

PROEM

CHALLENGING EMPIRES
READING THE WORLD
SOCIAL FORUM ¹

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In a wellknown article, Michael Hardt — co-author with Antonio Negri of *Empire* — has compared the World Social Forum to the great NAM (Non-Aligned Movement) that shook the middle of the 20th century.² And many other observers, including this writer, have argued that the WSF is one of the most significant civil and political initiatives of the past several decades, perhaps of this past century.

Whether it will play such a role remains to be seen. But at any rate, it is not every day that an initiative like the World Social Forum (WSF) takes shape, which simultaneously challenges the hegemony of so many empires, both 'external' and 'internal'; and there are even fewer instances of an idea with such sweep actually taking off and staying in flight. At the same time, and as some of the essays in this book discuss, the initiative is also today at a crucial stage, both in and of itself — as it attempts to consciously and strategically globalise itself, among other things by holding its next world meeting in India, outside its birthplace and on the other side of the planet — and on account of the enormous challenges of the historical moment at which it is doing this.

This book is an attempt to contribute to a better understanding of this initiative. Specifically, we as editors hope that this better understanding will enable us all to engage more critically with and take part in this important idea, at this significant time. This proem lays out the nature of the book project, a very brief description of the WSF and some comments on it (there is much more on this, within the book), and a description of the content and structure of the book.

As such, this volume is a careful selection of diverse essays and documents, either on the Forum itself or engaging with it, or else engaging with related issues in ways that we believe shed light on the Forum and its potentials and limitations. Although a fair amount has now been written and published on the Forum, our sense is that no single piece or volume has yet been able to fully portray the richness and depth of the initiative, let alone of the ideas behind it or that it has thrown up. But precisely because of the scale of the initiative, and of the fact that the Forum seems to have so widely engaged — and in many cases, ignited — people's imaginations, and also because the Forum is at a crucial juncture of transition, we believe that it is essential to try to critically and comprehensively engage with the phenomenon. We have tried to do so by bringing together essays and writings from many

parts of the world, written by people of many different ideological persuasions and points of view. We see this as a 'committed but critical' anthology on the Forum, and the book as something of the 'open space' that the Forum itself is struggling to be.

Perhaps not surprisingly, coming to this formulation and attempting to achieve this balance has itself been a struggle, throughout the process of constructing this book. One of our many decisions towards this was to try to include in this collection, both the critical but not committed as well as the committed but not necessarily critical. Another was to focus on the *Forum* even while recognising the emergence of what some call a 'world social movement' from within the Forum process, and that the Forum itself is only a part of a much wider and still-emerging global movement. We see this struggle of ideas as reflecting the Forum at its best.

Yet another decision was to include thinking and writings both from established (or 'old') politics as well as new politics, and hard critique and rejection as well as analysis and celebration, and thereby to encourage dialogue across boundaries. And finally, in the same vein, has been our decision to not edit out parts of pieces that seem to overlap — that give different understandings of the 'same' histories (of the Forum, and of the movement) and of the future. We have tried not to privilege any one view. To arrive at this collection as it stands, we therefore searched out, exchanged, and went through a much larger number of texts — indeed, right up to the week before it went to press.

Necessarily, this book has its limitations. Some of these arise from the fact that the book is largely a collection of existing writings (with only a very few commissioned papers and a small number of unpublished papers), a decision we took in the interests of getting the book out in time for the forthcoming WSF world meeting (to be held in Mumbai, India, in January 2004). But we are aware that the collection remains uneven. Many parts of the world are not represented. There are also several points of view, especially from the margins, that we sought, especially from the Dalits in India, but where the contributions did not come in. The proportion of contributions by women authors is much lower than we wanted. We also know, and in some ways regret, that we are publishing just at the very moment when international debate on the Forum is mushrooming, since this means that we are not in a position to include many of the items now emerging ! But in order to get the book out, we took the decision to accept these limitations and to publish now, and have, together with our publishers, crafted the book around these realities.

Despite all these limitations, we believe that we have found (and received on invitation) pieces of very high quality, thereby making this a truly extraordinary collection of writings that we know will, individually and collectively, contribute strongly to the emerging debate.

What we have been able to do in relation to the emerging debate however, is to include more recent pieces in the bibliography. It might seem invidious to here identify, even more to recommend, certain items. But we nonetheless draw attention to certain items that come with original views, from under-represented world areas, or from equally under-represented 'subject positions'.

In this short list, we would mention Buzgalin's tract, because it comes from the important experience in Russia both of globalisation and of alter-globalisation, and also because of its major attempt to contribute to the theorisation of alter-globalisation;³ Chattopadhyay's essay, because it analyses in detail, the question of what the WSF offers the Left in India — and what the Left seems to be missing;⁴ an article by Vera-Zavala, because it is a critical reflection on the Forum by someone from a civil formation that has played a very important role in the formation and growth of the Forum (ATTAC) and raises points about the internal

dynamics of the Forum that have not been so bluntly raised by others — and also because it is from ‘ScandaNetherlands’ (as my co-editor, Peter Waterman would have it) which is playing an important role in the life of the Forum and the global movement in general but is so far little represented in literature that has appeared in English.⁵ In addition, there is an essay by McLeish, which is perhaps one of the best on the networking that is so much part of the WSF process (here focussing on the European Social Forum);⁶ and last, a major critique of the Forum that has recently appeared by RUPE (Research Unit on Political Economy) — important because it is one of the first attempts to look in some detail at the political economy of the Forum.⁷

This book has several objectives. By bringing together such a rich collection we hope to inform a wide reading public about this significant social and political phenomenon. Through this, we want to encourage and enable a process of engagement with the Forum, and in turn engage more widely with the phenomenon of global civil action — referred to by some as the ‘anti-globalisation movement’, by others as the ‘global justice and solidarity movement’, and by others yet as the ‘alternative globalisation (or alter-globalisation) movement’ — that we increasingly see taking shape around us : of which the battles of Seattle, Prague, Gothenburg, Québec, and Genoa, the worldwide protest this last February (2003) against the launching of the war on Iraq, and the recent popular revolt in Bolivia have been just the most visible manifestations. To the extent that the WSF is a part of this wider emerging movement, and that it is impossible (and unnecessary) to disentangle it from that, in some ways this book also provides windows to some — though by no means all — of what is more widely happening.

In particular, we believe that the Forum brings together three novel and inter-related dimensions : the *form* of the political and of political discussion (the Forum’s concept of ‘open space’); the *question* of the renewal of imaginaries and utopias (how to give content to “Another World is Possible !”); and *questions of strategy* (including proposals, types of political organising, etc). We hope, through this book, to stimulate a more critical engagement with and interrogation of all these three dimensions.

Finally, we have also put this particular collection together now because we believe that the WSF is at a critical juncture. Since 2001, the WSF has moved from being a singular major event each January in Porto Alegre to being an efflorescence and celebration across the world. During 2002-3, continental meetings have taken place in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America, and city, state, and national meetings have taken place in several countries across much of the world. The steady growth in numbers attending the world event attest to the relevance of the Forum to people all over the world who are concerned by economic globalisation, militarisation, and other interrelated issues. But it is not numbers alone that count.

The annual world event is changing. The first meeting in 2001 was predominantly a challenge to Davos as a symbol of economic globalisation, and through that to economic globalisation itself. In 2002 it moved to being a meeting that made a call for alternatives — ‘Another World Is Possible !’. And the third meeting in January 2003, while centred on illuminating steps towards concrete alternatives, was one also marked by critical self-reflection on the WSF itself— both as structure and as process.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, there is much reason to think that the WSF has struck at the level of meaning. It has made abundantly clear that there *is* an alternative to economic, capitalist globalisation, that there *are* alternatives. In this way, the WSF — along with all the other forms of global civil action that are also taking place — is playing a

profound role in freeing peoples all over the world of the shackles of the colonisation of the mind.

The challenge that the Forum poses is also in the process of being greatly widened. Starting from a first position of opposing neoliberal globalisation, the Forum has played an important role in the building of worldwide opinion against the war on Iraq, not by taking a position itself but by being an arena where anti-war forces from many parts of the world could meet. Significantly, it was also a space and time where these actors and others who had till then been opposing neoliberal globalisation alone could meet and together develop a more comprehensive understanding of war and militarisation as an instrument of economic globalisation.

More recently, and more or less as a function of the next world meeting being held in India and of WSF India hosting the meeting, the Forum has, by including these as axes for the meeting, also widened its perspective to also opposing communalism (religious sectarianism and fundamentalism), casteism (oppression, exclusion and discrimination based on descent and work), racism, and patriarchy.

Equally, the fact that local, national, and regional 'chapters' of the initiative have now taken shape in many parts of the world, and in such a short span of time, can also be seen as a deepening of the relevance of the idea globally. (Though another way of looking at this phenomenon is that the political conditions over the past period have thrown up communities of people with common minds and interests across the world, and in this sense the WSF is merely a vehicle for this manifestation.)

The challenge that the Forum poses is also deeply 'internal' as well as external, insofar as the culture of politics that the Forum professes to practice, of 'open space', is a radical challenge to most existing modes of organisational practice and politics, and where, by adopting this wide programme, it also challenges all those who take part in it to also adopt these positions. This therefore includes a deep challenge to the practices of class, communalism (religious fundamentalism and discrimination), caste discrimination, racism, and / or patriarchy, also sexism and homophobia and in general, a lack of tolerance of plurality, diversity, and openness, even by those who profess to believe in these.

On the other hand, this dynamic growth and broadening has also brought its own share of organisational and management problems, both at the events themselves and also in the evolution of policy and strategy for the Forum as an idea, sometimes tending to overwhelm it. The third world meeting (held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in January 2003) is widely considered to be the point at which organisers, participants and observers began to seriously talk about how to practise alternatives to economic globalisation, and also to reflect on the extent to which the Forum is practising the principles it preaches — but it is also the point where the Forum came closest to collapsing, inwards.⁸ Many key participants and theorists, such as Boris Kagarlitsky and Hilary Wainwright, have also commented that the Forum is becoming a place where it is impossible to hold an actual debate or to have real dialogue in the formal sessions⁹ (and even if Wainwright, in this volume, otherwise also celebrates the Forum as a process that is "vital to creating a global political culture"¹⁰). These are serious comments.

The recent deliberations of the WSF International Council show that the Forum is becoming aware of its own globalisation, as regional and problem-specific Forums mushroomed worldwide. But are the Forum's ruling bodies, structures, and processes appropriate to a phenomenon that is growing exponentially and spreading globally? Are the decisions that

the WSF International Secretariat and the International Council are taking — which are taken on behalf of all those forging the path to another world — actually also doing this, or are they getting mired in the grammars and vocabularies of the past ? And how can the Forum become a place for meetings of minds — for real dialogue — and not remain, or become, events of a thousand separate meetings ?

Most fundamentally, and even though it is most commonly associated with the annual meeting each January, the WSF is a *process* that is still very much under construction and experiencing rapid change. Its fate, if we can use that word, depends on how it learns to evolve and respond to changing conditions, and how ‘we’ all — movements, intellectuals, progressive organisations, etc. — respond to its initiatives.

The structure of the book

We see this book as our contribution to this process. In order to do so, we have conceived of the book in terms of five main sections. It opens with an exploration of antecedents — of the conceptual, ideological, and historical landscapes within which the Forum has taken shape and within which it continues to unfold (and whether those giving it leadership and / or taking part in it were or are aware of this or not). We believe that it is essential to attempt to locate the Forum within this wider world — and where each one of us will, of course, do so in our own ways. At the same time, this section — though not a history ideas as such — necessarily also provides a useful framework for a deeper understanding of the pieces that make up the next two sections, ‘Diaries’ and ‘Critical Engagement’. Indeed, in some ways, the whole book is ideally read in relation to the context that this section suggests — and even while taking into account that the portrayals of context and antecedents, as they emerge from the various readings, are themselves partial and contested.

Section 2, ‘Diaries’, attempts to give some idea of what these meetings are like, especially to those who have not yet had the chance of personally attending one of the larger meetings of the World Social Forum. Written in the tradition of travelogues, the two essays we have included give important glimpses and critical insights to the, *experience* of the Forum, which anyone who has been to one of the meetings will tell you is a central part of what it is all about. And these are complemented by other pieces in Sections 3 and 4, where reportage is built into what are essentially analytical essays.

The third Section, together with the next one, is in some senses at the heart of this book : significant and sustained critical engagement with the Forum and its ideas and propositions. We have attempted here to include essays from as many viewpoints, and parts of the world, as we could find. They include pieces ranging from some based on very local experience, both within specific countries and also within the Forum, to high abstraction. The explorations range from the experiential to the philosophical, and include structural and post-structural analysis. The moods of the pieces range from high celebration to deep anguish — and rejection. Read individually, and read collectively, we believe that this section reveals the range of different struggles that are taking place, and is in itself simultaneously a manifestation and celebration of the struggle that the Forum itself is, and is so much a part of.

Section 4, on the Forum in India, is in many senses a continuation of the previous section but focussing on India, precisely because the next world meeting of the World Social Forum is to be held in the country. It provides as wide a spectrum of opinions and analysis as possible, but draws also more on ‘smaller’ journals and less formal sources than in the other sections, in order to give some idea of the debate that the Forum has so far generated in the country.

An important limitation of this section is that most of the pieces in this section focus on or were generated by one meeting, the 'Asian Social Forum', the so-called 'regional' meeting of the World Social Forum that was organised in the city of Hyderabad in January 2003, and not at the larger picture, of how the WSF experience is or is not relating to life and politics in this complex country during these turbulent times. The reality is that at the time of writing, very few people in India — whether activists, academics, or journalists, let alone those in the wider professional or business world — have so far heard of the Forum, let alone attempted to look at, engage with, or debate this very major world process; one that has, as mentioned at the outset of this introduction, been compared with some of the great initiatives of modern history. This is changing a little as we get closer to the world meeting in January 2004, and where both deeper commentary and opposition are beginning to emerge.¹¹

On the one hand, we hope that the publication of this book in India might help to correct some of this. But on the other, given that the original Brazilian organisers of the WSF have felt so strongly that the first world meeting of the Forum outside Brazil must be held in India (over all other countries in the world), and where this proposal has been endorsed by the International Council of the World Social Forum, and given also the serious political and academic attention that the Forum has widely commanded elsewhere, this almost total lack of attention in India to the initiative also perhaps demands a little reflection.

The first possibility — argued by some — is the lack of availability of information in India about the Forum, and poor information and communication infrastructure. This however seems a weak excuse, given how well connected Indians are into world circuits in almost every other field and that 'India' is now considered a world power in information technology.

The second is that we in India are so overwhelmed by all that is going on in the country in these turbulent times— communal violence, state-sponsored pogroms, nationalistic war hysteria, a sustained rise of the right, continuing caste discrimination, massive impacts of economic liberalisation including suicides by farmers and workers, flagrant corruption, and environmental and social devastation caused by huge 'development' projects, to speak of only some of the scarred landscape — that we have developed a highly insular and parochial view of the world, and whatever little information is available to us on the Forum and on world events gets overwhelmed by the demands of more 'local' and 'national' developments. If this is at all the case, then again hopefully this book can help a little to correct this imbalance. Because the local and national are inextricably connected to the global.

The third, related possibility is a matter of political culture. To the extent that something only three years old can establish a tradition, the culture that the WSF practices is not to reach out and embrace but rather, within its self-selected view of itself as an 'open space', to expect those who hear of it to come to it and to partake of it. This culture, authored by the Brazilians, however also has some basic and somewhat hidden underlying assumptions, such as the existence both of good and open communication and information systems and of a culture of openness. In India however, these have so far been somewhat weak.

This experience, in fact, points to a structural contradiction within the very concept of the Forum — where, even though the Forum's Charter of Principles speak of it being an 'open space', they also make clear that it is open only to those who have specific positions on certain defined political questions. But this has quickly assumed epidemic proportions within India. Like so much else in this country, this issue too has quickly become larger than life — but this may also have a silver lining, since it has equally quickly also exposed the internal contradictions of the formulation.

In this sense, the holding of the World Social Forum in India provides an opportunity for dismantling the walls that we have around us in this country, precisely because it will be a microcosm of the whole world of which we are only a part — and of all the other worlds that are possible. Again, we hope that this book can also play some role in this process of dismantling.

Section 5 moves decisively past the Forum as Forum, and looks ahead to what possible futures there are — for the Forum, for ‘social movement’ more generally, and for such initiatives at a world level. We have included five very different pieces, which open up very different spaces and start from very different points of entry, to try and portray something of the landscape that lies ahead of us, and its questions. The view is extraordinary.

Finally, three features of this book need to be mentioned. One, interspersed between the sections are significant documents generated by the organisers of the WSF process or that have been generated by social movements at one of the editions of the Forum. Rather than ‘storing’ all these in one reference section, we have preferred to make them part of the life of the book, enabling readers to dip into and then come out of the ‘actually existing Forum’ as they move through it. (We have then also broken this ‘rule’, by including both WSF and movement documents generated in India within Section 4, on the Forum in India.)

The ‘social movement documents’ also require an introduction. By choice, the WSF refrains from taking positions on issues — even though it was specifically set up to provide a forum for opposing neoliberal globalisation — or from ‘representing’ the views of those who meet at Forum events. It thereby leaves the space open to all those meeting during the Forum to take whatever positions they wish, in their own names, and undertaking only to publish and circulate any statements made.

One of the important outcomes of the meetings of the World Social Forum have so far been the statements made by meetings of social movements during the meetings. By definition, of course, they do not represent the views of the Forum, as such. But insofar as there is a strong school of thought that argues that the Forum is itself a ‘movement of movements’, and / or that it should be transformed into a ‘world social movement’ (or movement network), these documents thereby assume a considerable added historical significance. We are therefore reprinting here a selection of documents generated during meetings over the past three years of the Forum.

Second, rather than giving a list of references at the end of each essay, we have collected all the references made by our contributors into one ‘bibliography’ that is located near the end of the book, together with the Glossary and Index. Collectively, this has become a rich resource list of key material in these fields.

And third, in an attempt to make this book — and in turn, the process of the World Social Forum — more transparent and understandable to all readers, especially in South Asia where most people are not familiar with colonial languages other than English, we have taken the step of translating into English all the names and titles that are given in the book in other languages (or explaining them in the Glossary). This, which is an outcome of a parallel process of attempting to make bibliographies more multicultural and user-friendly, has led to a somewhat unconventional presentation style in the bibliography (which is also unconventional in other terms), but we hope that this will help all readers to ‘read’ and understand this major world process better.*

Although one tradition in edited volumes is to engage with the issues, positions, and propositions presented by the issues, authors, and texts, I — in concurrence with my co-editors — have chosen to not do so here; in large part, because our approach in this book is to merely present the various positions, and to thereby enable readers to navigate through them as they wish and to arrive at their own assessments. In all honesty, it would also be extremely difficult to do justice in a brief survey to all the views expressed in this volume, which are in many places mutually contradictory; but more centrally, this is also beyond the scope of our role, as we see it.

I speak for my co-editors in saying that it has been a privilege to look around and search out the pieces that we present in this book, to read all the essays, and to learn from them. It has been a powerful reminder of the scope and richness of the movement, and struggle, we are today engaged in. I thank my co-editors for giving me the privilege of writing this introduction, and warmly invite readers to now enter this book.

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NOTES

¹ I thank my co-editors, Anita Anand, Arturo Escobar, and Peter Waterman, for their comments on earlier drafts of this proem. In some senses, this therefore now represents something of a collective formulation.

² Hardt, July 2002.

³ Buzgalin, October 2003.

⁴ Chattopadhyay, November 2003.

⁵ Vera-Zavala, February 2003.

⁶ McLeish, nd, c.2003.

⁷ RUPE (Research Unit for Political Economy), September 2003.

⁸ Albert, in this volume; Waterman, this volume, Sec 3.

⁹ Kagarlitsky, November 2002, and Wainwright, December 2002.

¹⁰ In her Foreword to this volume.

¹¹ The commentary includes presentations at a major series of twelve seminars organised at the University of Delhi during August-December 2003, collectively titled the 'Open Space Seminar Series', focussing on 'The World Social Forum and Cultures of Politics'. For details, see Sen, October 2003. The opposition includes the announcement of a meeting to oppose the Mumbai Forum, during the days of the Forum. See : International League for Peoples' Struggles (ILPS), World Peoples' Resistance Movement (WPRM), South Asia, and others, September 2003; and also RUPE September 2003.