

Widening the Cracks in Consent:

Reflections on the 2002 World Social Forum

Silent resistance needs to be transformed into stories of resistance. Hidden cracks in our social consent need to be made visible, private feelings of anger need to find a collective voice for saying “no”. Cracks in consent occur, then, when silent sufferers speak up, when silent suffering gets translated into the language of resistance. - dian marino1

In the winter of 2002, a group of Master's students from York University's Faculty of Environmental Studies (FES) travelled to the second annual World Social Forum (WSF) in Porto Alegre, Brazil. This international meeting of social movements convened under the theme 'Another World is Possible' and brought together an estimated 70,000 delegates from 131 countries. From January 31 to February 5, nearly 5,000 organizations lent their voices to the proceedings, and shared one overarching goal: to combat the negative effects of corporate globalization and offer an alternative to the worldview put forth by the financial and political elites at the World Economic Forum (WEF), which took place simultaneously in New York City.

Introduction

Simone: In creating a space focused specifically on resistance to globalization and the pursuit of a better world, the WSF represented both a collective rejection of the hegemonic force of neoliberal capitalism (which values economic efficiency and the right of corporations to pursue endless profit regardless of the social and environmental consequences) and a collective affirmation of the urgent need for alternative visions and practices. For five hectic, exhilarating, overwhelming, but ultimately inspiring days, the masses that gathered in Porto Alegre transformed their private feelings of anger into a collective 'language of resistance.'

Unfortunately, the powerful messages articulated at the forum have garnered precious little attention in North America. Consequently, the four of us who had the privilege of being a part of this significant event wrote this piece to share our experiences with a broader audience. In particular, we considered the political relevance of the WSF as a site of struggle for social justice – as a particular 'crack in consent' that could be widened, stretched, then filled and re-formed. What follows is our collective reflection on our participation in the Forum, our motivations for going, and the lessons we take away with us.

Who we are and why we went

Diana: We are four students/activists in our twenties, four women and one man, three Canadians and one American, all Caucasian and with varying degrees of heterosexual and class privilege. We were drawn together not only out of our common bond as students in the same pro-

gram, but also because of our shared experiences of activism in Canada: from our time on the picket lines of York University during the 11-week CUPE 3903² strike, to our participation in the Quebec City protests against the Free Trade Area of the Americas, as well as local actions in Toronto to challenge globalization. Our passion for global justice is what motivated us to attend the WSF, however it is our position as students that enabled us to acquire much (but not all) of the necessary funding to travel to Brazil, since we had access to some institutional support, which we then supplemented with donations from several organizations and a fundraising party. The cost of the Forum itself was minimal, and we were also fortunate enough to have a friend in Brazil who hosted us for much of our time there. However, we were unable to recoup all of our costs in the end, and so some of us had to fill in the gaps with credit cards and students loans in order to take advantage of the opportunity to attend the Forum.

Charlie: For me, going to the World Social Forum fulfilled two purposes. One was a desire to make concrete connections with people from other countries who are also involved in a struggle against corporate globalization. Additionally, I had done some research on the Worker's Party (PT) in Porto Alegre in Brazil as well as the MST, a landless peasant movement in that region and I felt that going to the WSF would be a great opportunity to see and learn from these movements first-hand. The other purpose was an opportunity to challenge my own status quo, in part by exploring alternative visions and gaining a sense of hope for what 'other futures' could be possible.

Diana: My motivation for going to the

Forum actually arose out of my frustration with left politics in North America, which I found to be focused on critique at the expense of working towards constructive, creative solutions. I was also worried about the future of resistance in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, and was in dire need of inspiration. I wanted to be around people who not only believed in changing the world, but who wanted to work out practical ways to make links among activists, build coalitions, and actually create alternatives.

The PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores)

Diana: The story of the WSF begins with the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), the Worker's Party that governs both the city of Porto Alegre and the state of Rio Grande do Sul, as PT's political and financial support were critical components in ensuring the forum's success. At the forum we learnt that PT emerged originally as part of the opposition to the military dictatorship that had controlled Brazil until the early 1980s. It was inspiring to learn of PT's work over the past twenty years to create the vital and vibrant (although imperfect) participatory democracy that now exists in those parts of the country where the party is in power. A cornerstone of that democratic process has been the participatory budget system initiated in Porto Alegre in 1989, and subsequently adopted by 70 other cities across Brazil. This system has created a mechanism of neighbourhood and issue-specific assemblies in which citizens from all over the city articulate their priorities regarding how the municipal monies are to be spent. By 1999, this alternative approach had been expanded to the state level, as the Worker's Party was elected

in Rio Grande do Sul, and resulted in engaging over 200,000 people in a state-wide participatory budgeting process. This experiment has been extremely popular and effective, with hundreds of thousands of participants who hail from all parts of the social spectrum.

Charlie: The success of this experimental budgeting approach is due in large part to the experience PT gained during its time as part of the opposition to the military dictatorship, steadily building connections and alliances through grassroots organising and action. When the party was finally elected to power in Porto Alegre in 1989 it existed as a widespread network of community groups, with a membership drawn from a broad range of social movements such as labour, feminism, the landless movement, anti-racism, environmentalism, youth, and queer rights. Given this history, it is understandable why PT has generally favoured popular democratic processes over the more traditional and autocratic mechanisms familiar to previous governments and institutions in the region.³ While the results have sometimes been less than perfect, the successes of the experiment in alternative budgeting do make it a hopeful and concrete example of an alternative vision in participatory democratic governance.

In the case of Porto Alegre, ten years of participatory budgeting has led to a significant redistribution of social services and resources in the city.⁴ Poorer districts have seen the development of bus systems, water services, paving, schools, and health care centers. There has also been a dramatic reduction in corruption, and an upsurge of popular participation in the political workings of the city. In our travels in Porto Alegre we had a chance to witness some of these changes. The bus system was efficient, free on Sundays, and always free for children, there were housing projects occurring in various poor districts (*favelas*) in the city, and many people we spoke with discussed the educational initiatives in place. At the same time, Porto Alegre was far from a utopia, and poverty and inequality are still significant problems in the region. There were also those who criticised PT for their ongoing participation in the global economy, as demonstrated by the existence of various multi-national corporations in the city, and concerns that they were becoming less radical as they became more established as a party and a main-

stream political power.

Diana: This power—due in large part to the success of the participatory budget process—has grown to the point that PT now governs almost 200 cities and several states, and boasts of over 50 federal deputies and a handful of senators. For the first time since the party's inception, PT is poised to take power at the federal level, with Lula da Silva, the party leader emerging victorious in the run-off to the Brazilian presidential race in 2002. Lula commands the attention and devotion usually reserved for pop stars in North America. I witnessed this first hand when I stumbled upon a massive and jubilant rally that greeted his visit to the World Social Forum Youth Camp.

Lindsay: Such success and popular support begs the question: is the rest of the world ready for a worker's party to be at the helm of one of the most important economies in South America? This is a question that concerns many supporters of the PT. Will global pressures water down PT policies on localization and most especially on trade? Will obtaining greater power corrupt PT leaders? Or will the PT maintain its vision and provide the world with a truly alternative model of governance?

Charlie: The PT's growing recognition and political support is happening at a critical time in South American politics. Witness the continued political instability in Venezuela (including popular protest against both President Hugo Chavez and his US-backed corporate opponents), the massive grassroots Argentine neighbourhood mobilisations in response to national financial meltdown, the ongoing struggles engaged in by popular movements all over the continent (from the Zapatistas in Mexico to the CONNAIE in Ecuador), and one can see that South America is becoming an increasingly intensified site for progressive resistance to globalization. At the same time, the United States is dramatically increasing its military presence and control in the region through the development of programs such as Plan Colombia, the Andean Initiative, and Plan Puebla-Panama, demonstrating the importance of that region for oil and other resources. South America will be an increasingly important region in the global political scene as well, as these struggles play out. The stakes are high and the threats are immediate to progressive forces in that

region as well, as demonstrated by the murders of two PT mayors in Brazil in the week before we arrived, as well as ongoing killings and incarcerations of trade union, indigenous, and peasant leaders throughout the region.

Charlie: It was in this dynamic context that the World Social Forum took place. Organized in a city where there have been fascinating experiments taking place in local democracy, hosted by a political party that is poised to take the federal presidency and to continue to shake up the political landscape of Latin America. The PT helped create a unique environment that brought people from around the world together to strengthen their spaces of dissent and promote alternatives. By welcoming 70,000 people to a city that has become world-renowned for its participatory budget process and relatively radical approaches to education, social services, and democracy, the setting was a lively place to carry on the discussion of coming up with "alternative worlds" to the one that is being presented by our current global leaders.

The World Social Forum Itself

Lindsay: 50,000-70,000 people marched in the streets of Porto Alegre on the opening day of the forum to celebrate the belief that another world is possible. We marched with a contingent of Canadian activists, which ranged from labour workers, to youth activists, and political representatives. Many of these people we had not met or known before. We came together in the march to show that we stood together with Brazil and South America. To be part of a march in Brazil, to see the solidarity and the strength of the people, was truly inspiring. The groups of youth, the political organizations, the women, the rural workers, and individuals from all over the world were all standing together in order to build alternatives.

Simone: The WSF was a dynamic and multifaceted event, with a constant flow of things to do, see, taste, and hear. The 'WSF 2002 Official Program,' a 185 page bilingual (Portuguese and English) newspaper, was our roadmap, without which we would never have been able to navigate our way through the week. This document laid out the building blocks of the WSF, which included conferences, seminars and workshops, individual 'testimonials', cultural

events, an International Youth Camp, a Women's Tent, and an Afro-Brazilian Forum, reflecting the immense diversity of the participants. The many approaches and themes represented included a dizzying array of sessions, including ones on participatory democracy, corporate globalization, environmental sustainability, women's rights, indigenous struggles, food security, militarism, alternative economic structures, labour, education, refugee and immigrant issues, human rights, and even on media and the Internet.

Lindsay: One of the most effective workshops I attended was held by Via Campesina, a peasant organization representing small and middle-scale producers, agricultural workers, rural women, and indigenous communities from Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Europe. When I walked into their workshop I was immediately confronted with a table of lush tropical fruits ready to eat. I stopped to wonder if it would be okay to enjoy just one grape. At that moment a drum began to beat at the far end of the room, and Via Campesina representatives entered at the far door. My eyes scanned the room to notice a group of suited individuals entering through another doorway while holding signs depicting the names of corporate food conglomerates – Monsanto, Coca Cola, Parmalat, Nestle, Sadia, and McDonalds. Guarding the table of lush fruits, the corporations effectively shielded the food from the approaching rural workers. A powerful moment of silence encompassed the room as each participant, for just a moment, got a glimpse into the feeling of hopelessness that peasant workers from around the world feel when they are confronted daily with the global corporate take over of their domestic food supply and subsequently their right to food.

While the workshop presented by Via Campesina was extremely powerful, in general I had very mixed emotions about the workshops, conferences, and seminars I attended at the Forum. At one level I was excited to have met people from all over and shared stories, successes and frustrations with them. On another level, I was extremely disappointed with the direction that many of the larger seminars and conferences took. For example, I looked forward to the food security conference as an opportunity to connect with activists from around the world and to discuss and develop solid alternatives to a neo-liberal agenda,

which prioritizes corporate profit above the needs of rural workers rights, family farms, and women. While the rural workers' stories were inspirational, I could not get my head around a panel of six people that included only one female voice. Ironically, many of the men spoke of the importance of the women's perspective. So why was this voice marginalized? My frustration only grew as I saw a series of people to come forward to the stage to share their experiences from their own countries and struggles: 9 speakers, 9 men. Though I was greatly touched by many of the stories, my disappointment in the gender inequity of the speakers made me question the inclusivity of the struggle. It reminded me again of the necessity to ensure that we must achieve participatory standards within our own organizations before we can even begin to implement them on a broader, more encompassing scale; we will otherwise simply recreate the world we are trying to transform.

Simone: Nevertheless, the importance of connections that were made between workshop participants cannot be underestimated. For example, we facilitated a workshop at the WSF entitled "Student/Worker Activism in Canada: From York University Picket Lines to Quebec City Street Protest." Our presentation was well-received and its discussion period offered a unique opportunity to hear about the experiences of university students from Brazil, Argentina, Italy, the United States and Canada.

Diana: As a result of our conversations with other students during our workshop, we were able to see that many of our struggles are similar, since we are all fighting for access to education on some level. In Canada and the US, the high cost of education limits access; in Brazil, university is free, but spaces are so limited that very few students can actually attend. We also discussed our common experiences of the corporate invasion of our campuses as public funding for education dwindles, and our concern that intellectual freedom is being severely compromised in the process. Yet students have not been idly standing by – despite the challenges, student resistance seems to be growing, and young people form a loud and active part of social change movements in North and South America. In fact, perhaps the most gratifying part of presenting our workshop was talking with our South American counterparts about the ways in which activists in

the North are fighting against the system – challenging their assumption that North Americans were just part of the problem and had no interest in creating a better world.

Charlie: Furthermore, amongst the Brazilian and Argentinian youth we met it was refreshing to learn how well developed their knowledge and experience of progressive politics and the role that active struggle plays in social change is. They were able to tap into a lively heritage and climate of popular resistance that provided a foundation of support for alternative thinking and struggling. This climate was a juxtaposition to the often fragmented and disenfranchised progressive atmosphere in Canada.

The MST: Movimento Dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra

Diana: As part of the forum, we also had the opportunity to learn about one of the most powerful and successful movements in all of Latin America: the Movimento Dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), or Landless Rural Worker's Movement. The MST had a strong presence at the forum and the Youth Camp, but even more inspiring were the visits we made to the MST settlements through a visitation program organized by the WSF.

Lindsay: The MST is a success story that provides an example of how the landless poor have gained ground in shaping the future of land and agrarian reform in Latin America and in Brazil in particular. With close to 60% of Brazilian land in the hands of a few Brazilian elite landowners, the ability of the landless poor to feed themselves has been hindered throughout the years. In the early 1980s, a grassroots movement emerged, showing that people had to take action for their own futures. This movement grew to become known as the MST and advocated for massive land reform in Latin America. Through a series of successful land squats the MST has gained access to over 15 million hectares of land in Brazil thus aiding over 250,000 families who would otherwise be living in abject poverty.

During our visit to the MST settlement, we were amazed at the relaxed atmosphere, the sense of community, and the belief in a cooperative lifestyle. In speaking with one couple, it became clear to us that it was a truly unique community. The diversity and

productivity of the farm spoke for themselves. This particular MST farm⁵ cultivates 140 hectares of rice using a chemical-free, combined aquaculture technique, which yields up to 40% higher yield than a neighbouring conventional farm that uses chemical additives, such as pesticides, fertilizers and herbicides. The 370 hectares are home to 38 families, 18 of whom are involved in an agricultural cooperative. In short, not only does this community produce enough to fulfill approximately 80% of its own food needs, but this is done using ecologically sound and sustainable techniques.

Charlie: According to Gaurencho, one of the MST leaders at COPAC, the cooperative I visited, since the PT has come to power in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, it appears that the relations with the police have improved and there has been more support for land reforms. The MST and the PT overall seem to have a working relationship as social movements, and the MST was a very visible presence throughout the World Social Forum. At the same time, it appears that tensions do exist. One clear example of this was the fact that a group of urban landless in Porto Alegre occupied a building in downtown Porto Alegre the day before the World Social Forum began, in protest of the continuing lack of housing in that city. The occupation continued undisrupted throughout the forum, as an ongoing sign that things are still not perfect in that region. These ongoing tensions will no doubt increase if the Worker's Party comes to power nationally in Brazil and faces the land reform question more broadly as the central governing power.

Another important aspect of the MST is their awareness of their role in the wider movement against neo-liberalism. One of the women at COPAC made it clear that establishing local cooperatives was not the end goal of their movement. She told us that "this is not only a local problem but it is a global problem, and we have to fight for the whole global system." The MST activists I met were well-versed in international issues and the impacts of neo-liberal policies in Brazil and around the world. This was further demonstrated by the fact that at COPAC two positions are held by people whose main role is to stay connected to the rest of the MST movement and the wider struggles in which they are

involved.

Lessons/Implications/Conclusions

Diana: Perhaps the most important aspect of the forum itself was that it created a space for the articulation of a different kind of politics that could challenge massive apathy and empower people to participate in governing themselves. The PT showed by example that there are other ways to organize political processes than those to which we have become accustomed. They have embodied such alternatives by encouraging public participation in local governance and demonstrating an avowed commitment to social justice, a commitment that extends beyond rhetoric and has manifested in concrete changes at the local and state levels. How far the PT will be able to take its progressive agenda is unclear, given that Brazil must continue to function in a global political economy that prioritizes corporate profits and free markets over social and environmental justice. Nevertheless, the very fact that the PT explicitly positions itself against the neoliberal capitalist model is cause for some celebration and a certain level of optimism. Though we cannot simply copy the PT and expect their model to work in North America, the lesson is above all that other models do exist and can work. Though we will have to find our own ways of political organizing for our own particular circumstances, we can and should learn from the PT, along with the multitude of other social movements that gathered in Porto Alegre.

The forum's importance as a nexus for such cross-cultural exchange cannot be understated, as a site for multi-directional flows of information, rather than the North American and Eurocentric media and knowledge flows which dominate our societies. In my short time in Brazil, I had the privilege of learning about and from countless social movements (like the MST) and political experiments (like the PT's participatory budget process), of which most North Americans are most likely unaware. In bringing together these disparate voices; indeed, in giving them a space to be heard, the WSF was a tremendous success.

However, problems of exclusion persisted, despite the incredible diversity among those present. Ghettoization of certain interests was evident: the women's tent was isolated

and hard to find; indigenous peoples were offered one large morning session to air their concerns, but had very little voice otherwise, save as artisans selling their wares; and Afro-Brazilians were granted their own side conference, only to have it hidden in the very back of the program, not integrated among the rest of the workshops. Furthermore, there were noticeably few delegates from Asia and Africa, and language served as another means of exclusion since the four official languages of the forum were English, Spanish, French and Portuguese.

Access was also a key issue – no matter how affordable the conference fees may have been, the costs of flying to Brazil are prohibitive for a large majority of the people who might have wanted to attend – the biggest proportion of conference attendees were, understandably, Brazilians, and those who came from far away tended to be politicians, academics, or NGO professionals. Though the organizers did apparently offer some financial support to those that professed need, it could never have been enough for everyone who might have wanted it. Consequently, it seems that the model set by the forum, in terms of creating a space where alternatives can be articulated and discussed, needs to be replicated on a smaller scale, at the local level. However, while opening space is important, it is not enough in itself. The question remains how to make sure that we embody the alternatives that we are striving for.

Charlie: There were also examples of particular groups trying to claim control of parts of the forum. One particularly noticeable case was how ATTAC, an activist organization based in France, became quite manipulative in trying to dominate the agenda of the development of an international direction for social movement organizing.

Diana: These omissions and exclusions need to be addressed in honest and creative ways, without the defensiveness that tends to accompany any such discussion. Too many people who are fighting for social justice think they are automatically immune from corruptive influences, and are consequently unwilling to acknowledge the ways in which they perpetuate the very things that they claim to challenge. This attitude is quite evident, not only at the WSF, but in many other 'left' spaces that I have been a part of, among people who cannot seem to

acknowledge that we are fighting not just systems of oppression, but ourselves as people who can never claim to stand completely outside of those same systems.

Thus although the WSF was an amazing site of creativity, resistance, and courage, it was an imperfect space. It is a work in progress that can be admired for serving as a source of inspiration for activists who can afford to go there, and which must also be critically and constructively evaluated in an effort to expand upon its considerable potential for engendering social transformation.

1 Wild Garden: Art, Education and the Culture of Resistance (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1997), p. 26.
2 The York University union of graduate assistants, teaching assistants and contract faculty
3 de Sousa Santos, Boaventura, "Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre: Toward a Redistributive Democracy," Politics and Society. v. 26(4) 461-510. see in particular section III. "The Evolution of Participatory Budgeting: On Learning Participatory Democracy" pp 475-485.
4 Abers, Rebecca. (1998a). "From Clientelism to Cooperation: Local Government, Participatory Policy, and Civic Organizing in Porto Alegre, Brazil," Politics and Society. v. 26(4) 511-537. see http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~daniel_schugurensky or www.unesco.org/most/southa13.htm
5 All of these communities are separate and distinct from one another and are governed in accordance with the desires and needs of specific localities.

