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## A BETTER OR WORSE WORLD ? THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM, PORTO ALEGRE 2003

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Many new social movements in South Africa suggest a rich and mutually stimulating relationship between the 'local' and the 'global'. Several have achieved a high level of visibility in the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) process, and their multiple voices were heard in what Manuel Castells has termed, in another context, a "creative cacophony".<sup>1</sup> Do they also represent a new form of social activism ? Are they "militant particularisms", ephemeral eruptions of the urban poor, the rural landless and other marginalised groups, or components of the emerging Global Justice Movement (GJM) ?

Several of these recent grassroots initiatives are struggles around 'social citizenship'. A key aspect of social citizenship is the right to a 'healthy environment', which implies access to adequate housing, water, sanitation and electricity, which many South Africans lack. At a local level, the prescriptions of the Growth, Employment and Re-distribution Policy (GEAR) have witnessed a shift away from the 'statist' service delivery models of the past — where the State subsidised and delivered municipal services (albeit in a racially biased manner). They have moved towards a 'neoliberal' service delivery model where the private sector dominates and the emphasis is on profit rather than meeting basic human needs. These developments have seen the costs of basic services escalate and increasing disconnection of water and electricity.

The poor and marginalised are responding actively to these changes in material conditions and state policy. A number of mass-based initiatives have arisen to challenge the water and electricity cut-off, the lack of access to sanitation, proper housing and health facilities, AIDS treatment, reparations in terms of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process, popular justice, evictions from informal settlements and lack of land redistribution. These have involved a diverse repertoire of resistance strategies including organised marches and petitions to parliament and local authorities.

Jon Jeter has called the rise of these grassroots movements, "South Africa's new revolution". He writes, "What most provokes South Africa's defiance today is what they

see as injustices unleashed on this developing nation by the free market economic policies of the popularly elected, black-led governing party, the African National Congress (ANC)”.

But are these mass-based struggles around social citizenship largely informal and ephemeral, incapable of establishing a sustained, durable presence ? Are they embryonic social movements in the sense of “purposive collective actions whose outcome, in victory, as in defeat, transforms the values and institutions of society” ? Do they seek to empower the poor and the marginalised against local, national and global elites ? Could these “militant particularisms”, to use Raymond William’s phrase, feed into an emerging global civil society and generate broader, transformative politics ? What are the connections between these initiatives and the GJM ?

The Anti-Privatisation Forum is a particularly significant formation in the light of the argument that the ‘common thread’ in the so-called ‘anti-globalisation movement’ is, as Klein argues, opposition to “the privatisation of every aspect of life, and the transformation of every activity and value into a commodity”. Klein goes on to forcefully say that “the only clear way forward” is for community and anti-globalisation activists to unite. “What is now the anti-globalisation movement must turn into thousands of local movements, fighting the way neoliberal politics are playing out on the ground”.<sup>2</sup>

Another analyst who has emphasised the importance of linking global to local struggles, said a year ago, that one of “the weaknesses of current global struggles against globalisation” was that “important as they are, they bear little relation to progressive struggles and forces within nation states. These global struggles are still largely limited to demonstrations around major international events. One of the challenges is to transform this energy to concretely link up with national struggles around the globe”.<sup>3</sup>

This is beginning to happen and the WSF is a crucial site for making deep and meaningful *connections* and giving voice to local and global critiques of commodification.

Participants at WSF 3 included key actors from significant South African alliances such as the Economic Justice Network and the Gender and Trade Network. Both of these contributed to a declaration against New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) formulated at a meeting in July 2002, which was linked to the African Union launch and attended by about seventy people from twenty-eight organisations.

The Social Movement Indaba (Zulu gathering) during WSSD brought together a number of other dynamic forces. These included the Anti-Privatisation Forum, Jubilee SA, the Environmental Justice Networking Forum, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC), the Rural Development Services Network, Friends of the Earth, First People, the Municipal Services Project, the World Bank Bonds Boycott, Indymedia, and the Palestinian Solidarity Committee; and also the Landless People’s Movement (LPM), which has been described as “South Africa’s strongest grassroots social movement in the Gauteng Region”.<sup>4</sup> The International Landless People’s Assembly at Shareworld cemented links between land activists in Latin America, Europe and Asia.

Other issue-based organisations involved are the Treatment Action Campaign, Jubilee 2000, the Basic Income Grant Coalition and the SECC. These have mobilised around real grievances but in opposition to the government and the ANC “because of subjective weaknesses on our side or because we have left a vacuum.”<sup>5</sup>

It has been suggested however, that many in the ANC Alliance dislike what is sometimes termed 'the Seattle movement', one reason being the movement's insistence on de-centralisation and diversity, to the point of having no identifiable leadership. V Munnik and J Wilson argue that, "This goes against the grain of the strongly centralised political tradition of the SA liberation struggle".<sup>6</sup> There is a fear that an emphasis on the autonomy of civil society could undermine the project of a strong developmental state taking the National Democratic Revolution forward.

These militant mass actions were not confined to the Gauteng region in 2002. There have been significant anti-eviction campaigns in the Western Cape. In 2001 the UN World Conference Against Racism in Durban was met with the biggest protest marches since the early nineties. The Durban Social Forum (DSF), a coalition of community-based organisations, led a march of some 35,000 protestors to focus attention on privatisation, evictions, debt cancellation, community housing, electricity cut-off and landlessness. Desai has suggested that the DSF involved a "new form of politics", and that it signalled the emergence "of a new force in South African politics and society". This is a movement with an ideology "that springs from ideas of neighbourliness, dignity and life". Like several other analysts, Desai also shifts from the singular to the plural in describing "these community movements as something precious and powerful".<sup>7</sup>

Desai admits that "much remains undecided" but points to increasing state repression. A striking characteristic of the state response to these various forms of social activism has been the use of force in the form of teargas, rubber bullets, live ammunition, and stun grenades. The newly formed Soldiers Forum (a grouping of ex-combatants) protesting their exclusion by the SANDF is an affiliate of the Anti-Privatisation Forum. In August 2002, eighty-three former soldiers were allegedly tear-gassed while in police custody after they refused to be moved to a prison to await trial. Unconfirmed reports said that some had to be hospitalised.<sup>8</sup>

These groupings are sometimes criminalised and sometimes romanticised. For example, the Minister of Public Enterprises, Jeff Hadebe, recently compared the members of the SECC to "a gang of criminals".<sup>9</sup> Water Affairs Minister, Ronnie Kasrils, called a group of about seventy anti-privatisation protestors in September 2002 "thugs".<sup>10</sup> But on the other hand, in very different, somewhat nostalgic terms, an SECC activist said, "It is just like the old days. We are pamphleteering, we have meetings...What strikes me about all these protests is that we're so fresh out of political independence and it's amazing that people have shaken off the nationalist honeymoon so quickly".<sup>11</sup>

New linkages — both global and local — were forged and cemented between protestors in the WSSD process. Are these linkages and alliances sustainable? Did the WSSD process demonstrate only episodic collective action — fleeting struggles without clear leadership, ideology or structured, accountable and democratic organisation? Is L Gentle correct that "the rise of new social movements in South Africa...is an index that a new political alignment of forces is developing?"<sup>12</sup> Did the process sow "the seeds of a South African Social Forum", as Patrick Bond has suggested?<sup>13</sup>

The Social Movements United march on August 31, 2002 mobilised thousands of local and international activists, but was one of two marches, the other having been organised

by the Global People's Forum with the support of the ANC Alliance. As with the three marches in Durban in 2001, the two marches "revealed a deep split running through South African civil society".<sup>14</sup> The Social Movements United March seems to have been very much a last minute coalition composed mainly of the LPM and the Social Movement Indaba. Earlier, one of the leaders of the Social Movement Indaba, the Anti-Privatisation Forum said, "We are inspired by earlier anti-globalisation protests in Seattle and Genoa and we hope our protest turns into something like Seattle".<sup>15</sup> This emphasises the importance of analysing the relation between local initiatives and the anti-corporate globalisation movement. Munnik and Wilson compare the Social Movement Indaba and the Global People's Forum to the WSF and argue that the WSF provides a model for a new approach to power, saying, "The single most important change (that the WSF suggests) to the concept and practice of centralised power will come from the acceptance of diversity, which is an outstanding contribution of the global social movement. Its other contribution is solidarity".<sup>16</sup>

### **Implications for South Africa**

The emphasis on solidarity, diversity, and a new approach to power has important implications for us in contemporary South Africa. This is a defining moment in South Africa; contestations about the meaning and nature of transformation are growing. We need to mobilise all our resources to address the critical issues of poverty, unemployment and HIV / AIDS. In this process of developing our collective strength, there are a number of points that emerged from WSF 3 that we should discuss and debate. They include :

#### **1. The Importance of Inclusivity**

The emphasis on diversity and debate within the context of respect for difference at WSF 3 presented a strong contrast to the past year in South Africa where some very sectarian interventions deflected debate from substantive policy issues, with a reckless labelling of comrades and a factionalist tone and language.

We need to defend the right to dissent and engage in debate with the 'ultra-Left', and not dismiss it as a 'negative tendency' and indulge in 'reckless labelling'. As Blade Nzimande says, "What must be defeated is this McCarthy tendency of intolerance of divergent views. The real enemy of our revolution is poverty, unemployment, HIV/AIDS and that is the challenge..."<sup>17</sup> Tactical differences should not be allowed to blow up into fundamental divisions within civil society. As Dot Keet said at the WSSD, "The real enemy is the United States and its allies, the big corporations and the international financial institutions, not your comrades who made different tactical decisions".<sup>18</sup>

Related to this is the question of discipline and non-violence, which would exclude trashing of city streets, looting or destruction of property. The new social movements forming around the country focussing on basic needs could prevent what a number of commentators have conceptualised as a slide into authoritarianism, an intolerance of criticism and dissent. Analysts have written about the 'criminalisation of dissent' and the tendency to paint anti-corporate activists as 'latent terrorists' or in our case, 'hooligans' and 'criminals'.

#### **2. Re-thinking Our Macro Economic Policy**

WSF 3 focussed on deepening global poverty. Recent statistics indicated rising poverty levels

in South Africa between 1995 and 2000. Although household incomes have declined, the social wage has increased through the provision of basic services, but this is meaningless if people cannot afford to pay for them. In a 2001 national survey, ten million people reported that their water services were cut off, with devastating social impacts.<sup>19</sup> In rural KwaZulu-Natal, the State changed free communal taps to a prepaid card system with a R 50 registration fee. Consequently, thousands of people had to obtain water from polluted rivers. This led to a cholera epidemic with more than 100,000 infected and some 100 deaths.<sup>20</sup>

At the time of writing (February 2003) there have been 1,000 reported cases of cholera in the Eastern Cape. The water corporations, Maud Barlow warned of at WSF 3, are driving this process of water privatisation. At the WSSD, a prominent message was “Our World is Not for Sale”. Protecting the role of the State in the delivery of basic services, referred to as “the struggle for common public goods” involves re-thinking our macro-economic policy, which currently concentrates power and wealth in the hands of the few, so that poverty and inequality are deepening.

The connection between the two requires emphasis. Poverty alleviation cannot be separated from wealth alleviation and the over-consumption of the global elites. In South Africa at present, many seem caught up in a drive of greed and acquisitiveness. Avarice flourishes. We have a model of free market capitalism and executive greed in recent disclosures of fraud attributed to six major US corporations. The greed was systemic. Ben Turok has pointed out that in line with the US, our chief executives are helping themselves to huge salaries and perks. The danger is that we follow the US lead in the self-enrichment of chief executives, but we do so in the name of black economic empowerment. He writes, “The crisis in US capitalism creates an opportunity for South African critics of rampant capitalism to debate our own way forward”.<sup>21</sup>

### 3. Re-building Social Capital

Related to the above is the need to rebuild social capital. In strong contrast to the sense of solidarity and connectedness at WSF 3, there is erosion of social capital in contemporary South Africa. Social capital refers to relations of trust, reciprocity and a sense of obligation. While much is said about the flight of domestic capital as investors use offshore opportunities to shift their assets, the loss of social capital is equally serious. It involves the unravelling of relations of caring and responsibility. It is taking many different forms of which the practice of raping babies and young girls is only the most extreme expression. It is manifest in the case of the nurse whose patient dies while she chats to the driver in front of the ambulance; the builder who erects sub-standard housing; the policeman who takes bribes; the currency speculator whose concern for profit obliterates any concern for the well-being of fellow citizens; the teacher who abuses or neglects his pupils; and owners and drivers of minibus taxis who are indifferent to the safety of their passengers. In January 2000, Minister Zola Skweyiya referred to this lack of concern for others as a “crisis of social disintegration”.

Part of the process of social re-construction involves animating the concept of citizenship. The identity of ‘citizen’ is an alternative to the passive spectator of ‘reality’ television or the consumer. A citizen is an individual who understands him or herself to

be part of a wider community. What the GJM is claiming is that we are also 'planetary citizens' caught up in a web of global relations.

We need new models of active citizenship whether global or national. We also need to re-define gender identities. As Nombiniso Gasa writes, "We need to view apartheid as a cultural order...one of the core elements being violence as a means of dealing with difficulty and difference". In the light of rising rates of violence against women and children, she asks, "As for apartheid's dehumanisation, how do black people recover their dignity? How do black men recover their manhood? ...We need to develop models of masculinity that will make an active contribution towards a culture where the recovery of manhood is not at the expense of other human beings".<sup>22</sup> This ideology of violence as legitimate is deeply rooted in southern Africa in struggles against colonial and white minority regimes.

#### 4. Challenging War and Militarisation

The attention given to the prospect of a US attack on Iraq at the WSF 3 reinforced the need to confront how war and militarisation in Africa continue to destroy lives and infrastructure and cannibalise scarce resources. The past few years have seen armed conflict in the DRC, Burundi, Angola, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sierra Leone, the Ivory Coast and Liberia. Yet, at the final summit declaration of the WSSD, no reference was made to de-militarisation or the need to transfer resources from military to social spending. We need to mobilise all our resources to challenge the R 60 billion-rearmament programme in South Africa, which is like dismantling a house in order to build a fence around it.

#### 5. Challenging Social Exclusion

The process of social exclusion that Susan George warned us about at WSF 3 is deepening, and threatens to include much of Sub-Saharan Africa. Castells has analysed the disastrous social consequences for the millions of homeless, impoverished and often illiterate people who populate this 'Fourth World'. As Klein writes, "Mass privatisation and de-regulation have bred armies of locked-out people, whose services are no longer needed, whose lifestyles are written off as 'backward', whose basic needs go unmet. These fences of social exclusion can discard an entire industry, and they can also write off an entire country".<sup>23</sup>

They can also write off an entire continent, like Africa.

#### 6. Deepening our Collective Understanding of Corporate Globalisation and Strengthening our Connections to the Global Justice Movement

Many speakers at WSF 3 emphasised the need for study and analysis of this complex historical moment, and talked about how trust in conventional political structures is fraying. There is a widespread loss of trust in politicians and political processes and political parties locally as well as globally. AfroBarometer surveys report that "only one in ten South Africans believe their elected public representatives act in their best interests or listen to them most of the time." They also point to voter apathy — one in five South Africans will not cast their vote.<sup>24</sup>

In this context of complexity and popular disillusionment we have much to learn from the GJM. For example, South Africa's LPM sent delegates to WSF 3 and to hold talks with the MST. The LPM can learn from the achievements of the Brazilian activists in organising land occupation and food production.

### Conclusion

Porto Alegre is a beacon of a new kind of politics from which we have much to learn. The major achievement of the WSF as the centre of the GJM is the consolidation of networks opposing neoliberal globalisation. It is possible that these networks are, as Raymond Williams wrote twenty years ago of the new social movements, “our major positive resource”.<sup>25</sup> But the threat of war, deepening inequality and social exclusion, the persistence of armed conflict, human rights abuses, environmental degradation and ethnic nationalism demand that we do not take too optimistic a view of the GJM. We cannot look to the GJM as the sole route of political re-vitalisation, though this is tempting in view of the increasing apathy and cynicism about political leaders and participation in political parties in the established democracies and of the intellectual and political space left by the demise of socialism and the erosion of faith in ‘the market’.

Many believe that effective state institutions are necessary to provide security and the goods and services necessary to meet human needs. For them, the attention given to global civil society is a distraction from the key task of building strong and democratic state institutions with the capacity to do this. As Michael Edwards has said, “It is still only states that can address the threats of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, since there is no other legitimate authority to which we can turn”.<sup>26</sup>

Does the WSF involve a new global solidarity, a new collective identity ? Or is it an incoherent patchwork ? What is its transformative capacity ? Is it another expression of unaccountable power ?

It is clear that new communities are forming in non-traditional ways often based on informational technology and shared values. Are the new South African forms of grassroots activism connecting to an emerging GJM and generating new forms of resistance politics ? There are high expectations of these initiatives. Bond maintains that the “new activist networks” in South Africa provide “inspiring modes of anti-neoliberal resistance” which should best be realised on a regional basis.<sup>27</sup> Another analyst, also thinking in terms of the Southern African region, has warned that, “Unless a Polanyian ‘second movement’ orchestrated by a broad coalition of democratic forces in support of the poor and the powerless takes off, the region’s future is not as bright as was once thought in the aftermath of South Africa’s transition to majority rule...The only potential source for long term progressive change in the region is seen to lie in a latent Polanyian ‘second movement’ generated by popular civil society across the region”.<sup>28</sup>

It could be that this ‘second movement’ is forming; that the forms of social activism described in this essay are Castell’s “embryos of a new society” or Jeter’s “new revolution”. Only theoretically informed social research can provide the answers. Webster has pointed to “a new social force in post-apartheid South Africa : the politically enfranchised working poor”, and has argued that the new work order calls for, “...new models of unionism...New allies will have to be sought among the social movements emerging in the townships of South Africa, such as the Treatment Action Campaign and the LPM...it is time for new tactics, new forms of organisation”.<sup>29</sup>

The main impression many of us brought home from Porto Alegre is that the ‘new’ is already emerging on a global terrain. In the words of Arundhati Roy at the

closing session of WSF 3, “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing”.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Castells 1997, p 69.

<sup>2</sup> Klein 2001, pp 82 and 89.

<sup>3</sup> Waterman 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Global Fire, the official newspaper of the WSSD civil society process, 22.8.2002, p 1.

<sup>5</sup> ANC discussion document ‘The Balance of Forces’, cited in The Mail and Guardian 16.8.2002.

<sup>6</sup> Munnik and Wilson 2003, p 41.

<sup>7</sup> Desai 2002, pp 145, 137 (citing article in the Sunday Tribune), and 149.

<sup>8</sup> The Mail and Guardian 23.8.2002.

<sup>9</sup> The Sunday Times, 2.12.2001.

<sup>10</sup> The Star, 4.9.2002.

<sup>11</sup> The New Internationalist, September 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Gentle 2002, p 19.

<sup>13</sup> Bond 2002, p 360.

<sup>14</sup> Munnik and Wilson 2003, p 3.

<sup>15</sup> Cited in The Mail and Guardian, 23.8.2002.

<sup>16</sup> Munnik and Wilson 2003, p 77.

<sup>17</sup> Nzimande 2002, p 17.

<sup>18</sup> Cited by Munnik and Wilson 2003, p 64.

<sup>19</sup> Bond 2002, p 45.

<sup>20</sup> McDonald and Pape 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Turok 2002, p 12.

<sup>22</sup> Gasa 2002, p 8.

<sup>23</sup> Klein 2002, p xxi.

<sup>24</sup> The Mail and Guardian, 13.12.2002.

<sup>25</sup> Williams 1983, p 173.

<sup>26</sup> Edwards 1999, p 16.

<sup>27</sup> Bond 2002, p 366.

<sup>28</sup> Tsie 2001, pp 142 and 144.

<sup>29</sup> Webster 2002, p 34.