

Under the Sign of Bolívar: The World Social Forum of Caracas (2006)¹

By Jim COHEN

The World Social Forum is taking place this year in a “polycentric” manner and in three stages: first in Bamako, Mali (January 19-23), then in Caracas (January 24-29), and finally in Karachi (March 25-28). In Caracas, inevitably, the gathering came under the influence of the presidential regime of Hugo Chávez, which led to a more fervent and more strategically-oriented brand of political language than usual in the space of the Forum. This led some commentators and participants to worry about a political takeover of the Forum. It must be recognized, however, that in Latin America today, the “radical pole” taking shape around Chávez and the new Bolivian president Evo Morales is not a marginal phenomenon, and the demand for a decisive political break with the neoliberal model of society is becoming insistent. Yet by no means did the Forum in Caracas cease to be a very pluralistic space of interaction among social movements and currents of thought in all their diversity.

The Forum in Search of Democracy... and Solutions

Since the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, in 2001, the international organizers, in an earnest and ongoing effort to make these gatherings a lever of long-term change in the societies of the South *and* the North, have been asking certain key questions about the Forum’s structure and process. The terms of the debate are well known: should the Forum be above all a space of horizontal exchange, favoring the emergence of a “transnational civil society”, shielded from all strategies of partisan influence so as to preserve its autonomy? Or should the Forum place the accent on solutions, including political strategies, thereby running the risk of diminishing the autonomy or (for some) the “neutrality” of the arena of exchange, by increasing the risks of political instrumentalization, factionalism and division?

Another debate, closely tied to the first, has to do with the Forum’s mode of organization: should it favor above all the democratic encounter of subjects from all horizons, refusing hierarchical distinctions between grassroots activists and recognized leaders? Or should there be a carefully dosed mixture of “horizontal” encounters and those whose aim is to channel the debate, even at the risk of causing the Forum to lose some of its political innocence?

¹ An earlier version in French was written for *Mouvements* (Paris), no. 44 (March-April 2006).

While these debates have been the same in substance since the Forum's inception, the terms of the problem have also varied according to the places and the circumstances of each annual gathering.² In Porto Alegre in 2005, a Forum recognized by many as the most successful to date,³ the panels of prestigious militants and intellectuals were all but eliminated from the program, leaving more space for the usual stunning variety of seminars and workshops making up the average Forum day. However, the point in promoting democratic equality among participants was never meant to be to abandon the search for solutions to the social problems provoked by neoliberalism: the 2005 Forum, like all those before it, gave echo to a series of proposals and a calendar of mobilizations drawn up by representatives of social movements. Parallel to these initiatives are ongoing efforts to systematize reflection on the future alternatives formulated within the Forums, as attested by the collective volume *Another World is Possible* (eds. Thomas Ponniah and William Fisher, see note 2).

More controversial in its form was the approach taken by the 19 prestigious signers of a document referred to as the "Porto Alegre Manifesto", which claimed, just after the 2005 Forum, to formulate a general and largely consensual program of radical reforms to be undertaken as a way of breaking with the neoliberal model on a world scale. Although most of the proposals put forward in the text (12 in all, beginning with cancelling the debt of southern countries, taxing financial transactions and combating tax havens⁴) are indeed the sort of measures that have become common-sense demands for the global justice movement, some denounced this manifesto as being in violation of the spirit of the Charter of the Forum. Its signers were said to be "hijacking" the Forum by formulating proposals in its collective name. However, reading the document, widely available on internet, one discovers that this is not the case; the 19 signers, some of whom are key players in the organization of the Forum since the outset, stressed that they were speaking only in their own names. (It is true that the title of their document leaves some room for doubt.)

² For a history of the Forum from its origins to 2004, see José CORRÊIA LEITE with Carolina GIL, *The World Social Forum: Strategies of Resistance*, trad., Chicago, Haymarket, 2005. For a systematization of the proposals formulated in the Forum of 2002 (but which have maintained their relevance four years later) see William F. FISHER and Thomas PONNIAH (eds.), *Another World is Possible. Popular Alternatives to Globalization at the World Social Forum*, London and New York, Zed Books, 2003. An excellent resume of these debates, theorized in an original way with reference to J. Habermas and A. Gramsci, see Heather GAUTNEY, "The World Social Forum: From Protest to Politics", *Situations: Project for the Radical Imagination*, n° 1, New York, 2005, p. 75-86.

³ See, for example, the commentaries of the sorely missed editor of *Mouvements* (Paris), Gilbert WASSERMAN, "Le mouvement altermondialiste entre hésitations, deuxième souffle et maturation », *Mouvements* n° 38, March-April 2005, p. 84-89. Gilbert died prematurely, at age 56, the day he was due to travel to the WSF at Bamako.

⁴ The Porto Alegre Manifesto is available in English via ZNet : http://www.zmag.org/sustainers/content/2005-02/20group_of_nineteen.cfm. Its signers, all well-known political and intellectual figures, include such key figures in the building of the WSF as Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Bernard Cassen and Ignacio Ramonet, Roberto Savio, but also Frei Betto, François Houtart, Immanuel Wallerstein, Samir Amin, Walden Bello, Emir Sader, Eduardo Galeano, Aminata Traoré, José Sarmago, Tariq Ali, Samuel Ruiz García, Armand Mattelart, Riccardo Petrella, and Atilio Borón.

Although the 2005 Forum was widely recognized as a gathering in which “civil society” was able to reach new heights of free expression, the gathering was by no means closed to political figures. Given the venue – the showcase progressive municipality run by the Workers Party – and given the contribution of the Brazilian state to the material organization of the Forum, it was only normal that President Luiz Inacio “Lula” da Silva be given an opportunity to address the Forum’s public.

And since the Venezuelan experience has been – whatever else one may think about it – the most radical to date in challenging the neoliberal model, it was altogether plausible that some time be set aside for a speech by President Hugo Chávez. By all accounts, the Venezuelan president received a more enthusiastic reception than Lula himself, given Lula’s hesitation in lending vital political support to progressive social movements since his election in 2002.

The Caracas Forum and the Bolivarian Touch

When the forum’s International council decided, in a relatively consensual manner,⁵ that the 2006 Latin American version of the Forum should take place in Caracas, it was clear from the outset that the event would undergo a greater than usual degree of influence by the host political regime, which is certainly one of the most vociferous in recent Latin American history! Regarding the Forum itself, Hugo Chávez has never hidden his point of view that it should cease to be a mere exercise in “folklore” and “revolutionary tourism” and become a place for strategic thinking and organization in order to bring about the “socialism of the 21st century” that he more and more insistently calls for.

A certain “Chávez-ization” of the Forum was thus a foregone conclusion. Some were scandalized in advance. The well-known Canadian commentator on global justice politics, Naomi Klein, had written as early as 2003: “*How on earth did a gathering that was supposed to be a showcase for new grassroots movements become a celebration of men with a penchant for three-hour speeches about smashing the oligarchy?*”⁶ In Venezuela itself, several groups of anarchist, left-libertarian and other left-wing critics of Chávez organized their own parallel event, the Alternative Social Forum, which declared its independence from all political leaders.⁷

In the Caracas Forum, large meetings involving well-known figures (aka “co-managed” activities), were back in vogue and their panels were marked by the strong presence of Latin American enthusiasts and direct allies of the Chávez experience.

⁵ Conversation (1/28/06) with Teivo Teivainen of *Network Institute for Global Democratization*, which took part as a body in these deliberations.

⁶ Naomi Klein, “More Democracy – Not Political Strongmen”, *The Guardian*, 3 février 2003.

⁷ See the Alternative Forum’s website (in Spanish) at <http://www.fsa.contrapoder.org.ve/>.

Kicking off the evening session of January 25th, on the subject of *“Imperial Strategies, Militarization and Popular Resistance”*, Socorro Gomes, a Brazilian member of the World Council of Peace, proclaimed that the path to victory over imperialism was via the presidencies of Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales. Venezuelan writer Luis Britto García called for the formation of a new Bolivarian military alliance against U.S. imperialism. The Argentinian professor of political theory Atilio Borón, director of the Latin American Council of the Social Sciences (CLACSO), drew a portrait of the militarization of the world, pointing out how closely bound up it is with mercantilization, under the aegis of U.S. imperialism and its “junior partner”, Europe. Ricardo Alarcón, president of the Cuban National Assembly, a silvery orator who moved the crowd, stressed – as one might have imagined – the importance of ALBA⁸ – the the new “Bolivarian” economic alliance of which Venezuela and Cuba are, for the moment, the two main pillars – as the best guarantee for the consolidation of an anti-imperialist front. Why waste time, asked Alarcón, in looking for answers “in the air”, since ALBA, he claims, “is the answer”.

A similar meeting on the following evening, this time on the subject of *“Hegemony, Neoliberal Governability and Social Movements”* was the occasion for Samir Amin, the well-known Egyptian anti-imperialist theoretician, who had come straight from the Bamako Forum, to mention something known as the “Bamako Appeal”, which he presented in very combative terms as a renewal of the third-world spirit of Bandung (1956), though he did not make it clear which groups within the Forum were behind this text.⁹ A Uruguayan trade unionist named Juan Castillo denounced his own country’s left government – the first in the country’s history – in the name of a more radical approach, explicitly referring to Venezuela, Bolivia and to Cuba – the “beacon”, in his view; of all social movements on the continent of Bolívar.

Such rhetoric, of a familiar sort for those who know the history of the Latin American left, afforded little room for questioning about such delicate problems as the limits of the Cuban experience and its democratic deficit, which leaves no legal space for autonomous social movements to emerge. It must be recognized, however, that the anti-imperialist sensibility of a very broad spectrum of the Latin American left includes an attitude of unconditional support for Cuba in its ongoing battle with the U.S.

⁸ ALBA : Alliance bolivarienne pour l’Amérique latine et les Caraïbes. Le sigle ALBA, qui veut dire « aube » en espagnol, se présente comme la réponse à l’« ALCA », sigle espagnol de la zone de libre échange des Amériques (ZLEA) promue, sans grand succès, par l’administration Bush.

⁹ It happens that the Bamako text (<http://france.attac.org/a5972>) is backed not by the WSF as a whole but by the following organizations: *Forum pour un autre Mali*, *Forum du Tiers Monde*, *Forum mondial des Alternatives*, *ENDA*.

When Equatorian indigenous leader Blanca Chancoso spoke, quite movingly, of the absolute failure of neoliberalism in her country and the urgent need to find an effective political solution, her moment of rhetorical indulgence for the Cuban regime seemed a very secondary matter...

The politicization of the Caracas Forum under the sign of Bolívar clearly took place at the expense of the more timid left-wing experiments taking place in Brazil (where more decisive radical action was expected), Uruguay, Argentina and – stretching the imagination a little more – Chile, where the recent election of Michelle Bachelet is a sign of hope for women but also a sign of governmental continuity. Although Lula, Argentina's Néstor Kirchner and Uruguay's Tabaré Vázquez were pictured on Forum posters alongside Chávez and Evo Morales as taking part in a powerful continent-wide challenge to neoliberalism, nearly everyone in attendance made a clear distinction between the radical pole and the more gradualist reformers – who, it is also widely recognized, are close allies of Chávez when it comes to trade matters and resisting U.S.-inspired “free-trade” schemes.

Movement Pluralism Alive and Well

Was there any justification, after all, for the fear that the Forum might ceased to be an open space of interrogation, free exchange and unfettered contact among social movements in the full respect of pluralism? I saw no reason to believe so. Even if, in his two-hour speech on the evening of January 27, Hugo Chávez continued poking fun at “touristic” conception of the Forum, he also stressed that he values the pluralism of social movements. In this Forum it was respected. Even in the aforementioned “co-managed” panels, one could hear other, more nuanced voices inviting the public to deepen its understanding of neoliberalism, militarism and the perspectives of today's social movements – for example, the analyses of Venezuelan sociologist Margarita López Maya, who invited the public, on January 25, to think in an open-ended way, in the light of current political experiences, about the best sorts of democratic relationships between social movements and left governments. In a similar vein, the Quebecois feminist Françoise David, taking the example of her own country, engaged in some clear and fruitful thinking about how social movements can maintain their autonomy while still forging political alternatives strong and focused enough to satisfy their legitimate demands.

In five days in Caracas, roughly 1800 seminars and workshops met and discussed the broadest imaginable variety of topics, proposed by over 2000 civil society organizations. Estimates of the number of individuals taking part hovered around 70,000 (not quite as many as the 100,000 expected). The six

thematic axes of the Forum¹⁰ were all well represented, as well as a seventh – that of gender – defined as a “transversal” axis.

Many participants complained, it is true, of the excessive distances between Forum sites, unlike at Porto Alegre in 2005. Although the Caracas subway runs well and was free for all people sporting Forum badges, it was impossible to keep track of events in 10-12 widely dispersed sites of activity. The “nervous center” of the Forum was the Bellas Artes district, and in particular the Caracas Hilton (a fact that struck many as ironic) and the elegant Teresa Carreño theater. These sites and the nearby Parque Central boasted the best meeting rooms and the best-promoted Forum activities. In places as far-flung as the military airport of Carlota or the Parque del Este, on the other hand, events, however interesting, were condemned to relative isolation.

Alliance Sought with U.S. Movements

Special efforts were made by the local Venezuelan organizers of the Forum to bring to Caracas as many Colombian activists as possible: trade unionists, feminists, Afro-Colombians and indigenous peoples.¹¹ The reasons for such a choice are obvious: with its chronic state of multilateral civil war, its horrific levels of violent repression, and its direct surveillance by the U.S. military, Colombia has not followed the general Latin American leftward trend toward the left and its social movements are in need of a serious international exposure and active support.

The Forum organizers also made sure that large numbers of activists from the U.S. were on hand. Among the groups most visibly present were Grassroots Global Justice, which describes itself as “an alliance of US-based grassroots groups who are organizing to build an agenda for power for working and poor people”, and Global Exchange, the green, antiwar and global justice organization based in San Francisco.

Global Exchange proposed several seminars on a wide range of subjects and brought along over 200 individual travellers as part of its regular program of movement-oriented travel to countries of the “global south”. Medea Benjamin, a co-founder of Global Exchange and of Code Pink, the feminist antiwar movement, could be seen alongside Cindy Sheehan, the symbol of a U.S. antiwar movement that is growing in popularity.

Cindy Sheehan was indeed among the guests of honor of President Hugo Chávez on the evening of his televised speech to the Forum. She was even given a mention in this speech, under the name of *Mrs. Hope* – the perfect foil for *Mr.*

¹⁰ To sum up the six thematic axes of the Forum 2006: 1) power, politics and social emancipation; 2) imperial strategies and forms of popular resistance; 3) resources and the right to life; 4) diversity, identities and cosmovisions; 5) labor, exploitations and the reproduction of life; 6) communication, culture and education.

¹¹ These choices were mentioned in an intervention by Edgardo Lander, sociologist and member of the member of the Venezuelan organizing committee, in a public debate on the future of the Forum on January 28, 2006.

Danger (Chávez's pet nickname for George W. Bush).

While many in the U.S. corporate media and even among sectors of the Democratic opposition to the Bush administration, seek to portray Chávez as a determined “enemy” of the United States, it must be recognized that he – and many others on the Latin American left – are making a direct and open appeal to U.S. progressives to join their Latin American counterparts in forging alternatives to an oppressive world-system. What the vectors and dynamics of such north-south political cooperation might one day become cannot be predicted, but it occurred to many at this Forum that the potential for such cooperation is enormous.

The 25-member strong Boston Delegation to the Forum, an eastern Massachusetts coalition of diverse movement groups, came to Caracas in search of ways of making their solidarity with Latin Americans concrete. This was the object of their presentation to the Forum on January 27th. Their stay in Caracas, like those of other U.S. groups, involved several excursions outside the space of the Forum to places (neighborhoods and workplaces) where popular mobilization and new social programs are making progressive change tangible. Galvanized by these experiences, the Boston group and other U.S. delegations will be looking for in the coming months for ways of forging more solid bonds with Venezuelans and others in Latin America who are trying for the first time to take their conditions of life into their own hands.

Mobilizations announced for coming months

Although no one is authorized to speak in the name of the entire Forum, each Forum since 2001 has ended with a meeting of representatives of social movements and the formulation of – at the very least – a calendar of important mobilizations for the coming year. This year was no different. The Assembly of Social Movements of the Caracas Forum set out the list of high-priority mobilizations:

- ▶ an international mobilization against the war and the occupation of Iraq, on March 18th of this year, followed by a meeting on the same theme in Cairo, from March 24th to the 27th;
- ▶ mobilizations aiming to destabilize the Doha negotiations in the framework of the World Trade Organization;
- ▶ demonstrations against the G8 summit in Saint Petersburg, Russia, in July, 2006...
- ▶ ... and against the combined World Bank and International Monetary Fund summit in September of this year.

Otro Puerto Rico es posible / Another Puerto Rico is possible

The World Social Forum has made it part of its purpose to spawn other, regional social forums far and wide in order to draw ever more active subjects into the process of inventing alternatives to neoliberalism. One such initiative that came to light in Caracas is the Puerto Rican Social Forum – Foro Social de Puerto Rico 6 to be held next May 26-28 on the campus of the University of Puerto Rico at Río Piedras. The organizers have declared in an initial appeal that such a gathering is necessary in order to “seek solutions to the principal social problems of the country: inequality, violence, exclusion, the national economy, infrastructure, and the development of our youth”. To fight “political manipulation and sectarianism”, the appeal calls for broad participation of “movements and projects initiated within civil society” in search of a “free space of interaction, exchange and...collective dialogue between citizens and social movements. The thematic axes of the Forum are adapted from those of the WSF.

Yes, you heard correctly: the broadest participation is hoped for. If you're interested, write to info@forosocialpuertorico.org and visit the website www.forosocialpuertorico.org.

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