a distinct disadvantage. In Mumbai, Hindi replaced Portuguese as an “official” language, but it became a *de facto* bilingual event with notable and polarizing results. Although interpretation was provided for major events in the large halls, white European faces dominated English-language events with Indians largely attending events addressing local issues in which Hindi became the *lingua franca*. The Caracas forum became much more monolingual than previous gatherings. The *lingua franca* was Spanish, with most people from Venezuela and neighboring Andean countries speaking only that language and expecting conversations to be in Spanish. Furthermore, a growing U.S. participation introduced a sizeable monolingual English audience who increasingly felt alienated in the Spanish environment. Volunteer interpreters struggled admirably to keep up but lacked the necessary resources to meet the heavy demands.

Furthermore, the forum also raised questions of imagining utopias: how to make another world possible? Finally, there were questions of strategies. What type of organizing was most effective?²⁷ These are some of the growing pains that the forum faces, and its ability address these issues and to survive as a viable organization depends on its ability to weather these storms. Patrick Barrett, lead organizer of the Midwest Social Forum in the United States, notes that what was encouraging

was that the WSF attempted to deal with these issues.²⁸ Wallerstein observed that “the leading participants in the WSF are aware that riding the WSF is like riding a bicycle—keep going forward or fall off. For the moment, the WSF is riding well.”²⁹

Despite problems, the WSF has been undeniably a success. It has gone a long ways toward building concrete policies for alternative globalizations, and has leveraged civil society into the world’s “other superpower.” What role will the forum play in ongoing efforts to organize civil society? Increasingly, the most important and interesting initiatives emerge not at the annual global meetings of the WSF, but in the local, regional, and national actions inspired by these meetings. Perhaps the WSF has served its original purpose of altering the discourse around economic and social policies. As Chavez noted in 2006, the goals of social justice expressed at the WSF are well on their way to becoming the dominant discourse in the world, and those who advocate putting capital before people should soon be seen as the dissidents.³⁰ Arguably, the WSF remains more important than ever to develop the self-organizational capacity of civil society to achieve and extend these goals.³¹

The WSF has been a wonderful place to break out of the isolation of solitary local organizing efforts, connect with others around the world working on similar issues, and regain energy to continue the struggle. It has realized the goals of the slogan “globalize the struggle, globalize hope.” In January 2007, the WSF met in Nairobi, Kenya. Organizers heralded holding the first centralized forum on the African continent as an important success. The first United States Social Forum (USSF) is planned for June 2007 in Atlanta, Georgia. No matter what shape it takes in the future, the WSF has been a historic experience with a lasting and positive influence on how social movements around the world organize their struggles for social justice.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Peace History Society meeting at Winthrop University, Rock Hill, South Carolina, November 3–5, 2005. It has been richly informed through conversations with colleagues in the Network Institute for Global Democratization (NIGD), particularly Thomas Ponniah, Teivo Teivainen, Heikki Patomäki, Ruby van der Wekken, and Mika Rönkkö.

2. Benjamin Keen, *A History of Latin America*, 5th edn. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996), xi.

3. See, for example, Joseph E Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

4. Jeffery M. Paige, *Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

5. Ernesto Cardenal, "Vénganos la república de los cielos a la tierra (La Teología de la Liberación hoy)," unpublished manuscript, 1998.

6. Richard L. Harris, "The Global Context of Contemporary Latin American Affairs," in Sandor Halebsky and Richard L. Harris (eds.), *Capital, Power, and Inequality in Latin America* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 279, 80.

7. WSF, Porto Alegre, January 2003.

8. World Social Forum Charter of Principles, http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id_menu=4&cd_language=2, June 8, 2002 (accessed November 3, 2005).

9. World Economic Forum, <http://www.weforum.org/> (accessed November 3, 2005).

10. Teivo Teivainen, "The World Social Forum and Global Democratisation: Learning from Porto Alegre," *Third World Quarterly* 23/4 (2002): 623.

11. For more background on the WSF, see William F. Fisher and Thomas Ponniah (eds.), *Another World Is Possible: Popular Alternatives to Globalization at the World Social Forum* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2003); José Corrêa Leite and Carolina Gil, *World Social Forum: Strategies of Resistance* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005); Heikki Patomäki and Teivo Teivainen, *A Possible World: Democratic Transformation of Global Institutions* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2004); Jai Sen *et al.*, *World Social Forum: Challenging Empires* (New Delhi: The Viveka Foundation, 2004); and Teivo Teivainen, *Democracy in Movement: The World Social Forum as a Political Process* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

12. Daniel Chavez, *Polis & Demos: The Left in Municipal Governance in Montevideo and Porto Alegre* (Maastricht, The Netherlands: Shaker Publishing, 2004).

13. WSF, Porto Alegre, January 2003.

14. For one of the few attempts to quantify participation in the forum, see Cândido Grzybowski, *World Social Forum; An X-Ray of Participation in the 2005 Forum: Elements for Debate* (São Paulo, Brazil: WSF International Secretariat, 2006).

15. WSF, Mumbai, January 2004.

16. Patrick Brantlinger, "Utopian Universities and International Activism," *Academe* 91/5 (September/October 2005): 28–29.

17. "Declaración del Puxirum de Artes y Saberes Indígenas," <http://www.ecuarunari.org/puxirum/declaracion.html>, Porto Alegre, January 31, 2005 (accessed November 3, 2005).
18. WSF, Porto Alegre, January 2005.
19. WSF, Porto Alegre, January 2005.
20. Thomas Ponniah, personal communication, May 2006.
21. WSF, Caracas, January 2006.
22. John Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 19.
23. WSF, Caracas, January 2006.
24. Heikki Patomäki and Teivo Teivainen, "The World Social Forum: An Open Space or a Movement of Movements?" *Theory, Culture & Society* 21/5 (2004): 145–54.
25. WSF, Mumbai, January 2004.
26. WSF, Mumbai, January 2004.
27. Immanuel Wallerstein, "The Rising Strength of the World Social Forum," <http://fbc.binghamton.edu/130en.htm>, February 1, 2004 (accessed November 3, 2005).
28. Patrick Barrett, personal communication, February 2005.
29. Immanuel Wallerstein, "The Rising Strength of the World Social Forum," <http://fbc.binghamton.edu/130en.htm>, February 1, 2004 (accessed November 3, 2005).
30. WSF, Caracas, January 2006.
31. Thomas Ponniah, personal communication, May 2006.