

LESSONS FROM PORTO ALEGRE

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In the program “Roda Viva”, produced by the public broadcasting system “TV Culture”, in São Paulo, which was recorded after the World Social Forum 2002, Boaventura de Souza Santos was asked if the Workers Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores* - PT) had manipulated the Forum in its own interest. The portuguese sociologist, who was an important celebrity in that meeting, answered saying that the PT is too small for that. In an interview given to the newspaper “*Folha de São Paulo*” on the same occasion, Tarso Genro, mayor of Porto Alegre, declared that all left-wing parties of all the world, united, would not be able to call together something like the World Social Forum.

Even if we only consider the numbers, the Forum was an unquestionable success. Boaventura and Tarso’s statements are based on such verifications, but they also refer to the reasons for the success of the Forum.

Figures increased spectacularly from the first to the second meeting of the World Social Forum. The participants, for example, went from 20,000 in 2001 to 50,000 in 2002. About 35,000 listeners from Porto Alegre, other places in Brazil and also from the bordering countries, came along, many having to endure long bus trips, just to see and hear in person the people they admire and to enjoy the energizing atmosphere of this huge worldwide meeting.

But this increase is even more meaningful if we consider the increase in the number of delegates, that is to say, the number of people registered in the Forum as representatives of entities and movements of the civil society: they went from 4,000 in 2001 to 15,000 in 2002, representing 4,909 organizations from 131 countries. In fact, what attracted so many delegates were the innovative characteristics of the Forum: its pluralistic and non-directive character, which unifies while respecting diversity; its openness to all those who want to participate – except representatives of governments, political parties and military organizations; and the fact of being an initiative of the civil society for the civil society, that created a new meeting place – the first and may be the only one of this kind in a worldwide level - without the control of any governments, movements, parties or national or international institutions which dispute political power.

In fact, for those delegates the Forum was really what its organizers intended it to be: a horizontal space in which the delegates could freely put forward their proposals and struggles – without considering any of these issues to be more important than others and without anyone imposing their ideas or their pace on the others -, to exchange experiences, to learn and to develop themselves through knowing about the struggles, hopes and proposals of others, to deepen their analysis about the issues that arise in their fields of action, to articulate themselves at national level and especially at the worldwide level . That is to say, to gain effectiveness and to move forward in their work of social transformation.

There would not be so much interest in participating in this event if it were only about taking orders, or being having each one’s options controlled, or being pushed to disciplined actions and mobilizations, or having to approve statements and motions or collective positions – which does not imply the lack of commitment to action. This is why the

organizers of the Forum wrote in its Principles Charter that the Forum should not take positions as the Forum itself, that no one should speak on behalf of the Forum and that in none of its meetings should time be invested in discussing and passing “final documents”.

This Charter explicitly states that the World Social Forum of Porto Alegre does not have a deliberative character. The same happens with the World Economic Forum, in Davos, to which the Forum of Porto Alegre is proposed as an alternative (and it is to highlight this aspect that it is held on the same days). To all participants, those days simply represent a stronger and more intensive opportunity to deepen their commitments and articulations, on a worldwide level, within an effort which already existed and will continue to exist after the Forum

It is obvious that behind this similarity there exists a huge difference: the participants of Davos aim to maintain and increase the domination of the capital - which they control - over the human beings of the whole world, as well as the expansion of their private business. The Porto Alegre participants, feeding on the increasing protests that come up everywhere against a globalization dictated by the interests of that capital, want to move forward in their proposals to build another world, centered on human beings and respectful of nature, a world which is not only seen as possible but also necessary and urgent and which, in fact, they are already building in their practical action.

This difference in objectives and contents lead to a difference in method, too: the main activity developed in Davos consists in conferences and debates on previously defined issues, to which the organizers invite great intellectual representatives of the neo-liberal “unique-monolithic thought”, the most powerful nations’ political leaders and great multinationals’ owners or executives. In the Porto Alegre Forum an important space is also given to conferences and debates, as well as to testimonies of people with significant experiences or reflections. In order to do that, Porto Alegre, like Davos, invite people who have already reflected or are already acting in domains relevant to the issues being discussed – though in 2002, the Porto Alegre conferences have being conducted not by isolated people but by great world nets. But the most enriching activity in the World Social Forum is the one related to the workshops and seminars freely proposed and organized by the participants themselves: 400 in 2001 and 750 in 2002. In fact, it is the joyful people movement around these workshops and seminars that create the atmosphere of enthusiasm of the World Social Forum, in the corridors and gardens where the Forum is held, with a variety of sounds and colors, good spirited protests and presentations of proposals and actions, as well as unexpected performances and events – exactly the opposite of what happens in the well-bred gray of Davos.

Obviously, these organizing options of the World Social Forum are not carried out without misunderstandings, pressures, deviations and even attempts at manipulation of the Forum as a whole. Its large scale induces greed and its horizontal character puts in a uncomfortable position those who are in a hurry to see changes taking place and were also brought up within the traditional paradigms of political action.

Most journalists, for example - and this appeared in the coverage they gave to the Forum -, used as they are to interview leaders and gurus or to highlight struggles for power, do not understand why there is not a “final document” or “concrete proposals” of the Forum. They do not ask for the same in Davos, but they do want it in Porto Alegre. They find it hard to understand that the World Social Forum is not a summit, but one of the bases of a social movement that, in order to develop itself, cannot have summits or bosses. A “final synthesis” after five days of work, with 15,000 or 50,000 people, would necessarily mean an impoverishment and could only be approved through some kind of manipulation; and

everybody leaves the Forum happier than if they had had to fight to include at least one line of their proposals in the final document...

In fact, there are hundreds of concrete proposals in the Forum, and even specific mobilizations, like the one this year against the FTAA. Or even new reflections, such as the one that came up this year about the inner change of those who are fighting to change the world. This issue, which was dealt with in several workshops and seminars, was the object of a conference that gathered more than 2000 people. But none of those proposals or reflections is an expression of the Forum as such. They are under the responsibility of those who presented or adopted them. All those who decide to support them will do so as groups or individuals responsible for their decisions.

Naturally, there are other tensions that come up even among those who organize the Forum or those who come to help them. For instance there are those who would prefer the Forum's International Advisory Council to become a new world direction of the struggle against neo-liberalism, controlling and guiding that process. The perspectives of continuity assumed by the organizers seem to aim in another direction, with the consolidation of the method oriented by the Forum's Principles Chart. It is more and more accepted that the Forum is a process and not an event or a new international organization directed by the leaders of a substitutive "unique-monolithic thought", which would be fatal to the Forum itself. It is also necessary, for example, to see to it that the conferences don't end up with 'guiding syntheses', voted by their respective audiences, or that they do not prevail over the workshops. At the same time, the decisions taken by the organizers so far aim at enabling the power of attraction of the Forum to generate in other parts of the world the same mobilization it has engendered in Brazil. The 2003 Forum will probably start with some ten regional or thematic Forums in the different geopolitical areas of the world, from September to December 2002, before a new world Forum, to take place once again in Porto Alegre. In September 2003 it would start in the same way, with the possibility of finishing it with a world meeting in India in 2004.

In fact, the biggest challenge for the organizers of the World Social Forum does not consist in defining new and better contents that could lead to even more concrete proposals, but to guarantee the continuity of the form the Forum was given – a case in which the means are determinant for the aim to be reached. The contents will naturally arise from the process thus launched, within mankind's struggle towards another world, and they will necessarily lead to the different editions of the Forum, with matters common to all and with the specific issues of each region of the world where it will take place. What is most important is to ensure that that new paradigm of political transforming action, created by the World Social Forum, is not absorbed by the "old models".

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