

MUMBAI AND THE FUTURE

The fourth edition of the World Social Forum (WSF), which took place in Mumbai (India) this past January (16-21), was a very significant step towards consolidating the WSF process. The three previous editions, having taken place in Porto Alegre (Brazil) and attracting only a modest number of African and Asian delegates, led many to believe that the WSF, even though allegedly world-wide, was indeed a Latin-American and European initiative. The success of the Mumbai WSF signifies that the spirit of Porto Alegre — the “Porto Alegre Consensus” that a more just and solidary world is possible, as is the political will to fight for it — constitutes a universal aspiration. If the WSF could be recreated in Asia, there is no reason why it couldn’t be recreated in Africa or in any other part of the world. As a matter of fact, the decision has already been made that the WSF following the one in 2005 — set for Porto Alegre since last year — will take place in Africa. Whether in 2006 or 2007 depends on whether the WSF continues to be an annual event or becomes biennial, a decision to be taken at the next meeting of the WSF International Council (IC) this coming April.

The Mumbai WSF succeeded in demonstrating that the spirit of Porto Alegre, while being a universal aspiration, acquires specific tonalities in different regions of the globe. Its universality is actually a product of the very reach of neoliberal globalization, which subjects every region of the world to the same economic model and its consequences: deepening of social inequalities, demoralization of the state, destruction of the environment. In this sense, the choice of Mumbai as the venue of the 2004 WSF could not have been wiser. With its population of almost 15 million, Mumbai is the living symbol of the contradictions of capitalism in our time. An important financial and technological center and the site of India’s thriving film industry — Bollywood, producing more than 200 movies a year for an increasingly global audience — Mumbai is a city whose extreme poverty easily shocks western eyes. More than half of the population live in slums (roughly two million on the streets), whereas 73 percent of the families, usually large, live in one-room

tenements. The recent spread of informal economy has turned 2 percent of the population into street vendors. In India, however, the struggle against this background of inequalities gains specific nuances that have left their mark on this Forum. First, on top of economic, sexual and ethnic inequalities there are caste inequalities, which, though abolished by the Constitution, continue to be a decisive factor of discrimination. The Dalits, one of the lower castes, formerly designated as the “untouchables,” made a very strong appearance at the Forum. Of the 100.000 participants, more than 20. 000 were Dalits, who saw in the Forum a unique opportunity to denounce the discrimination that victimizes them. Second, the religion factor, which in the West tends to carry less weight in view of the secularization of power, is in the East a crucial social and political factor. Religious fundamentalism — a plague all over Asia, including India itself with the increasing politicization of Hinduism — was a major topic for debate, as was the role of spirituality in the social struggles for a better world. Third, having taken place in Asia, the Forum could not help but pay special attention to the struggle for peace, not only because it is in the West Asia, from Iraq to Afghanistan, that US’s war aggression is strongest, but also because today South Asia (India and Pakistan) is a region full of nuclear weapons. Having all this in mind, the Social Movements Assembly called a world march against the war on March 20, the first anniversary of the invasion of Iraq. Fourth, at the Mumbai WSF the western conception of ecological struggles gave way to broader conceptions, so as to include the struggle for food sovereignty, land and water, as well as the preservation of biodiversity and natural resources, and the defense of forests against agrobusiness and lumber industry.

By its very success, the Mumbai WSF creates new challenges for the WSF process. I single out three main ones. The first is the Forum’s expansion. It is not just a question of geographic expansion, but the expansion of themes and perspectives as well. Meeting in Mumbai, the IC decided to encourage the organization of local, national, regional and thematic forums, in order to deepen the syntony of the “Porto Alegre Consensus” with the concrete struggles that mobilize such a diversity of social groups across the globe. Furthermore, the WSF has been collecting an impressive amount of knowledge concerning its organizations and

movements, the world we live in, and the proposals that go one being presented and implemented to change it. This knowledge must be carefully evaluated to be adequately used and render the Forum more transparent to itself, thus allowing for self-learning for all the activists and movements involved in the WSF process. Finally, as knowledge accumulates and the large areas of convergence are identified, the need for developing plans of collective action increases. The issue is not so much to augment the WSF's efficaciousness as a global actor — efficaciousness is not gauged by global as much as by local and national actions — but mainly to prepare responses to the attempts of the World Bank, IMF and the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos to coopt the agendas of the WSF and sanitize them in favor of solutions that will leave the ongoing economic disorder intact. Given its open-space nature, the WSF will not present proposals in its own name; it will rather facilitate the articulation between the networks that constitute it, in order to deepen plans of collective action and put them into practice.

The twofold need to evaluate and spread the accumulated knowledge and prepare plans of collective action with a sound political and technical basis led to more discussion than never before in previous Forums of the relationship between expert and grass-roots knowledge, and, more specifically, between social scientists and popular struggles. Several workshops were devoted to this general topic. One of them, entitled “New Partnerships for New Knowledges,” was organized by the Center for Social Studies (CES) of the University of Coimbra. The participants were social scientists and activists. Immanuel Wallerstein (USA), Anibal Quijano (Peru), D. L. Sheth (India), Goran Therborn (Sweden), Hilary Wainright (UK) and myself were among the social scientists; Jai Sen (India), Irene Leon (Equador) and Moema Miranda (Brazil) were among the activists. The discussion concentrated on themes that are at the core of the idea of public sociology: the relationship between expertise and engagement; from critique to plans for action; the reliability of the knowledge underlying social struggles and its critique; the impact on social scientists of their engagement with lay or popular knowledges; activists as producers of knowledge.

A proposal for a Popular University of Social Movements was also presented at the workshop. It can be consulted at <http://www.ces.uc.pt> .