
WHAT IS THE POINT OF PORTO ALEGRE ?

ACTIVISTS FROM TWO GENERATIONS IN DIALOGUE WITH OPENDEMOCRACY

ezequiel adamovsky and susan george

openDemocracy : *What do you see as the priorities for the WSF and why ?*

Susan George : The first Forum in 2001 was about analysing the world situation. As a movement we now largely share a common analysis. The second Forum last year (2002) was supposed to be more about making concrete proposals. As I understand it, this year (2003) is about strategies and how we reach our goals. I hope this will be the overriding concern, although such clear-cut distinctions aren't always possible; there will be new elements of analysis and new proposals.

What do I feel are the priorities and why ? I think that everyone should go with *one* priority. Mine will be the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) more generally. Porto Alegre is full of such interesting people and so many interesting events that you want to be in twenty-five places at once ! If you don't decide before you get there what you want to do and who you want to do it with, you are going to be frustrated and come back feeling you didn't really get that much accomplished.

That's my advice. I don't want to dictate to people what their priorities should be, but I think we should all be concentrating on strategies in whatever area we feel is most important and that we know most about.

Ezequiel Adamovsky : I also think this Forum will deal mainly with strategies, and in this regard one of the most important issues now is how to strengthen the network of movements that has been built up in the last few years. That will be my priority at the WSF.

But I have some concerns. The first is that the Forum risks reproducing, in the way it functions, some features of the society we want to change. There is a danger, for example, that the Forum will become unduly focussed around big names or intellectuals who get most of the funding, whilst many grassroots activists can't afford to attend and

don't get the space they deserve. I certainly don't mean any offence to Susan personally — it is a general point about the way the Forum seems to work.

A few days ago, I was discussing this with friends at the Anti-Eviction Campaign in South Africa, who are really angry about it. Many can't afford to go to the WSF events. A major issue at the Forum will be how to build a global network for the movement. I think intellectuals should try to meet activists on an equal basis to listen to each other. There's a danger that the Forum will become ritualised into an annual meeting with famous intellectuals and big names on panels, but without enough real exchange between activists and movements from all over the world.

SG : I'm not looking to be a star and I think that many people in the movement that you call "intellectuals" aren't looking to be stars either. But I have been working on these issues for twenty-five years. When the WSF organisers invited me I said that the movement was really launched now and that the presence of this or that big name was really not important. I stressed exactly on what Ezequiel is saying, as the organisers have very little money this year, because they have lost some financial support from the local government — and they should use their limited funds to bring people of the kind that Ezequiel is describing.

As far as I know, almost all the Northern organisations are paying their own way. Maybe they could cut back on some delegations in order to pay for organisations like the one Ezequiel mentions in South Africa. But I don't think it's the case that there is a single pot of money out of which some big names are being brought and other activists aren't.

However, I certainly agree that unless we have contacts with people on the ground, grassroots activists and others who are attempting to write about and popularise this movement and to help to channel it into particular directions, we cannot have the same goals. Ideally the WSF could be a place where that happens, but you seem to be saying that you don't think it's going to happen. I would say that it's one of the rare places that these things can happen internationally.

oD : *Are radical voices and movements being alienated ?*

EA : Many radical movements are feeling increasingly uncomfortable with the WSF. There have been attempts to create alternative spaces within the Forum and outside it, and some proposals to organise a sort of counter-Forum. I see a danger here and at some point, the Forum will have to address the fact that different groups have different approaches to social change.

To put it simply, on the one hand, there's the approach of most non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that want to reinforce the role of civil society as a check on the power of corporations. These NGOs want to restore the balance that society has lost, and makes capitalism more humane. On the other hand, there is a more radical approach, shared by some social movements and radical collectives, which wants to strengthen the antagonistic movement against capitalism, to fight this society and build a new one.

We don't need to put a fence between these two approaches; quite the opposite. We can stay together and be productive when we meet. But I think the WSF should provide a space in which radical movements can feel comfortable, and play a larger role

at the Forum. For example, the mayor of Buenos Aires, Aníbal Ibarra — the guy we are actually fighting against in the city — usually goes to the Forum. It is really annoying that we have to share that space with him.

One of the radical groups — People’s Global Action — was in two minds about whether to organise events at the Forum. They have now decided to go, but only after a lot of discussion about whether to hold their events inside or outside the Forum. Likewise, guys from Indymedia are angry with the Forum, as all the space for media has been occupied by mainstream media, leaving no space for the alternative or the independent.

SG : First, on that single point of the Mayor, I’m very interested to hear Ezequiel saying that people are feeling more and more uncomfortable. Last year, before the French elections, we were also irritated that every French politician on the Left who was going to run for the President was rushing to Porto Alegre to show off. We felt exactly the same way in France as Ezequiel and his movement feels in Buenos Aires.

Secondly, I think it’s always healthy to have people on your left, especially as you get older — unless they advocate violence. We really have to keep this a peaceful pressure movement, and that pressure should come from many different quarters. Advocating violent action is utterly counter-productive.

But I simply don’t understand when I hear people talking about revolution. What do they mean ? Taking State power ? Well, Lula took State power and he’s hemmed in on every side by the international system. Would it be what the philosopher Paul Virilio in France called the “global accident”, where all the banks, all the markets, everything collapses at once ? You would have huge chaos and total human misery. I think it would end in fascism.

Nevertheless, I’m absolutely prepared to listen to what Ezequiel calls radical strategies and what they can do to help to build a different society. If it’s done in a non-violent way I think we would agree that this movement has to create spaces where that kind of new society can be built.

It’s not quite accurate also to say that all NGOs simply want to give capitalism a human face. People in the North and South are increasingly recognising — and I don’t know whether you qualify my own organisation ATTAC as an NGO — that it’s not enough to have a capitalism, which is just slightly nicer. We go a lot further than that.

EA : People have many different ideas of what a revolution means. The same is true with violence. What is violence to some is not violence for others. But what I want to stress is that I don’t think it’s enough for this movement to be what Susan calls a “pressure movement”. I would like this movement to help take control of our own lives, not just to pressure the representatives to change the world in ways that we want, or to pressure the State or the corporations to change anything. We need more than that. Maybe that’s one of the issues of strategy that we need to discuss in this Forum and in the future.

oD : *How do we avoid the Comintern syndrome ?*

EA : I have a third concern about the WSF. There’s a proposal to create a network of

networks and movements. This is a valuable idea, but it has dangers. My fear is that it could become centralised, with a homogeneous voice or a visible location. This would actually lead to the destruction of existing networks that are being built and getting stronger every day.

To have a 'secretariat' of a network actually is the opposite of having a network. This could lead to struggles for power, struggles which could end up destroying the existing networks. Instead, the Forum should offer economic and technical support for the network to actually happen rather than try to centralise or give the network a voice or a space, a location. For example, the network, People's Global Action, is being set up. It came from an idea of the social movements, and they don't have much resources at all. No offices, no computers, no telephones, etc. It may be a good idea to help the existing networks to function rather than bringing some new central structure into being. I noticed this idea in the WSF being carried out by some of the movements and by some of the big names.

SG : Can you be more specific ?

EA : I was told that some people working on this are intellectuals who usually attend the Forum, which is fine, absolutely fine. But I think this idea should be carried out by the movements themselves — and for that to happen, movements should have the chance to attend the meetings where this issue is being discussed as well as the WSF.

SG : I'm completely against the idea of some sort of Comintern, which would centralise and try to speak for the entire movement. It would be a disaster. When you speak about domesticating the existing network, I haven't seen a move towards that on the part of groups from the North, but I know that there has been a proposal mostly coming from the Brazilians — principally the CUT and the MST — for some sort of 'secretariat.' Many groups in the North would have more of a tendency to accept a proposal coming from those respected organisations in the South, than if it came from others. But when you talk about giving economic and technical resources to movements which are struggling to exist, I wonder where those are going to come from.

Some people think that there's a lot of money floating around with northern NGOs. There may be with some, but on the whole everything works on volunteer labour. If we want to get economic and technical support for our allies, then the best way to do that is to keep working on issues such as international taxation, reducing the burden of debt, and municipal budgeting systems on the lines of Porto Alegre. This is where the real money is. Anything else is going to be peanuts.

I know People's Global Action, having worked with them from the very beginning. I know they can do a lot with very little. Most movements operate in that way. So let's be more specific about how we can help existing networks, how they can be identified, how the serious ones can be separated from the less serious, and then see what we can do together to get those resources.

oD : *How do we organise for a different future ?*

SG : I understand your concerns about centralising, but do you object to the sort of

declaration that came out of Porto Alegre last year ? This was the result of many movements working together. Focus on the Global South and ATTAC played quite a large role. Do you see this as a sign of centralisation or as a desire to corrupt the thought and the practice of the movement ?

EA : No, I don't object to any attempt of the movement to come together and to think, produce statements or design a political strategy. But a secretariat or any other form of centralisation would destroy the possibilities of a network.

My priority is to help build networks with other movements. In the past, the contacts we made with groups such as the Anti-Eviction Campaign in South Africa were really productive for us. We exchanged ideas on issues from horizontal organising to direct action. So the priority should be to keep learning from other movements and sharing our experiences with other movements.

SG : I understand the means perfectly, but in view of doing what ?

EA : I can speak about what I would like to do in my struggle. I'm an anti-capitalist. I would like to create a completely new society, quite different from the actual one. For this, we need to link our struggles with the struggles of others all over the world. That's why my priority is to build relations with other groups — not only to learn and exchange experiences on a theoretical level — but also to organise a common strategy to change the world.

We are doing this in my own Asamblea every day. We are creating spaces where people can make their own decisions and live the way they want to. This is also happening in many different countries and places : movements organised in horizontal ways, as we are doing, or whatever other means they are using. We are all working towards the same goal, even if we don't have the same strategy and disagree on certain issues — the idea to create a world where you can decide by yourself.

SG : I share that goal. I see the world as it is now as one that is more and more dominated by a tiny minority of transnational forces, who have no intention of allowing people to make their own decisions and live the way they want to, if I may quote Ezequiel. There is an all-out battle against any form of democracy, epitomised at the moment in the WTO, and particularly in the fight against public services against the environment and other aspects — health, education, etc., as embodied in the GATT. My goal is to prevent the bastards from going any further than they've already gone.

It's all very well to say we're going to create spaces where people can make their own decisions. Those decisions are more and more hemmed in by the fact that there is no decent bus service, no decent schools for children, rising food prices due to imports, no social housing, and so on. That's why I focus on trying to challenge the bastards and get rid of them. And since I can't do everything I've picked one particular corner of that now. My big fight used to be about international debt. I have said everything I have to say on that, even though I'm still marginally part of that debate.

We must get rid of the killers who have got most of the money, most of the power, and are already in position, controlling most of the structures. For me that is the urgent

task, because without that, what Ezequiel is proposing is simply never going to work.

EA : I agree with what Susan just said. When I speak of creating spaces where we can live the way we want to live, I mean that we have to challenge and confront the power of corporations. But I think we need to do both things at the same time because it's part of the same issue and same struggle. You challenge and confront corporations while you are creating something different, a different space which is organised with different rules, different bases.

For example, in my neighbourhood of Buenos Aires, we created our own neighbourhood, which is organised on horizontal principles. But at the same time, we need to confront the power of corporations and the state. We decided to occupy an empty building, which belonged to a financial corporation, and we are now in a trial. They are trying to kick us out. Building a world *beyond* capitalism always means *confronting* capitalism. Even if you try to 'escape' from them, they simply come for you. They cannot afford to let us escape and build autonomous spaces, because they live on our work, our energy.

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Ezequiel Adamovsky is an Argentinean community activist and commentator, living in Buenos Aires. He has been published on Znet in the USA and openDemocracy in the UK. He is completing a PhD in Russian History in London

Susan George is Associate Director of the Transnational Institute (TNI) in Amsterdam, and Vice-President of ATTAC France. Her seminal work, How the Other Half Dies : The Real Reasons for World Hunger (Penguin 1976) was followed by dozens of prefaces, journal and magazine articles, conference and seminar contributions, chapters in edited volumes and many books. Her current work concerns 'globalisation' particularly the WTO, international financial institutions and North-South relations. She helped to lead the campaign in France to defeat the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) and is now engaged in the campaign to democratise the WTO.