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**Is the World Social Forum of use for popular struggles ?
Are the social forum formulas adequate to that effect ?**

1. The undeniable success of the World Social Forums (and of the national and regional forums), from their first edition (Porto Alegre 2001) to their seventh (Nairobi 2007) shows that the formula met a real objective need, felt by many militants and movements engaged in their struggles against neo-liberalism and aggression (including military aggression) of imperialism. In these struggles, movements and militants have much renewed their forms of organization and active intervention in society.

Yes, the dominant political culture of the left had been marked in the XIXth and XXth centuries by practices based on the hierarchical vertical organization of parties, trade unions and associations. In the circumstances of the period the movements they stimulated – radical and reformist social transformations, revolutions, national liberations – transformed the world, in a direction generally favourable to the working classes.

Nevertheless the limits and contradictions specific to these forms of action appeared strongly as from the 1980-1990 period. The democratic deficiency of these forms, going as far as the self proclamation of “vanguards” armed with “scientific” knowledge and the “exclusive effective” strategy, are at the root of later disappointments : reforms and revolutions brought to power regimes of which the least that can be said is that they frequently badly kept their promises, often degenerated, sometimes in criminal directions. These failures made possible the return to the offensive of dominant capital and imperialism as from the 1980-1990 period.

2. The moment of euphoria of capital and imperialism – which went onto the offensive under the banner of neo-liberalism and globalization – was short lived (1990-1995). Very quickly the working classes entered the struggle to resist this offensive..

Yes, in general, this first wave of struggle placed itself on the ground of retaliation to the offensive in all its multi-dimensionality : resistance to economic neo-liberalism, to the dismantling of social benefits, to police repression, to the military aggressions of the US and its allies. The chain of these grounds of resistance is continuous and, according to the local circumstances, struggles are deployed on the main grounds of the immediate challenge to which people are confronted. In this sense the demand for market regulation here, the promotion of women’s rights, for the defence of the environment, for the defence of public services, for that of democracy as the armed resistance to the aggression of the United States and its allies in the Middle East (Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon) are in-dissociable from each other

In these resistance struggles the peoples have innovated. Many of the old political forces of the organized left remained aloof from these first struggles, timid in face of the aggression, sometimes won over to the liberal and imperialist options. The movement was initiated by the “new forces”, sometimes almost “spontaneously”. In their deployment, these forces promoted the fundamental principle of democratic practice : refusing the vertical hierarchy, promoting the horizontal forms of cooperation in action. This advance of democratic consciousness must be considered as a “civilizational” progress. To the extent that it is reflected in the social forums, these must therefore be considered as perfectly “useful” for the development of the struggles in progress.

3. The resistance struggles have recorded indisputable victories. They have initiated (but only initiated) the defeat of the offensive of capital and imperialism.

The United States project to control the planet militarily, which is necessary to guarantee the « success » of the globalization in place, the « preventive » wars conducted to ensure its effectiveness (invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, occupation of Palestine, aggression against Lebanon) have already visibly held in check the political project of imperialism.

The so-called neo-liberal economic and social project, designed to provide a strong and stable base for the accumulation of capital – ensuring the maximum rate of profit at any price – is, in the opinion of the very authorities who are its authors (World Bank, IMF, WTO, European Union) incapable of imposing its conditions. It is « falling apart » : the WTO's Doha round is in an impasse, the IMF in financial collapse, etc. The menace of a sudden economic and financial crisis is on the agenda.

4. Nevertheless there is no room for self congratulation about these successes. They will remain insufficient to change the social and political balance of power in favour of the working classes, and, therefore remain vulnerable as long as the movement has not gone over from defensive resistance to the offensive. Only this can open the way to the construction of the positive alternative – « another possible world », and a better one of course.

The challenge to which the struggling peoples are confronted is entirely situated in the answer they give to the question asked here : in the terms forcefully expressed by François Houtart ; moving up from the collective consciousness of the challenges to the construction of the active social agents of the transformation.

Obviously this challenge concerns, well beyond the Forums, the peoples themselves. To what extent does the collective consciousness find its expression in the Forums? It is certainly present in unequal degrees of maturity, as always in history, depending on the moments, the places and the movements concerned. But beyond this, do the Forums contribute to the necessary advance of consciousness, to the construction of agents of transformation? To which extent this collective consciousness is reflected within the social forums? We will attempt to reply to this question further on.

Progress is and will be difficult. Because it implies (i) the radicalization of the struggles and (ii) their convergence in diversity (to use the formula of the World Forum for Alternatives) in joint action plans, which imply a strategic political vision, the definition of immediate and more distant objectives (the “perspective” which defines the alternative). The radicalization of the struggles is not the radicalization of the rhetoric of their words, but their articulation to the alternative project which they propose to substitute for the systems of social power in place : constructing social hegemonies (class alliances and compromises) imposing themselves as alternatives to the social hegemonies in power (those of the alliances dominated by capital, imperialism and the local comprador classes in its service). Beyond a wave of “coordination” of struggles (or even simply exchanges of views) which does not enable their dispersion to be transcended (and thereby their weakness), convergence can only be the product of a “politicization” (in the good sense of the term) of the fragmented movements. “ Non political civil society”, an ideology imported straight from the United States, which continues to wreak its devastation, is fighting against this demand. .

Convergence in diversity and radicalization of struggles will find their expression in the unavoidable construction of « stages » (which some do not even wish to hear mentioned,

since it appears to them synonymous with compromise and opportunism) allowing (i) advances in democratization (conceived as an endless process and not as a “blue print”, supplied by the model of western representative political democracy) associated with (and not dissociated from) social progress, and (ii), the affirmation of the sovereignty of States, nations and peoples, imposing forms of globalization which are negotiated and not unilaterally imposed by capital and imperialism.

These definitions of the content of the alternative construction are certainly not accepted by all.

Some believe that democracy (multi-party system and elections), be it dissociated from the « social question » (subject to the working of the market), is « better than nothing ». However the peoples of Asia and Africa do not appear on the whole inclined to fight for this form of democracy dissociated from social progress (and even in fact associated at the present moment with social regression). They often prefer to rally para-religious/ethnic movements which have very little of democracy about them. It can be regretted, but it would be better to ask the question why. Democracy can be neither exported (by Europe) nor imposed (by the United States). It can only be the product of the conquest by the peoples of the South through their struggles for social progress, as was (and is) the case in Europe.

The very mention of nation, national independence and sovereignty makes some people's skin crawl. « Sovereignism » is almost qualified as a « vice of the past ». The nation is to be thrown into the rubbish bin, moreover globalization has already made it obsolete. This thesis which is popular among the European middle classes (for obvious reasons related to the problems of constructing the EU) finds no echo in the South (nor in the United States or Japan for that matter!).

Transformation in stages does not exclude the affirmation of the prospect in the long term. For some, like the author of these lines, this transformation is that of the « socialism of the XXIth century », others refuse socialism, for them henceforth definitively polluted by its practice in the last century. But, all the same, even if the principle of convergence is accepted, its implementation will be difficult. Because it is a case of reconciling (i) the advances in democratic practice acquired in and by the struggles (having to abandon the nostalgia for movements commanded by the “vanguards”) (ii) the requirements of unity in action, modest or ambitious depending on the local (national) situations.

The principle of necessary convergence is not accepted by « all ». Certain so called « autonomist » currents, more or less inspired by « post-modernist » formulations refuse it. The movements they inspire must be respected for what they are; they are part of the struggle front. Some go as far as maintaining that the movement, be it dispersed, is constructing the alternative by itself, going as far as claiming that the “individual subject” is already on the way to becoming the agent of the transformation (the theoretical vision of Negri). It is also of course possible not to adhere to this theoretical thesis. This is probably the case of many powerful mass movements engaged in great struggles. It can also be thought (hoped,) that organizations inherited from the past – political parties, trade unions, etc – are capable of transforming themselves in the direction of the required democratic practice. The thinkers of the autonomist currents affirm they are able to change the world without taking power. History will tell if this is possible or an illusion.

In any case, whether it is in « big organizations » or « little » ones the conflict opposes the « logic of struggle » (which insists on its needs) to the « logic of organization » (which insists on the interests put into play by the « leaderships » in place or waiting to seize the leadership, the participation in the dominant power in place, and thereby encourages “opportunism”).

Convergence cannot be constructed at the world or regional levels if it is not first put in place on the national levels because, whether it be wished or not, these define and manage the concrete challenges and it is at these levels that the swing in the social and political balance of power in favour of the working classes will or will not occur. The regional and world levels may reflect national advances, no doubt facilitate them (or at least not hinder them), but hardly more.

5. Advances in the directions opening the way to the construction of the alternative are taking place at the moment in Latin America, in contrast to their absence, or near absence, elsewhere, in Europe, Asia and Africa.

These advances, in Brazil, in Argentina, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and their visible possible coming success elsewhere – Mexico, Peru, Nicaragua – are precisely the product of the radicalization of movements having reached the level of effective critical mass and their political convergence. These are « revolutionary advances » in the sense that they initiated the swing in the balance of social and political forces in favour of the working classes. Their success is due to their real practical answer associating the democracy of the management of the movements’ and the political focussing of their projects, overcoming the dispersion which dominates elsewhere.

Who could deny that the State powers that these advances have produced « pose problems », that they risk getting bogged down under the pressure of external constraints and those of the local privileged classes?. For all that, should the possibility that these changes (in power !) will open for the mass movements be spurned. These powers will allow other advances, based on the association (and not on the dissociation) of the affirmation of national independence (vis-à-vis the United States), of democratization and social progress. .

Elsewhere the image of reality, despite the struggles, is less promising..

In Europe the priority given to the « construction of the European Union » encourages the slide towards social liberalism, the illusions kept alive by the rhetoric of the « third way » and of « capitalism with a human face ». Will the “movement” succeed on its own in overcoming these handicaps? Personally I strongly doubt it and think that decisive changes in the orientation of the political power is a precondition, in particular the break with Atlanticism (NATO is the enemy of the peoples of Europe). Others don’t think so. In Eastern Europe, on the way to becoming in its real relations with Germany and Western Europe the analogue to what was (and still is) Latin America in its relations with the USA, illusions are even greater.

In Asia and Africa we are seeing at the moment excesses which we qualify as « culturalist » and which feed the illusion of supposedly « civilizational » projects based on para religious or ethnic gatherings. Here the talk of « cultural diversity » often comes to the help of this retreat into impasses. This talk is, moreover perfectly tolerated (even encouraged) by the capitalist and imperialist power.

It is necessary to « know » more at this point – how progresses have asserted themselves in Latin America - , to « know » more about the reasons for the relative stagnation of the movements elsewhere, about their decline or defeat in certain cases. That should be the essential direction for numerous debates, in the Forums and elsewhere. The World Forums are

meeting places and poorly equipped to provide an adequate framework for deepening these debates. The national Forums (even regional) are, or can be more suitable.

6. The proposals drawn up in the « Bamako Appeal » (January 2006) answered, by their very intention, to the call to give more importance to deepening the debates of this nature. They are only « proposals » – and not imposed « decisions » (whoever had the audacity to do so would have no effective power to follow them up !). These were naturally refused on principle both by the extreme autonomist currents and by the mass of « apolitical » NGO's. But they are making their way elsewhere..

The World Social Forum Charter in no way forbids initiatives of the Bamako type, the Appeal of which was moreover endorsed by Movements' Assemblies . Nevertheless, this initiative irritated the WSF « Secretariat ». Why ? Perhaps because it does not basically share the proposals contained in this Appeal. Should it be concluded from this that the Secretariat aligned itself with « apolitical » NGO's (and perhaps the extreme autonomist currents) to close the Forum to other currents of action? Who would deny that the document in question – drawn up by 200 participants in one day and a night – points out inadequacies, even contradictions. Should its drafters furthermore be accused of « intellectual arrogance », of outmoded « vanguardist » attitudes, even of dangerous political motives ? It would be necessary to show that the extremist autonomist currents produce nothing which is not the spontaneous, eloquent and coherent product of the direct expression of the masses, that the « intellectuals » who formulate the theses of these currents do not exist. It would be necessary to show that the « apolitical » NGO's do not hold views which, in fact, have an obvious political sense, in making their own the rhetoric of the system institutions (reduction of poverty, good governance, exacerbated culturalism, etc).

7. The World Forums have a history and a prehistory. They did not appear suddenly without preparation. François Houtart, Bernard Cassen and others have recalled the essential stages of this history, from the anti Davos in Davos (1999) and other initiatives.

The object of this paper is not to propose an « assessment » of their deployment over the last seven years. Even if one thinks that their success is certain and their impact real (which is our case); nevertheless emphasis must be put not on self congratulation but on the weaknesses.

The authorities responsible for the actual management of the Forums are various (Secretariat, International Council, « leaderships » of the principal movements and NGO's represented). They are the focuses of power, by definition and as always (and it would be naïve to ignore it). Their often dominant concern is self assessment with respect to internal performance criteria, often of a very banal nature (quantity of participants, number, perhaps quality of the debates, direct material questions of organization). The real criterion of assessment is « external » to the Forums : do they contribute to facilitating the progress (rather than the stagnation, even the decline) of the struggles? It would be desirable that this dimension of the challenge find a greater echo in the assemblies and meetings organized by these authorities..

Taking the criticism a little further we venture to say that the World Forums suffer from a (growing ?) imbalance in the presence of their participants. The Forums, which are costly in the extreme in money and intellectual work, attract more the NGO's (sometimes of course devoted to the support of the struggles) endowed with staff and financial means – those of the North, but also, in brutal terms, those of their « clientele » of the South – than the major movements in conflict. Hundreds of thousands of peasants engaged in fierce struggles , whole peoples confronting the machine guns and bombs of the imperialist occupier, sometimes make their voice heard here and there in a « workshop ». But many other organizations – sometimes insignificant in the scope of their action – dispose of « ten

workshops » to make their propaganda. Let us speak frankly : some of these organizations are part of the system (and constitute « safety valves ») rather than being part of the alternative. The matter of the “opening of the Forums » (the principle of which must not be thrown into question) is a problem. Its management must be subject to greater attention.

These « failings » of the World Forums are also seen in the national Forums. But here the immediate proximity of the forces in conflict with the existing order favours, at least potentially, the overcoming of the failings mentioned here. The results – positive or less so – depend on the concrete conditions on the ground and on the nature of the handicaps (national political competition) as on the favourable factors (radicalization of the struggles.).

8. The reconstruction of a « front of countries and peoples of the South » is one of the basic conditions for the emergence of an « other world », not based on imperialist domination.

Without in any way underestimating the importance of the transformations of all types which have originated in the societies of the North in the past and present, up to now these have remained harnessed to the imperialist wagon. One should therefore not be surprised that the great global transformations have originated in the revolt of the peoples of the peripheries, from the Russian revolution (the « weak link » of the period) to the Chinese revolution and the Non-Aligned front (Bandung) which, for a moment, obliged imperialism to « adjust itself » to demands which conflicted with the course of its expansion. This page, that of Bandung and of the Tri-continental (1955-1980), of a multi-polar globalization, has been turned.

Since the conditions of globalization in place preclude a « remake » of Bandung, the current ruling classes of the countries of the South are trying to join this globalization, which they sometimes hope to be able to change in their favour, but which they are not fighting. They divide into two groups of « countries »: those which have a « national » project (the nature of which –essentially capitalist but nuanced by concessions or their absence in favour of the working classes, but nevertheless in open or muted conflict with the imperialist strategies – may be discussed case by case), such as China or the emerging countries of Asia or Latin America ; and those which have no project and agree to « adjust » unilaterally to the demands of the imperialist deployment (in this case they have compradore ruling classes).

Variable geometry alliances are in the process of being constituted between the States (the governments), the emergence of which was seen within the WTO. The possibilities which these rapprochements can open up for the working class movements must not be disdained, but examined with open eyes.

Is a front of the « Peoples of the South », going well beyond the rapprochement between ruling classes, possible ? The construction of this front remains difficult, handicapped as it is by the « culturalist » excesses pointed out above and the confrontations they entail between peoples of the South (on pseudo-religious or pseudo-ethnic grounds). It would be less problematic if and to the extent that the States « having a project » would – under the pressure of their populations – evolve in a more resolutely anti-imperialist direction. That implies that their projects get out of the rut of the illusion that resolutely and exclusively “national capitalist” powers are in a position to influence imperialist globalization in their favour and to enable their countries to become active agents of imperialist globalization, participating in the fashioning of the global system (and not unilaterally adjusting to it). These illusions are still great and strengthened by nationalist rhetoric as well as that which encourages the « emerging countries » (in the process of “catching up”) developed by the institutions in the service of imperialism. But to the extent that the facts refute these illusions, new popular and anti imperialist national blocks will be able to clear the way and facilitate the internationalism of

peoples. It must be hoped that the progressive forces of the North will understand it and support it.

9. In conclusion it will be said that « the future of the Forums » depends less on what happens « within them » than what develops elsewhere, in the peoples' struggles and in the evolution of the geo-strategy of States.

This conclusion does not lead to any pessimism about the Forums, but it leads to modesty in assessing their achievements.

In parallel then (and not in conflict) with the continuation of the Forums' militant actions, other forms of intervention are necessary, allowing the deepening of the debates in view of joint actions (beyond the « day » of world protest against the debt, or preventive wars, or the affirmation of women's rights, of access to water, etc).

Since its creation in 1997, the World Forum for Alternatives has been engaged on this path. It is a network of numerous "think tanks" directly articulated on social and political forces struggling against the system. It attempts to stimulate working groups (and not only exchanges of view) perhaps facilitating joint action fronts. For information : groups of trade unionists ("rebuilding the united labour front"), of peasants' movements (imposing access to the land for the benefit of all peasants"), of non-aligned political forces on the global policies of capital and imperialism (working on questions of international law or the reform of the United Nations system and the economic management systems of globalization, etc).

Many other national, regional and global « networks » are deploying praiseworthy efforts in comparable directions. We will not list them at length, but simply recall – as examples - what ATTAC represents in France, or the work of "Focus on Global South", ARENA and so many others.

It would be highly desirable, in the perspective of strengthening the effectiveness of the Forums, that a greater presence of these programmes be reflected in the Forums.