

1st April 2015

## **Another, Much-Needed, World**

I am writing from Tunis while participating in the World Social Forum which is taking place for the second time in a row in the country that triggered the “Arab Spring”. It has been a week since the terrorist attack that killed 21 people. The first remarkable fact to point out is that the 50,000 plus participants from 121 countries refused to be intimidated by the extremists and insisted on participating in solidarity with the people of Tunisia, the most successful of all Maghreb countries in terms of effecting a transition from dictatorship to democracy. A country with few natural resources and with tourism its main industry, Tunisia is at the heart of a region that was once the cradle of capitalism and has always been dominated by trade in strategic resources, from gold in the 14th century to oil in the present.

Its impressive cultural diversity has a pervasive presence, from art and politics to society in general and all aspects of everyday life. Many cultures – Carthaginian (Berbers and Phoenicians), Roman, Christian, Arab-Muslim (from the Middle East and the Iberian Peninsula), Ottoman, French – have mingled here over the centuries. This was the birthplace and home of Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), one of the founders of modern social science. Ten centuries before that, Augustine – himself a precursor of utopian modernism and anti-colonial criticism, among several other things – was born in the Roman city of Hippo (now named Annaba, in present-day Algeria), just a short distance away.

Perhaps many will be surprised to know that these days 31% of the members of Tunisia’s Parliament are women, while according to some commentators women have been the most staunch advocates of democratic transition in the country. It is difficult, in a word, to escape the magic of the place. The central theme was the same as that of the WSF’s first Tunis meeting, held in 2013: human dignity. The concept is at once broad and intercultural, encompassing Western-based human rights and notions of respect for human beings, for their communities and for nature itself viewed as a living being and a source of life, as is the case with the indigenous and peasant worldview as well as with that of Koranic Islam. This broad topic was covered by a wide range of discussions on the three main sources of domination and oppression of our time – capitalism, colonialism (racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia) and patriarchy –, aimed either at exposing present situations or at suggesting alternative scenarios.

Since the WSF was first established fifteen years ago, special prominence has been given to a number of themes: the seemingly unstoppable advance of the most anti-social version of capitalism (finance capital-based neoliberalism) as it hits a Europe lulled into a false sense of security; the scandalous concentration of wealth – according to data from the well-respected Oxfam, the richest 85 people on the planet own as much wealth as the poorest half of the world’s population (3.5 billion people); environmental destruction resulting from the unprecedented exploitation of natural resources; the expulsion of peasants from their ancestral lands to make way for industrial agriculture and the large scale land-grabbing it involves; the encroachment of transgenic seeds and genetically modified products (such as fruit and eucalyptus), which deprive farmers of their control over seeds, destroy biodiversity, kill bees

and cause harm to human health; the increase in political violence and the need to denounce not only terrorism but also state terrorism, which has always resorted to extremists in pursuing its own aims; the tragic deterioration of the living conditions of Palestinians, subjected to the most violent and vicious form of colonialism by the state of Israel; the heroic struggle of the Saharawi people in their fight for independence and liberation from Moroccan colonialism.

It is time to take stock of these fifteen years since the first WSF meeting. The WSF has made it possible for social movements around the world to get better acquainted and to coordinate their struggles, which are perhaps best exemplified by the Via Campesina and the World Women's March. The truth, however, is that meanwhile the world has become more violent, unjust and unequal, and many among us (myself included) believe that the WSF should have been renewed over the years so as to play a stronger role in formulating proposals and policies. One thing is certain: even if there are those who doubt that another world is possible, the WSF has clearly shown that an other world is urgently needed.