

The World Social Forum Challenge

Geoffrey PLEYERS

The 8th World Social Forum opened on January 27th in Belem, Brazil. Geoffrey Pleyers explains the situation of the alter-globalisation movement: in spite of the success of its ideas in the wake of the world economic crisis, the movement is looking for new ways of action.

Towards the 2009 World Social Forum

On January 27, over 100,000 people will inaugurate the 8th World Social Forum (WSF) in Belem, Brazil. Many things have change in the alter-globalization movement¹ and in the world since the WSF Forum's last visit to Brazil in January 2005. The 2005 Forum, held in Porto Alegre, remains the most successful both in terms of its size (200,000 people attended the opening demonstration, 2,500 workshops were run by 5,700 civil society organizations and the event was covered by 6,923 journalists) and in terms of the quality and openness of the discussions. Since its first meeting in 2001, the WSF experienced a continuous and impressive growth increasing from 15,000 to over 170,000 participants in four years. The Forums have become huge meeting places where people from all over the world share experiences and discuss local and global issues.

Since 2005, the geography of Social Forums has profoundly changed. The alter-globalization movement has notably declined in some of its historical bastions, including most

¹ Also called “anti-corporate globalization movement” or “global social justice movement”.

Western European countries, but has met with new success in strategic and highly symbolic regions. Over 60 national or regional Social Forums have been held across Africa since 2005. Bamako, the Malian capital, hosted one of the three WSF meetings in 2006; the 2007 WSF in Nairobi was attended by 50,000 people. Social forums have also experienced major success in North America. Several meetings have been held in Canada since 2001 and the first US Social Forum in Atlanta gathered over 10,000 activists from a panorama of civil society and minorities' activists. The 2008 Mexican Social Forum initiated a new convergence among a highly divided local civil society.

Beside this geographical change, the alter-globalization movement has undergone a much deeper transformation that has reorganized the movement around new guidelines. The quarrels about the objectives of the Social Forums and the political orientations the movement should or shouldn't support have been a symptom of this reconfiguration. The 2008 World Trade Organization (WTO) gathering in Geneva offered a clear illustration of the current state of the movement in the midst of a global crisis.

The “Paradox of Geneva”

Between 22-29 July 2008, thirty delegations from the WTO's most influential member countries met in Geneva in a bid to break the deadlock over the trade liberalisation process, which had been initiated in Doha in 2001. After the failure of negotiations in Seattle (1999), Cancun (2003) and Hong Kong (2005), the credibility of the WTO was at stake. Despite the importance of the WTO conference, the European alter-globalization organisations haven't been able to mobilize their activists as they did in Genoa, Gleneagles and Rostock. The contrast with the demonstrations five years previously, when the G8 met near Geneva, was stark.

However, the influence of the movement has been felt in other ways: many state leaders and delegates, who directly or indirectly participated in the trade negotiations, have adopted some of the movement's main ideas. In the 1990s, opening up a country to international trade was seen as the only path to greater economic growth. By 2008, many state leaders, among them French President whose country was assuming the European Union presidency Nicolas Sarkozy and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, openly said they

“refuse to sacrifice hundreds of thousands of agricultural jobs on the altar of neoliberalism” (*Le Monde*, July 22, 2008).

Some of the alter-globalization arguments have indeed reached far beyond the movements’ supporters. With the 2008 financial crisis, UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown has become the frontrunner of a large political confluence that promotes a better regulated economy and a new Bretton Woods. The newly elected US President Obama may join the band and has already held some harsh critics against tax havens (*The Guardian*, November 8, 2008). The 2008 financial crisis offered a *theatricalization* of a global ideological shift that has started well before: the end of three decades of hegemony of neoliberal ideas. Many of the international institutions that supervised international trade liberalisation and encouraged southern countries to adopt neoliberal policies now face discredit. The trade liberalization process has been stopped and the WTO has experienced a series of setbacks. South American governments even buried the Free Trade Area of the Americas project in the 2005 summit. Some of them have repaid their IMF debts to escape the institution’s dictates.

In the last decade, the alter-globalization movement has taken an active role in undermining the Washington Consensus legitimacy, notably by opening debates on trade and economic policies that used to be restricted to international experts, and by demanding for clear evaluations of Washington Consensus policies that remain questionable in terms of poverty reduction and have proven counterproductive in terms of economic stability. The financial crises in Asia (1997-1998), Argentina (2001), the US (2007) and now the globe (2008) have strengthened these demands. Alter-globalization experts and activists have also emphasized the legitimacy of state intervention in the economy while neoliberal thinkers considered the market and independent experts as more rational and long-term oriented. In 2008, even the former Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, once a major target of activists, said that “There are very few countries that have adopted the neoliberal recipes and that have not completely collapsed, like Argentina. Countries that managed to get successfully into globalization did so by maintaining state decision capacity in economic matters”².

² Lecture given at the Institute for Political Studies, Paris, June 12, 2008.

The paradox is thus that at a time when core alter-globalization ideas are shared by prominent policy makers, and while targeted international institutions are widely delegitimized and have lost much of their influence, the future of the organizations and events that have symbolised alter-globalization seems uncertain. Major activists' networks have disappeared or declined, as is the case for the "*Movimiento de Resistancia Global*" in Barcelona, ATTAC and most local social forums. Recent continental forums in Malmo (Sweden, September 17-21, 2008) and Guatemala City (October 7-12, 2008) attracted far fewer people (respectively 12,000 and 7,500 activists) than previously. Instead of celebrating the "end of neoliberalism", vowed by Joseph Stiglitz in July 2008, European activists worried about the movement's declining dynamic. Two weeks later, the Americas Social Forums looked rather like a "political show" than a lively debate among innovative movements. Moreover, the movement is much less visible in the mass media than it was between 1998 and 2005.

Towards Concrete Outcomes

Has the movement died because of its success? Massive demonstrations and social forums may have lost their purpose as some core alter-globalization arguments have become widespread. However, while the alter-globalization movement has contributed to blocking the trade liberalization process, concrete alternative outcomes remain limited and the new economic world order remains to be built. We are reminded daily of the importance of global regulations and global challenge that require international cooperation. The food crisis and the consequences of the economic crisis have underlined that poverty and economic inequalities are major issues. Hence, after being successful in the struggle against neoliberal ideas, alter-globalization activists believe that time has come to focus on implementation of concrete alternatives to neoliberal policies. However, while social forums' massive demonstrations and clear opposition to the Washington Consensus provided both media coverage and a united image of the movement, alter-globalisation activists are far more divergent when it comes to the implementation of alternative policies. The movement is now fragmented around three distinct trends.

1. A Focus on the Local Level

Rather than getting involved in a global movement and international forums, a wide "cultural trend" of the alter-globalization movement considers that social change may only

occur by implementing horizontal, participatory, convivial and sustainable values in daily practices, personal life and local spaces. The Zapatistas and other Latin American indigenous movements now focus on developing communities' local autonomy by implementing participatory self-government, alternative education systems and improving the quality of life. Many urban activists appreciate also the convivial aspect of local initiatives and the fact that it allows the implementation of small but concrete alternatives to corporate globalization and mass consumption. In many Italian social centres, critical consumption and local movements have often taken the space previously occupied by the alter-globalization movement. Local “collective purchase groups” have grown and multiplied in Western Europe and North America. Most of them gather a dozen activists who organize collective purchases from local and often organic food producers. Their goal is to make quality food affordable, to bring an alternative to the “anonymous supermarket” and to promote local social relations. The movement for a “convivial degrowth” belongs to a similar tendency and aims to implement a lifestyle that is less of a strain on natural resources and reduces waste. Other “convivial urban movements” include critical masses to promote the use of bicycles or local initiatives to promote strengthened social relations in neighbourhoods.

2. Citizens' and Experts' Advocacy Networks

Rather than massive assemblies and demonstrations, another component of the movement believes that concrete outcomes may be achieved through efficient single-issue networks able to develop coherent arguments and efficient advocacy. Issues like food sovereignty, Third World debt and financial transactions are considered both as specific targets and as an introduction to broader questions. Through the protection of water, activists raise for instance the issue of global public goods, oppose global corporations and promote the idea of “the long-term efficiency of the public sector” (“Water network assembly”, European Social Forum 2008). After several years of intense exchanges among citizens and experts focusing on the same issue, the quality of the arguments has considerably increased. In recent years, they have become the core of social forums' dynamic. Although they get little media attention, these networks have proved efficient in many cases. During the fall of 2008, the European Water Network contributed to the decision by the City of Paris to re-municipalize its water distribution, which had been managed previously by private corporations. Debt cancellation arguments have been adopted by Ecuadorian political commissions, and some alter-globalization experts have joined national delegations in major international meetings, including the 2008 WTO negotiations in Geneva.

3. Supporting Progressive Regimes

A third component of the movement believes that a broad social change will occur through progressive public policies implemented by state leaders and institutions. Alter-globalization activists have struggled to strengthen state agency in social, environmental and economic matters. Now that state intervention has regained legitimacy, this more “political” component of the movement believes that time has come to join progressive political leaders’ efforts. It has notably been the case around President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela as well as President Evo Morales in Bolivia. Alternative policies and projects are implemented both through national social and economic policies and thanks to international alliances between progressive regimes. New regional projects and institutions have been launched on this basis, like the “Bank of the South” that has adopted the main tasks of the IMF in the region. For historical reasons and their political cultures, Latin American and Indian activists are used to proximity with political parties and leaders. Similar processes have also occurred recently in Western countries. For example, in the United States, where the impetus given by the first national Social Forum in 2007 was largely redirected towards the extensive presidential campaign by Senator Obama.

Beyond celebrating the end of the Washington Consensus and the collapse of its economic model, will the alter-globalization activists find some common ground in Belem? Huge and urgent tasks remain to be done in order to get out of the financial, economic and ecological crisis with a new global order that includes global governance, economic regulations and sustainable lifestyles. From this perspective, the three trends of the alter-globalization movement appear to be complementary, rather than opposing, political strategies. To acknowledge that shared approach may be the major challenge of this eighth World Social Forum.

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