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The Mumbai World Social Forum: Alternative Futures from the Grassroots

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I recall an Indian proverb saying that, as all rivers find the same ocean, so too do all paths reach the same source. Perhaps this is a fitting analogy for the World Social Forum (WSF), the fourth of which was recently held in Mumbai India from the 16th - 21st of January. For as each of the over 130,000 droplets arrived by plane, train, rickshaw, bicycle and by foot, they began self-organising into streams, thousands of organisations emerged and merged into rivers of social movements, which finally came together at the WSF to form an ocean of humanity united under the banner *"another world is possible."* While the WSF is a global event and deals with global scale problems, issues and challenges, it is driven from the grass roots. If the WSF is an ocean, every "droplet" comes from a grassroots network, organisation and the activism, involvement and education of individuals. Unlike other global events, UN meetings, WTO ministerials, the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, where the halls of power are guarded by body guards, and where a PhD, $30,000 or a government position are the minimum "accessories" for a ticket into the debate, the WSF draws from the "wretched of the earth", the rich soil from which humanity springs. It is more appropriate to say that the WSF is a grassroots event at the global level. The WSF is a culmination of decades in the development of localised activism, organisation and education, the blossoming of local and regional civil society into an emergent global civil society. It has become a grassroots global debate on the futures of humankind through a new blending between the local and the global.

What is the WSF and Why Does It Exist?

The WSF is a global meeting of thinkers, artists, writers, activists, documentarists and organisations, who come together in an "open space" format to discuss the world's most pressing challenges and inhumanities. The WSF is more specifically a challenge to the mono-logic (and assumed ortho-doxy) of neo-liberal economics, the "Washington consensus" and its handmaidens, the IMF, World Bank and other programs that extend the power of a global corporate elite under the misnomer of "development".

The roots of the type of corporatist development being critiqued at the WSF can be traced back to the post-Bretton-Woods world economic order as framed by the allied victors of WWII and, more specifically, 80-s neo-liberalism pushing-through the successive GATT (General Agreement of Trade and Tariffs) "accords" as a way of eliminating trade barriers and of de-nationalising industries and resources.[1] This led to and almost ubiquitous series of protests against the privatisation of resources in former colonial states and / or developing countries. For decades, grassroots movements emerged throughout the "South" to protest World Bank projects that displaced indigenous peoples, IMF structural adjustment programs that undermined public welfare and health systems, and global financial speculation that wrecked havoc on smaller economies, their currencies and stock markets.

In the 90-s, the word *globalisation* came into vogue, describing a series of interconnecting phenomena surrounding corporate globalisation, information

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communications technology systems, trans-nationalisation, a global "information economy", "economic democracy" and the like. Much of this literature assumed a neo-liberal and corporatist understanding, that a global free market system was finally bringing the world together in a "golden straitjacket" and would ultimately help to modernise the "under-developed" world. What this literature missed or omitted were the other "globalisations" under way, the globalisation of environmental issues which increasingly cross borders, the globalisation of security concerns, the globalisation of human rights movements against corporate and state crimes, the globalisation of consciousness, which challenges ethnocentric versions of reality and nation-based governance, and the emergence of global civil society.

The nascent anti-globalisation movement which emerged in grass-roots form in the South (although there were increasing signs that the UN-generated World Summits prepared the terrain for these, especially the Copenhagen Social development Summit in 1995 and others), emerged in full bloom in suburban USA in the form of the "Battle of Seattle". By '99, corporate globalisation was no longer just a threat to indigenous peoples, but was also identified as a threat to the "suburban north", their unions, democracies, ecosystems, and human rights. Thus, a global anti-globalisation movement focused strategically on putting the issue on the map by targeting the major meeting places where neo-liberalism unfolds: the meetings of the World Trade Organisation, the World Economic Forum / Davos, for example, in the hope that the media might cover such protests.

Anti-global or Alter-global?

The protest movement was successful at putting the question mark on these processes in the public mind, but was quickly character assassinated by conventional media channels, protesters typified as disruptive activists, "anti" development Luddites, anarchistic misfits, and the like. One criticism that emerged was the question: "If you don't want neo-liberal market integration, if you are against corporate globalisation, then what do you want?" In all fairness, dozens of alternatives to corporate globalisation have existed for years, but in an effort to create mass awareness of the problems within globalisation (which has largely been successful), "anti-globalists" picked up a very negative media spin.

In an effort to shift the debate from what globalisation social activists were against to the proposals, visions, and alternatives that could address the issues, one of the front-line groups in the debate, Attac France, headed by Bernard Cassens, together with the Brazilian Workers Party, jointly proposed holding a "World Social Forum" that would be open to the many people and groups that deserve to have a say in globalisation, but who are locked out of the elite halls of the WTO, WEF / Davos. The WSF would also coincide with the World Economic Forum and be a contrast and parody of it. At the WEF, self-appointed CEO "representatives" at $30,000 a head and other government functionaries come together to discuss global economic issues, while activists outside beg to have a voice in the debate, while at the WSF all people with a stake in globalisation are accepted, becoming part of an open debate on the futures of the planet and the direction of human development.

Organised in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2001-3, the first three WSFs were a huge success, attracting thousands of people from all around the world, from about 10,000 in the first forum to 100,000 in the third. Because of the ethos of inclusion, open-ness to exploration of alternatives, respect for diversity and non-violence, the WSF attracted a dazzling and prolific number of progressive groups, activists, artists and thinkers.

And yet, the WSF, which has had remarkable success in coordinating local-global activism and become one of the key platforms for the proposal of renewed visions, innovations and alternatives for a more humane and sustainable world, has been given only the most token and patronising references by the media. CNN for example, simply said in under 15 seconds that "thousands of anti-globalisation protestors meet in Mumbai" - end of story.

In sharp contrast to the US media, which

has shifted to the right over past decades,[2] The Times India gave daily coverage of the event, quite sympathetically. But true to its tabloid roots, when a scandal emerged involving a South African Judge and WSF participant over an alleged rape, the paper was quick to shift much of its coverage on to the scandal, which was - in the end - exposed as false anyway. Besides transcending the banality of the global media empires and their deliberate distortion of what counts as world events, one of the key strategic points in the movement is to win the struggle over globalisation "nomenclature". How the issues are presented depends on the nature of the named and the "namer".

"Anti-globalisation protesters" has a nasty ring to it, as do images of anarchists throwing rocks at armed police and other stereotypes typical of Hollywood's media culture of packaged icons and archetypes. Particularly from the vantage point of your average suburban sitting at home with his or her children, one would want to stay as far away as possible from these dangerous and savage activists who block streets, chant loudly and destroy global franchises, like Starbucks and McDonalds. Yet the struggle over globalisation nomenclature has seen a first victory in France, where the initially harsh portrayal now has a softer ring to it: "Alter-globalisation movement". In contrast to rowdy "anti-globalisation protesters", these "alter-globalists" are more thoughtful, forward looking (in some cases visionary), caring and, most importantly, they offer viable alternatives to corporate globalisation.

A Movement or a Forum?

There has been tension between those that believe that the WSF should be a social movement or a "movement of movements" and those that believe that remaining a forum is the only way to maintain inclusivity, communication and exploration. For example, Ashis Nandy, when discussing the implications of the WSF, said that:

> *A social movement by itself will not be an alternative. A social movement has to trigger alternative political and social processes. In time, that is bound to come. In any case, I don't think we should look at one alternative. That would be as bad as the neo-conservative vision. We need many alternatives to choose from. And in future, I am sure, we shall see a whole new set of alternatives that will bring together many of the single-issue movements we are seeing around us. I suspect that many movements are moving towards new visions and new analytic frames; only the dying movements, mostly guided by European social thought sired by the age of imperialism, believe that they have the final clue to history.*[3]

This camp's thinking sees the WSF as an opportunity for mutual learning, deepening connections, understanding, out of which will spring synthesis. And yet, the WSF would not exist if it were not for the drive and strategic commitment of a multiplicity of social movements, from women's empowerment, to the landless peasants, to Dalit rights, to the international socialists and the greens. Success, defined in a variety of ways, has therefore been predicated on social movement - organised and strategic social action.

Alternatives and Innovations

One of the aspects of the WSF that makes it a unique advancement over the predominance of critique in the globalisation debate is its emphasis on looking for alternative futures to economic globalisation, the search for and discussion of the various innovations and social alternatives for a sustainable and humane world. Because of the WSF's connection to the anti-globalisation movement and years in the practice of critique, it seems that such alternatives have been slow to emerge. Such a forward looking approach normally requires people to let go of their single issue focus *identity politics* and begin to formulate shared visions and shared alternative futures. This is not easy with ten stakeholders, let alone one hundred or a hundred thousand of them! Ashis Nandy, on the other hand, seemed to feel that such an ecology of alternatives will emerge organically through deep participation. A number of groups have for years been hard at work developing such an ecology of alternatives.

The World Forum of Alternatives, headed by famed Egyptian economist Samir Amin, launched a "Directory of Social Movements" aimed at facilitating the self organisation of the various social movements into a more coherent blueprint for alternative economic development. The Alliance for a Responsible, Plural and United World, otherwise known as Alliance 21, a progress network of social innovators, has for over a decade been developing alternatives to economic globalisation through a participatory approach that links a diverse network of organisations and stakeholders. They have recently published a comprehensive booklet of proposals and they were associated with 25 workshops on issues ranging from developing a World Parliament to Media and Globalisation and a new Charter of Human Responsibilities.[4] The International Forum on Globalisation (IFO), based in San Francisco, is a loose network of many of the stars of the "alternative globalisation movement" and have worked for almost a decade touring various regions in an ongoing feedback process of developing coherent alternatives to corporate globalisation. They offered a 10 point blueprint for a sustainable and humane world, as well as the key reforms needed.[5] Attac, a largely European network, have spearheaded the adoption of the Tobin Tax (Attac France) and media innovation (Attac Germany), through a proposal for developing a world television station to cover the WSF and alternative globalisation movements.

One of the dominant themes in the movement toward alternatives seems to be *localisation* or *subsidiarity*. This refers to the devolution of power to the local, the preferencing of local economic and social development, rather than a global scope for development through multinationals or large government interventions. Colin Hines, the resident expert on *localisation*, was on hand to offer a vision of the future in which communities had retaken control of their capacity to determine the direction of their development[6] and Michael Albert spoke about the need for a participatory economic system that respected and responded to the needs of workers, called Parecon.

There was general consensus that Corporations had become too powerful, too influential over governments and too ready to behave with impunity. Two decades after the Bhopal disaster, which killed 20,000 thousand people, activists were on hand to present their ongoing struggle to hold Union Carbide and Dow Chemical to account for their neglect of basic safety.[7] Participants spoke about how to end 'Corporate-State' collusion and about creating alternative business structures that are responsive to local citizen concerns.

The alternative presented by George Monbiot was for the formation of a World Parliament to accurately reflect the will of all people, as opposed to a UN which reflected only the will of a minority in an un-democratic fashion. He argued that, as Corporations, helped by the IMF, have already succeeded in becoming the de-facto policy makers for nations and determine global economic policy, we ought to set up a World Parliament as the legitimate forum for alternative and democratic global policy-making. Such a parliament would have symbolic power, as a critique of the illegitimacy of current global governance and as the most proportionally representative body of world opinion.[8]

In response to the trend towards commodification and marketisation of everything, an important thread in the movement has emerged for the creation of a *global commons*, formulating a "hands off" for certain aspects of life which should never be under private control. This included protecting as public resources fresh water, oceans, biodiversity, human knowledge and wisdom, indigenous knowledge, the gene pool, a global atmospheric commons, medicinal plants and other aspects of daily life needed for subsistence, but which are under threat through corporate monopolisation via the WTO-backed TRIPs agreement (Trade Related Intellectual Property).[9] A global commons has been particularly significant for AIDS campaigners, whose efforts to develop a cheap and generic AIDS retro-virus has been stifled by pharmaceutical patents protected by TRIPs, despite the severity of the crisis in poor countries.

The seeds of a 21st century global peace

movement has emerged through the successive WSFs. The nascent power of this new global peace architecture was witnessed in 2003 as over 15 million people united on the 15th of March against the US' illegitimate attack on Iraq, coordinated at the 3rd WSF in Porto Alegre. The newer post-Cold War peace movements are merging with older ones: the Cold War era anti-nuke campaigns, many of them still informed by the Hiroshima experience, and colonial "Gandhian era" peace movements. New initiatives like Controlarms.org aim to create a global legal framework to control and limit the global arms trade.

Ecological sustainability is a key concern at the WSF, with numerous workshops on alternatives production systems and infrastructural designs such as organic farming, parabolic cookers, "green" closed loop manufacturing, alternative energy systems, alternative transportation, eco-cities and eco-villages. Yet much of the discourse on ecological sustainability had a global and macro-logical perspective, critical of consumerist globalisation, "endless growth" modernism, and focussed on finding global scale alternatives to today's ecological challenges. Founder of The Ecologist Edward Goldsmith, for example, said that the potential impact of global warming would force us to completely rethink economics and agriculture in the 21st century.

Another core theme at the WSF was the apparent globalisation of human rights movements, with Indian *Dalit* (untouchables) merging with Japanese *Burakumin* and other de-humanised groups from around the world, in solidarity against the structural violence they have faced for centuries. The confluence of these untouchables with other groups such as the Brazilian Landless Peasants movement, indigenous Mayan rights movement and the thousands of other human rights groups present at the WSF augurs the emergence of a higher order global voice for the dispossessed in the spirit of William Irwin Thompson's "Gaia Politique".

Indian groups, such as Ananda Marga promoted their Progressive Utilization Theory (PROUT), Nayi Azadi Abhiyan (New Global Freedom Movement) promoted self transformation as a pathway toward global transformation. Groups sought to address religious intolerance and create a bridge between multiple faith traditions. A huge photo display contrasted the systematic persecution and subsequent genocide of Jews by Nazi Germany to the systematic persecution and increasing xenophobia of Muslim's being promoted by the Indian state of Gujarat. The Churches' Auxiliary for Social Action held a panel on combating religious intolerance through conflict resolution. Groups promoting "post-conventional" awareness were very much at home at the WSF, offering workshops, such at Shikshantar on "unlearning", Art of Living on "building a sustainable society", and Akhil Bhartiya Rachnatmak Samaj on "humanity above nationality". An emphasis on spiritual development, therefore, grounded much of the workshops from a place of deep love and transpersonal awareness.

Much of the conference was dominated by conferences and workshops on global economic reform. Groups, such as CADTM, Jubilee South, ActionAid and other networks campaigning and working for the end of odious debt, organised and sponsored a variety of conferences and workshops. A multitude of free trade agreements (FTAs) were under attack, and groups also took aim at how IMF engineered "structural adjustment programs" have wreaked havoc on smaller economies by allowing the privatisation of industries and resources and thus have undermined the capacity for governments to fund primary services like education, health care, utilities and transport.

There was a concerted effort to look at current problems in global governance and the modern nation state system's failure to create the conditions for equitable trade, lasting peace, food security, arms control and environmental protections. CIDSE International Cooperation for Development and Solidarity hosted a presentation on how to re-distribute wealth and power globally. IBASE (Instituto Brasileiro de Analises Socias e Economicas) held a conference on combating unilateralism and reforming the United Nations.

WSF from a Macro-historical Perspective

Some have commented on the historical dimensions of the WSF. Immanuel Wallerstein sees the WSF as yet another "anti-systemic" movement, the most recent in a long series of anti-systemic movements aimed at countering and finding alternatives to the march of the world economic system under capitalism. Wallerstein remains cautious in giving the WSF too much significance, as other anti-systemic movements through-out the 500 year history of capitalist imperialism have failed to live up to their promise. The question here is how different this "movement of movements" is from other "anti-systemic" movements throughout history and whether it can transcend - and learn from - the mistakes and limitations of past movements.

Using Arnold Toynbee's conception of crisis and response, the WSF represents a dramatic and multi-civilisational attempt by a creative minority to respond to the multiplicity of challenges being forced upon the world through capitalist globalisation. The radical nature of the proposals, from policy shifts, new narratives to spiritual initiatives, demonstrates an all-out attempt to avert disaster and save humanity from falling further into dehumanisation and un-sustainability. The question here is whether this creative minority can organise itself effectively enough to lay the blueprints for a better, more humane and sustainable global civilisation.[10]

From the perspective of Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit scholar and mystic, the WSF can be looked at as a further development of a "oosphere", whereby minds across regions are increasingly linked in global consciousness and a spiritual community is born out of the evolutionary process of humankind. The question here is whether the WSF can foster and nurture a spiritual community in global solidarity, or if it devolves into self-absorbed and narrow *identity politics.* Whether the WSF can further nurture this type of spiritualisation and emergence of global consciousness.

Finally, the WSF represents the culmination of the exponential rise of NGOs and INGOs in countries around the world, in particular in those nations where people have the right to freely associate. From less than a thousand or so INGOs at the beginning of the 20th century, we have witnessed the birth of more than 40,000 by the end of the century. We have seen nothing less than the birth of a "third sector", which has become a social force along side the two other well known sectors, government and business. This has led to the growth of civil society at the global scale.[11] Yet, questions remain whether this third sector can become a global civil society with sufficient influence to counter the vast power of economic globalisation and provide counter-balance and coherent and visionary alternatives.

Reform or Revolution?

Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz was greeted with warm applause and gave a speech outlining how the IMF should be reformed to make it more accountable and responsive and open to alternative development approaches, while outside, on the WSF "streets", large banners ubiquitously called for the complete decommissioning of the IMF and the World Bank. The argument over the future of the IMF reveals a bigger debate at the WSF between advocates of reform, advocates of radical change and even those that advocate revolution (ie the Marxist "umbai Resistance" that boycotted the WSF). It occurred to me sometime through the conference, however, that the movements, ideas and proposals at WSF were radical only in so far as they challenged the bankrupt logic of economic neo-liberalism and offered alternatives that most educated US economists would consider strange. Ideas like spiritual development, localisation, parabolic micro-heaters, global consciousness and a global commons and micro-lending defy the standard model. Yet within the walls of NESCO grounds, an ecology of alternatives was forming and people generally understood each other, finding within the debate strangeness and familiarity, innovation and novelty yet appropriateness, depending on the context and the crisis. The WSF represents radical change, but not vio-

lent revolution. Perhaps the WSF, within its communication-intensive climate, is more akin to an evolutionary shift in paradigms for human development. The ecology of alternatives and visions at the WSF represented a debate on human development that deeply challenges the current paradigm for human development based on a puritanically promoted economic model. Within this emerging alternative paradigm of human development, communication was possible, emerging slowly, coming together, networks gradually forming. Like it or not, the WSF, for the most part, represents a radical shift in human development and the futures of globalisation. The forum is therefore made for those who believe that another world is possible and that ordinary people can create a sustainable and humane world of co-existence, from the grassroots up.

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Notes

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2. Frank, Thomas *One Market Under God*, Anchor Press 2001
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