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## UNDER A TREE IN PORTO ALEGRE : DEMOCRACY IN ITS MOST RADICAL SENSE

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THOMAS PONNIAH AND WILLIAM FISHER INTERVIEWED BY  
SOLANA LARSEN FOR OPENDEMOCRACY

**openDemocracy** : *What were your reasons for editing Another World Is Possible : Popular Alternatives to Globalisation at the World Social Forum ?*

**Thomas Ponniah** : I talked with the anti-apartheid activist and poet Dennis Brutus in the autumn of 2000, who told me that the WSF was an attempt to bring together progressives from all over the world to renew the process of envisioning a new world. It seemed to me that there was a need to document the process as it is only through documentation that activists and intellectuals can continue to build on the knowledge produced at each Forum. I put the idea to Bill (William Fisher) and he agreed to co-edit a book on the alternatives presented at the Forum.

**William Fisher** : We're particularly curious about what the world might look like if the slogan for the Forum, 'another world is possible', proves true. It is important to move beyond critiquing the world you're opposed to, and to begin articulating the *characteristics* of the world you're imagining as the future. It isn't as if we thought that just after two WSFs there would be a coherent vision of what this 'other world' is. Rather, we wanted to identify and analyse the divergences or convergences, and that's what became the organising theme for the book.

**TP** : We see six key divergences. First, *revolution* versus *reform*. For example, there are those who think that we should reform the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank, opposed by others who believe they are un-reformable and should be replaced by de-centralised pluralist global governance. Second, *environment* versus *economy*. Some ecologists call for a reduction of economic growth to preserve environmental sustainability while others call for sustainable economic growth as the best form of guaranteeing resource distribution. Third, *human rights* versus *protectionism*. Northern labour calls for human rights legislation as part of trade

agreements, while southern labour interprets this as selective use of ‘human rights’ as a disguised form of protectionism. Fourth, the question of whether *universal* values are *western* values. Michel L and Frei Betto argue that we should return to the values of the French revolution — liberty, equality and fraternity — but broaden them out so they include women, marginalised groups, people of colour and so forth. Celia Amoros and others say these values have been laden with patriarchal and colonial assumptions, so why should they be the beacons for building another world? The fifth, *divergence* — there are different scales of the proposed alternatives. Some call for a return to the local, some for a return to the state as the mechanism for social re-distribution, and others for a new system of global governance. Inevitably, these different visions of where decision-making power should be located create a tension. There is a sixth, *conflict*, which is not fully articulated in the book, although it is present in the foreword by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (authors of *Empire*). It is the conflict between political parties and social movements. Parties tend to appropriate the aspiration of social movements. But at the same time they have been crucial for implementing many of the best ideas that political activists have brought forward.

**WF :** We saw more divergences but these echoed most widely and seemed most significant to us. Convergences are harder to identify but are just as important. The one we focussed on — it leapt out at us — was a commitment to a participatory democratic process. The WSF is an open forum; there’s a commitment to its openness, and to the participatory nature of it, in other words, to *open democracy*. That’s the key *convergence*. There’s convergence about the nature or identity of the adversary — neoliberal globalisation. Admittedly, after 9/11, war and militarisation also became very important themes of WSF 2002 and remain important in the Forum of 2003 because of the pending war on Iraq.

**TP :** The call for a democratic revolution or re-invention of democracy is not only in terms of democratising representative democracy but also of reflecting on how to democratise economic production, culture, and our relationship to nature. These are key areas of convergence. In the sixties and seventies, the themes of class and anti-colonialism were important to social movements. In the eighties and nineties, the focus shifted to the theme of identity. Now I think that the key issue for movements is the question of *democracy*, but democracy in its most radical sense. Not just political but also economic, ecological, and cultural democracy.

**oD :** *Is the WSF rethinking democracy?*

**WF :** It’s a place where it *can* happen, where people are encouraging others to make that happen, and people are pressing each other for answers. It’s not a place yet where there are answers that are ratified by a forum. But it may come out in small ways through networks that use the Forum in order to interact.

**TP :** Porto Alegre is an amazing city. In a country with one of the highest differentials between the rich and poor, Porto Alegre exhibits a high level of social re-distribution. The core of this egalitarianism lies in its participatory budget that allows every citizen

to collaborate in allocating the city's resources. It seems logical that a movement seeking democratic alternatives would find Porto Alegre as its initial meeting place.

**oD** : *So does that mean the WSF is in trouble now that the next one is planned to be held in Hyderabad, India ?!*

**WF** : No, it's not. But, Thomas is right, that for the first three years it was really significant that it was held in Porto Alegre. There was a connection between Porto Alegre as a model of an alternative way of doing things that provided an inspiration for the whole Forum. It doesn't mean that the Forum can only be held in a place like this, but it will be different somewhere else. I can't think of a single place where you're likely to find a better match between the city and the spirit of the WSF at the moment. So I don't expect it will re-locate for good, but there's no reason it can't move about. In the current plans it is expected that the WSF would return periodically, perhaps every other year to Porto Alegre.

**TP** : The decision to make India the base of WSF 4 in 2003 was a consensual one, proposed at the last Forum. The Indian members of the WSF-International Council (IC) said they needed more time to consult Indian civil society. One of the representatives told me at the time that only 200 or so activists in India even *knew* about the Forum. At the IC meetings in Barcelona in spring 2002, it was agreed that India should first host an ASF and based on its success, the IC and the India Working Committee should decide whether India could host the WSF in 2004. The ASF was held in January 2003 in Hyderabad. It was a great event that filled people with optimism about the WSF being held in India. The process of the Forum moving around in the global South is playing out the democratic ideal, as movements are wary of becoming bureaucratised, centralised, and sedimented. It cannot be permanently located in one place or it would just become a new IMF or a Soviet Union. Porto Alegre is a great alternative, but so is Kerala in India, or Chiapas in Mexico where movements and governments are also experimenting with new forms of democracy. The global Left did not know of Porto Alegre four years ago. Now maybe, parts of India will also become known for their alternative forms of governance. So it's a good thing. I hope it moves to Africa in the future, so we can learn from innovations of African movements as well.

**WF** : Once the Forum moves, some might not be as successful as this one is — due to the place and possible lack of institutional support. But as Thomas says, if the Forum stayed here, it would become too institutionalised and would die.

**oD** : *So how do you determine the success of a summit like this ?*

**WF** : By its diversity — of views, participation, leaders, and ideas. Success means an increasing number of people who feel that they can participate, and benefit. They learn things or build new networks. I don't know how you would measure it, because no one has actually counted if there have been more networks created. But that's what I would see as success.

TP : There is also an extension of the process taking place — the regional and thematic Forums, and soon perhaps national and local Forums. If the global WSF ever collapsed, or fragmented, the process would continue, because there are now these Forums. So the WSF is a great success because it has produced Forums that go *beyond* it — that will outlive it.

WF : It's important to think of all these various Forums as the WSF. They are collectively the process that *is* the WSF. It is not just about this annual meeting.

**oD** : *But aren't there disagreements about what the WSF should be for ?*

WF : There is definitely a divergence. Besides the organisers, so many different participants have visions of what they would like to see the Forum become — and maybe also criticisms of what it is now, and of its limitations. The heart of the difference lies in this — Is the WSF a process, an open social movement, or a powerful institution ? Clearly, if it were the latter then it would be able to do and achieve things. Some people would like to see it become the institution that would then be able to make another world emerge. There isn't a single consensus that could come out of the Forum. Nor would we want to see it powerful enough to institute one idea as the consensus idea of the Forum. So we are among those people who see the WSF as an absolutely new but significant process.

**oD** : *Who would like to see it become a body that could make change ?*

TP : This has come out in the IC — and is a debate on whether the IC should make a statement about the war on Iraq. One group argues that the Forum should be a political agent, while another says no, the Forum should be a pedagogical space. These are two different visions. It is a good debate to have. Personally, I would hope that it remains a pedagogical space out of which new politics can emerge. That is to say, the WSF provides a space in which movements from all over the world can network together and make statements about the war, but not in the name of the Forum.

**oD** : *So is another world possible ?*

TP : I think it is clear that another world *is* possible — a world of many worlds. The question is what are the strategies for moving towards a different future ? That is the discussion that I think has been initiated at this Forum.

**oD** : *Has the election of Lula in Brazil intensified the feeling of alternatives being possible ?*

WF : It is obvious that people here (in Brazil) connect to Lula, and that his election is something they see as being very positive. But I would be very cautious about reading too much into that. We can see the election of a president from one party at one specific time and then the election of one from an opposing party the next time. Lula's election should give some inspiration, but the movement at the heart of the WSF should be seen as a long, ongoing, never-ending struggle. It is not as if somehow

the election of Lula has made another world possible and changed things. I don't think we would agree with that view. But clearly, it has fuelled the spirit of *this particular* WSF.

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**Thomas Ponniah** is a PhD candidate at the Graduate School of Geography at Clark University, USA. His dissertation focusses on World Social Forum alternatives to contemporary globalisation. Currently a teaching assistant at Harvard University, he worked as an intern and researcher with the World Social Forum Secretariat in Brazil, and with the Asian Social Forum Secretariat in India.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> As noted earlier in the book, the location for the World Social Forum in India was ultimately finalised as Mumbai.