

## **A Brief History of the Alter-Globalization Movement**

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**Activists supporting alter-globalization recently met in Tunis for this year's World Social Forum. This is a good point from which to look back over the history of the alter-globalization movement, from the 1990s to 2013.**

The 2013 World Social Forum gathered some 30,000 activists in Tunis, March 26<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup>. Although the number of participants was well short of the records set by the recent Forums held in Brazil (170,000 people in 2005, and 130,000 in 2009), attracting tens of thousands of Tunisian and international activists shows that the WSFs remain appealing events in various regions of the world. The 2013 Forum aimed to encourage exchanges between progressive citizens from every continent and progressive activists involved in the Arab spring.

### **The 1990s: The Formation of a Worldwide Movement**

The short history of the alter-globalization movement can be divided into four periods. The first one, in the mid-1990s, reflected a proliferation of local and national protests against neoliberal policies, in every region of the world. During this period the movement was essentially organized, on the one hand, around international campaigns (such as the one against third world debt), and networks and meetings of intellectual activists, NGOs and counter-summits<sup>1</sup>; and on the other hand, on the basis of massive popular protests at the local and national levels, as in the “water wars” in Bolivia, and farmers’ protests all over Asia. They all denounced the growing influence of the World Trade Organization, the burden of third world debt, and the power of the multinationals. Small farmers movements were particularly active. In 1993, they founded the global network Via Campesina, which today boasts 200 million members across the world. Indigenous movements, anti-privatization campaigns (notably in South Africa), the World March of Women, progressive intellectual networks, libertarian activists, young “alter-activists”, and NGO’s all contributed to the rise of a lively and diverse movement.

The emergence of this global movement highlighted and brought together a number of local and national struggles which up to then had been seen as isolated, and had been inconspicuous in the outside world. Activist intellectuals from North and South played a fundamental role at this stage; they turned the attention of public opinion to the damage inflicted

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<sup>1</sup> Mario Pianta, “Parallel Summits of Global Civil Society”, in Helmut Anheier, Marlies Glasius and Mary Kaldor (eds.), *Global Civil Society 2001*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 169-194.

by neoliberal policies, developed arguments against the Washington Consensus, and increased the number of international meetings. They set up networks that have played a fundamental role in the movement, such as ATTAC, Global Trade Watch, the Transnational Institute, Focus on the Global South, and Jubilee South. This period also featured the proliferation of “counter-summits” around the edges of the big meetings of international organizations. The alter-globalization protests in Seattle in 1999 and the collapse of the WTO summit there had great symbolic significance, and reflected the central message of alternative globalization: “ordinary citizens” can have an impact even at the highest level of international decision making.

### **2001-2005: Social Forums Become the Heart of the Movement**

These actors all came together at the first World Social Forum at Porto Alegre (Brazil) in January 2001, marking the beginning of a new phase. Over the next five years, hundreds of social forums were organized at the local, national, continental and global levels. In contrast to the counter-summits with their central focus on opposition to one particular international organization, these Social Forums are geared up to encouraging exchanges among activists from different parts of the world about the alternatives that they are implementing. The first European Social Forum, in Florence (2002: uniting 50,000 people) and the World Social Forums in Mumbai (2004: 120,000 people) and Porto Alegre (2005: 170,000 people) are some of the greatest success stories of alternative globalization, both in terms of the popular mobilization and the exchanges created on various themes, and in terms of organization, which was more open and horizontal than in previous versions of the social forums<sup>2</sup>.

In spite of predictions made by many intellectuals, the alter-globalization movement did not decline after September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001; in fact, in the years since then it has had its greatest popular successes, and has had a significant impact on public opinion and the media. Between 2002 and 2004, opposition to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq was a major component of the movement. For example, the European and World Social Forums launched the initiative for the global protest that united between ten and twenty million people on February 15<sup>th</sup> 2003. It was in this period that progressive governments were coming to power in Latin America, many of whom attended the World Social Forums as candidates and then as elected presidents. Even some right-wing politicians and representatives of the World Bank wanted to join the WSF.

### **2006-2010: A New Geography**

After 2005, the audiences and outcomes of most alter-globalization meetings have considerably diminished. While they demonstrated the movement’s ability to expand geographically and to include Africa, the “polycentric” World Social Forums of 2006 (held in Bamako, Caracas and Karachi) and the Forums of 2009 (Nairobi) and 2011 (Dakar) were all disappointing. There was a significant decline in the number of participants (between 15,000 and 50,000 for each), and the inclusion of popular organizations often met more complications. It was also in this period that some networks that had been very active either disappeared (like

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Geoffrey Pleyers, *Alter-Globalization: Becoming actors in the global age*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2010, in particular chapter 9.

Barcelona's "*Movimiento de Resistencia Global*", which disbanded) or encountered internal problems that they never completely recovered from (e.g. ATTAC in France and the Wombles in the UK).

Paradoxically, the alter-globalization movement seemed to be facing difficulties at the very time when neoliberal ideology was more frequently being questioned. However, during this time the movement was successful in at least three ways: geographical extension into regions considered to be symbolic or strategic (Africa, the United States, and the Arab world), convergences on environmental issues, and delegitimization of the Washington Consensus.

Firstly, Social Forum dynamics has extended into regions deemed to be symbolic or strategic. Three World Social Forums and dozens of continental or national forums have taken place in Sub-Saharan Africa. Fifteen thousand mainly working-class activists participated in each of the United States Social Forums (at Atlanta in 2007 and at Detroit in 2010), in which the main discussions focused on racism, domestic workers, migrants, the right to the city, and movements concerned with food issues. But it is in the Arab world that social forums have especially proliferated. For example, no fewer than seven international forums were organized there in October and November 2010. Moreover, the participation of 130,000 people in the World Social Forum at Belém in 2009 has shown the undeniable success of the alter-globalization movement in Latin America, where a number of progressive regimes remain in power.

That Forum in Amazonia (in Belém) also illustrated the growing importance of environmental issues in the movement. In December that same year, alter-globalization supporters and ecologists were drawn together to the UN Climate Change Conference at Copenhagen, and in March 2010 the "World People's Summit on Climate Change" united 25,000 people from 147 countries in Cochabamba, Bolivia, illustrating the contribution of indigenous people to the movement<sup>3</sup>.

The economic and financial crisis that began in 2007 delegitimized neoliberal ideology. A series of negotiations for trade liberalization at the WTO were failures: Seattle (1999), Cancun (2003), Hong Kong (2005) and Geneva (2008). Latin American governments buried the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas during the continental summit of 2005, and set up a "Bank of the South" to replace the World Bank in the region. The first meetings of the G20 in 2008 targeted tax havens, and even Nicolas Sarkozy stated that "the ideology of market dictatorship and the impotence of governments died with the financial crisis."<sup>4</sup> Alter-globalization perspectives seemed to be confirmed by the crisis, and their discourse had a new resonance. However, a few years later, the tax havens are still active, the IMF budget has tripled, and since 2010, traders' bonuses have set new records. The return of the state to save the banking sector was followed by austerity policies. Though ideologically discredited, the neoliberal "zombie"<sup>5</sup> continues to guide economic policies, thus reminding alternativists that, no matter how deep the

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<sup>3</sup> B. Bringel B. and E. Muñoz, *Dez anos de Seattle, o movimento antiglobalização ea ação coletiva transnacional*, Ciências Sociais Unisinos, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> *Déclaration de M. Nicolas Sarkozy, Président de la République, sur les mesures de soutien à l'économie face à la crise économique internationale*, Argonay, 23 October 2008: <http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/087003350.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Colin Crouch, *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism*, Oxford, Polity Press, 2011.

crisis is, it does not in itself create societal change. Such change depends on the abilities of social actors to give it meaning, to raise the questions presented by the historical situation, and to put forward alternative political visions and economic logics. The actors in the alter-globalization movement were not up to this, until a new generation of activists appeared, to get the debate onto the front pages of the financial press.

### **Since 2011: A New Generation**

Between 2005 and 2010, the region with the largest number of international social forums was the Arab world<sup>6</sup>. In 2011 a global wave of movements came out of this region, denouncing austerity policies and reminding us that it was not the excesses of the welfare state but those of finance that caused the crisis. Going beyond the economic crisis, outraged, “indignant” protesters and “Occupy” movements have denounced the crisis of democracy. They have risen up against the absence of choice offered by the major parties in representative democracies, the inequalities, and the collusion between the richest “1%” and the politicians. For these protesters and the Occupy activists, democracy is not just a claim, it is also and above all a practice. The heart of their camps and little local assemblies was experimentation with direct democracy, participative and horizontal, in debates and in the processes and the organization of daily life.

These camps were highly publicized, but also sporadic. However, they constitute only the tip of the iceberg. Confronting the crisis, thousands of citizen initiatives against austerity policies are developing ways to overcome the structural limits of representative democracy, especially in Europe. Rapidly expanding alternative and local food networks are converging with other solidarity economy initiatives.<sup>7</sup> Networks of committed experts try to influence certain European policies, and pursue the long task of educating people about complex issues. Demonstrations against austerity are increasing in Europe, but although the movements have been coordinated at the continental or global level for a decade, demonstrations against austerity do continue but they remain mostly organized at the national level.

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<sup>6</sup> G. Caruso, ‘The World Social Forum and the Maghreb-Mashreq Uprisings’, in M. Kaldor, S. Selchow and H. Moore (eds.) *Global Civil Society 2012*, p. 175. London: Palgrave.

<sup>7</sup> K. Hart, J. L. Laville and A. Cattani, *The Human Economy*, Cambridge, Polity, 2010.