

Editorial

It's a sign of how bad things are when even the modest proposal that everyone on planet earth gets fresh water and enough to eat is fighting talk.

– Terry Eagleton

Naomi Klein aptly described the first World Social forum as “the end of the end of history”. The fall of the Berlin Wall signified the end of a utopia gone badly wrong. Thatcher and her followers were able to speak with confidence that There Is No Alternative to the barbarism of capitalism devouring the guts of most of humanity. For sometime, Fukuyama’s apocalyptic “end of history” seemed real. It became almost impossible to breathe and dream. The hegemony of global capitalism had reached maddening proportions. It is said that in 1992 Nike paid Michael Jordan to advertise its shoes, and here was the madness - he earned more than the entire East Asian industry which produces those shoes.

Then in 2001, the city of Porto Alegre, situated in Brazil’s southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, reverberated with a fresh call: “Another World is Possible!”. The birth of the World Social Forum was a noisy affair. The force of this new possibility stood in contrast and opposition to the rigid and soulless World Economic Forum happening at the same time on the beautiful island of Davos in Switzerland. Those who took the side of the wretched of the earth looked to Porto Alegre, and those who worship the power and logic of money turned to Davos. The battle lines were drawn. Ever since, world politics have not been the same. This year will see the fifth installment of the World Social Forum return to its base after the 2004 event was held in Mumbai, India. The WSF has come to mean many things to many people: celebration of hope, new ways of doing and thinking, and the limits of resistance to capitalism in our times.

African murmurs

The 80s saw Africa saying NO! to the devastation visited upon the continent through the killer medicine of the Structural Adjustment Projects (SAPs) of the World Bank and the IMF, which required iron-fisted men to carry out their mission – from the safe distance and sanctity of parliament and state houses – in the name of development and democracy. To achieve this madness nothing was spared; even the anti-colonial history and memory was appropriated, as was revolution and socialism. But the African NO! was simply named “food riots”; this was a resistance which did not speak for itself and the IMF quickly worked these “ food riots” into its four-staged re-colonisation strategy, revealed by Joseph Stiglitz after his sojourner as a servant of the devil.

The call for Africa’s “second liberation” was stillborn and was appropriated into a limited desire for “multi-party democracy”. Instead of freedom from the shackles of neo-colonial bondage, multi-party democracies continued the one-way traffic of African wealth to the North and domestic suburbs where the

national representatives of the system reside. In the words of the African revolutionary thinker A.M. Babu:

It is much better for the international bourgeoisie for locals to supervise their own dependency, it lessens tensions and the real master is invincible. We are busy chopping each other's heads through military coups and the struggle for power in order simply to prove ourselves better supervisors on behalf of international capital, and to enjoy the rewards in wealth or absolute power"¹.

What Babu did not anticipate was the effective utilization of democratic discourses and the ideology of development to sustain the same position in the interest of global capitalism. African leaders chose to do unto themselves what global capital would otherwise do unto them. As South Africa's ruling party (Mandela's African National Congress) policy ideology put it:

We don't oppose the WTO. We never joined the call to abolish it, or to abolish the World Bank or the IMF. Should we be out there condemning Imperialism? If you do those things, how long will you last?²

Resistance was colonized, tamed and tailored to serve the purpose of the hegemony of money. Resistance needed to liberate itself from the party, the leader, the old orthodoxies, hierarchies and empty discourses. It was the creative power of resistance and poetry of the indigenous people of Chiapas in Mexico which gave the world the beginnings of a new language – a language which found expression within the WSF. What started in Africa as a murmur now found a name – the monster was named “neo-liberalism”. The dream returned, history could be made again. Chiapas fortified the possibility of the peoples of the world to say a collective NO! and many YESES!

In the past five years, the view that there is no one answer, no one single manifesto, no pre-determined history (as the nineteenth-century Russian populist Herzen declared, “History has no libretto”) seemed both to gain ground and drive the desire to make history afresh through trial and error, rather than rely upon the certainty of yesteryears' political fantasies. Of course, those who held old views found new energy from the emergent global peoples' resistance – Marx, Lenin, Mao and even Stalin occasionally reared their heads. The freedom from the burden of certainty was best articulated by one of the World Social Forum's superstars, the French small-scale farmers' leader and bane of agri-business, José Bové. When asked whether the Seattle gathering represented a new internationalism, Bové answered:

¹ A.M. Babu, *African Socialism or Socialist Africa*, Zimbabwe Publishers: Harare 1985, p 49)

² Quoted in A. Desai, *The post-apartheid state and community movements*, Development Update, Vol 5, No.2, p.59

There are no pre-conceived ideas. Those days have gone – thank goodness – when popular movements were slotted into theoretical constructs. Seattle showed the opposite. People came together not with any worked out theory, but to take action... far too long, theories and analysis have been shuffled around, promising change. People today have lost confidence in these theories. Seattle revealed the existence of an informal worldwide network.³

The birth of the WSF is generally perceived to have carried on the spirit of the 1999 battle of Seattle. The collective NO! saw the closure of a meeting of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) right within the belly of the beast. From there onwards the evil triad of the WTO, World Bank and IMF could only hold their meetings behind army barricades. The people of the world had won the moral high ground despite their leaders' shameful genuflection to these institutions. The WSF gave the new resistance a space to share the new language. By and large, the forum strove to be anti-hierarchical and non-vanguardist. The WSF spoke about "space", "reflections" and "networks of resistance". These new discourses and praxis somehow gave expression to a movement of movements, but there were shortcomings – and deep ones, too.

If Klein was ecstatic about the first forum, by the third she was crying "highjack!". The event had been taken over by established left-leaning political parties and the Latin American big men: Lula of Brazil, Chavez of Venezuela and the ever-presence of Castro, even in his physical absence. Perhaps the most devastating critique came from the pen of the respected radical thinker James Petras, who saw the 2002 meeting as a "tale of two forums". One forum promoting reformism and accommodation could be found representing the established political parties, NGOs and a myriad of intellectuals, and was based in the main venue, the Pontifical Catholic University (PUC). On the other hand, there was the more radical, anti-establishment forum which occurred in hundreds of small and big meetings, circles of articulation and self-organized spontaneous conversation away from the university and media attention. Others began to argue that the WSF had become a jamboree of a motley concoction of agendas and interests, as recent greetings from one of the regular attendees shows:

Hope you all doing well. I'm in Porto, and now joining the throngs who pretend to struggle, we the passport wielding, credit card swiping, voyager mile accumulating, cyber connected, defenders of the rights of the working class, the Dalits, the landless peoples' rights for self-determination. I watched with glee as the internationalists were hooking up at airports, hotels, taxis. "Hi comrade, long time. Since Mumbai". "Hi comrade, long time, since Cancun, are you going to Hong Kong. I am still struggling to get funding". Yeaaaaa., this is the new age struggle;

³ José Bové and Francois Dufour, *The World is Not for Sale: Farmers Against Junk Food* p 169

and I am part of it. Now that I have more time on my hands (thanks to donor sponsored air-conditioned hotel room)...⁴

The biggest conceptual and organizational challenge to the WSF came from a parallel meeting, organized under the catchy name “Mumbai Resistance 2004” (MR). The critique delivered by MR 2004 was devastating (if not over-stated at times); tough questions were asked around the origins and funders of the WSF. One of the most serious charges was that the WSF is nothing but a valve and a permitted space of dissent, and does not really threaten the interest of global capital. MR 2004 pointed to the once CIA-controlled Ford Foundation as one of the main funders, and the agenda of the moderate French players, such as ATTAC and Le Monde Diplomatique, was also held up as evidence of the castrated possibilities of the WSF. MR 2004 did not mince its words: he who pays the piper plays the tune. True, more and more global South NGOs found legitimacy by association, and Northern Funders continue to determine, in particular, the African representation to the WSF. These were often the same donors who would not touch national movements and counter-hegemonic projects at a national level. Increasingly, those who have sustained and given impetus and life to the WSF find themselves outside; the Zapatistas are excluded because they are involved in armed combat, the FARC of Colombia was denied space for a press conference in 2002. This problem of exclusion is discussed by Radha D’ Souza and Michael Abrahams in this issue of We Write.

Lack of Black Voices

One of the key fault lines in the WSF activities has been the lack of a platform to build and raise the black voice and black issues. This is surprising given the fact that Brazil is home to the biggest black population outside of Africa, and racism continues to ensure that the darker you are, the lower you find yourself in the Brazilian social ladder. The lack of prominence of the black question in the global resistance, and at the WSF in particular, can be accounted for by examining the historical inequities which developed along the color line. A second factor is the historical denial of race as a legitimate area of resistance. This is partly a result of the out-dated Marxist philosophies raven with arrogant universalizing Eurocentrisms, which privileged class over any other category of exclusion. In his contribution, Frank Wilderson debates the uneasy relationship between Marxism and the Black Subject, and Aziz Choudry points to how global struggles run the risk of eclipsing older struggles such as those of the indigenous peoples in places like Canada, USA and New Zealand. The Africa Social Forum (ASF) has not been able to galvanize the African Diaspora to place the Black Question more visibly and prominently at the WSF. The promises and challenges facing the ASF are examined in the piece by Amanda Alexander and Mandisa Mbali. We hope you will enjoy this, the second issue of We Write What We Like – A Journal for Black Thought.

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⁴ Email message from Porto Alegre, January 25, 2005.