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"The World Social Forum: From Defense to Offense"  
Immanuel Wallerstein

The World Social Forum (WSF) met in Nairobi, Kenya from January 20-25. The organization, founded as a sort of anti-Davos, has matured and evolved more than even its participants realize. From the beginning, the WSF has been a meeting of a wide range of organizations and movements from around the world who defined themselves as opposed to neo-liberal globalization and imperialism in all its forms. Its slogan has been "another world is possible" and its structure has been that of an open space without officers, spokespeople, or resolutions. The WSF has been against neo-liberal globalization and the term alterglobalists has been coined to define the stance of its proponents - another kind of global structure.

In the first several WSF meetings, beginning in 2001, the emphasis was defensive. Participants, each time more numerous, denounced the defects of the Washington Consensus, the efforts of the World Trade Organization (WTO) to legislate neo-liberalism, the pressures of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on peripheral zones to privatize everything and open frontiers to the free flow of capital, and the aggressive posture of the United States in Iraq and elsewhere.

In this sixth world meeting, this defensive language was much reduced - simply because everyone took it for granted. And these days the United States seems less formidable, the WTO seems deadlocked and basically impotent, the IMF almost forgotten. The New York Times, reporting on this year's Davos meeting, talked of the recognition that there is a "shifting power equation" in the world, that "nobody is really in charge" any more, and that "the very foundations of the multilateral system" have been shaken, "leaving the world short on leadership at a time when it is increasingly vulnerable to catastrophic shocks."

In this chaotic situation, the WSF is presenting a real alternative, and gradually creating a web of networks whose political clout will emerge in the next five to ten years. Participants at the WSF have debated for a long time whether it should continue to be an open forum or should engage in structured, planned political action. Quietly, almost surreptitiously, it became clear at Nairobi that the issue was moot. The participants

would do both - leave the WSF as an open space that was inclusive of all those who wanted to transform the existing world-system and, at the same time, permit and encourage those who wanted to organize specific political actions to do so, and to organize to do so at WSF meetings.

The key idea is the creation of networks, which the WSF is singularly equipped to construct at a global level. There is now an effective network of feminists. For the first time, at Nairobi, there was instituted a network of labor struggles (defining the concept of "worker" quite broadly). There is now an ongoing network of activist intellectuals. The network of rural/peasant movements has been reinforced. There is a budding network of those defending alternative sexualities (which permitted Kenyan gay and lesbian movements to affirm a public presence that had been difficult before). There is an anti-war network (immediately concerned with Iraq and the Middle East in general). And there are functional networks on specific arenas of struggle - water rights, the struggle against HIV/AIDS, human rights.

The WSF is also spawning manifestos: the so-called Bamako Appeal, which expounds a whole campaign against capitalism; a feminist manifesto, now in its second draft and continuing to evolve; a labor manifesto which is just being born. There will no doubt be other such manifestos as the WSF continues. The fourth day of the meeting was devoted essentially to meetings of these networks, each of which was deciding what kinds of joint actions it could undertake - in its own name, but within the umbrella of the WSF.

Finally, there was the attention turned to what it means to say "another world." There were serious discussions and debates about what we mean by democracy, who is a worker, what is civil society, what is the role of political parties in the future construction of the world. These discussions define the objectives, and the networks are a large part of the means by which these objectives are to be realized. The discussions, the manifestos, and the networks constitute the offensive posture.

It is not that the WSF is without its internal problems. The tension between some of the larger NGO's (whose headquarters and strength is in the North, and which support the WSF but also show up at Davos) and the more militant social movements (particularly strong in the South but not only) remains real. They come together in the open space, but the more militant organizations control the networks. The WSF sometimes seems like a lumbering tortoise. But in Aesop's fable, the glittering speedy Davos hare lost the race.

by Immanuel Wallerstein

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These commentaries, published twice monthly, are intended to be reflections on the contemporary world scene, as seen from the perspective not of the immediate headlines but of the long term.]

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