

Sociologists Without Borders Meet at the World Social Forum

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A small team of U.S. and Brazilian members of Sociologists without Borders (SSF) traveled to Porto Alegre Brazil to attend the fifth World Social Forum (WSF). They joined more than 155,000 other participants in what is arguably one of the most significant global political events. Here we report back to our fellow sociologists on the work being done at the World Social Forums, including that of SSF and an emerging global network of scholars working for social justice.

Background on the World Social Forum

The World Social Forum first met in Porto Alegre Brazil in 2001 with the considerable support of Brazil's Worker's Party (*Partido Trabalhadores* or PT). The first WSF was an overwhelming success: organizers initially expected a few thousand participants, but more than 15,000 people were said to have attended. WSF-II in 2002 attracted more than 60,000, and the following year (also in Porto Alegre) drew at least 100,000. The WSF tested its wings in 2004 by moving the site to Mumbai, India, where a more economically and ethnically diverse collection of more than 100,000 people gathered. The Forum returned to the incubator of Porto Alegre again for its fifth meeting, drawing more than 155,000 registered participants from 135 countries.

The Forum's 2500 separate activities were organized into 11 rather broad thematic sessions that were clustered in distinct areas of the vast "WSF territory." The territory included hundreds of meeting spaces and a large "youth camp," which housed and facilitated self-organized meetings among 35,000 energetic young people. This year's WSF adopted two major innovations to enhance participation: it allowed for individual (rather than solely organizational) registrations and it adopted a new methodology, abandoning the formal plenary sessions of the past and encouraging more agenda-setting by participants. The WSF website helped organizations to coordinate their programs prior to the meeting, and resources that had in prior years been used to bring in plenary speakers were freed up for "Solidarity Funds" to help increase participation from poor and geographically distant areas.

The vast majority of participants (around 80%) come from the country where the Forum is held. But the international presence is very visible in both the faces of participants and especially in the content of WSF activities. It is the latter that may be most important for the WSF project of articulating and promoting visions of "another world." By coming together as a "world" social forum, participants' attention is directed to the global level as their programs explore the common sources of parallel problems and as they seek to identify effective means of promoting social change.

The WSF is designed to be an "open space" rather than an organization, a network or a movement. A government-issued welcoming guide distributed at the Porto Alegre airport described as a space for "democratic debate and exchange of ideas ... and the creation of propositions for the construction of a human being-centered society, with justice and equality for all." Organizers see it more as a process than an event, and indeed its significance lies in the activities it stimulates outside of the actual days of

global convergence into a World Social Forum. This rather ambiguous framing of its identity has made it difficult for organizers to overcome fundamental rifts over the question of whether or not the Forum can take up positions or promote any concrete proposals for collective action. Is the WSF truly “open,” for instance, when its Charter of Principles rejects both neoliberal forms of globalization and the use of violence to resist these? Can the WSF be considered open space if it restricts participation by political parties, governments, and private corporations? These are important questions with elusive answers, and it may well be that the WSF has managed them in a way that has served democratic interests, even if nobody seems satisfied.

The issues addressed in the meeting varied widely, but one could clearly identify some common themes. A principal one is the celebration and tolerance of diversity, which was the theme of the Forum’s opening march. A second and related theme is a demand for greater public participation in global decisions that have increasingly important impacts on people’s everyday lives while remaining outside the realm of established democratic politics. The neoliberal version of economic globalization places markets above politics as the source of governance. This leads to increasing social exclusion of people without access to resources while making governments and politics irrelevant to economic life.

Scholars for Global Justice

Scholars have played an important role in World Social Forums, and studies of participants in social forums have shown that a large majority has college degrees. This may not be too surprising, given the complexities of global interdependencies and the role of academics in popular education. But what I have noticed in recent years is that the recent wave of protests targeting global institutions has generated several independent initiatives aimed at focusing attention on the roles and organizational possibilities for scholar-activists. After helping organize a session on scholar-movement relations at last summer’s Boston Social Forum (held in advance of the Democratic National Convention) and participating in similar sessions at the European Social Forum last fall, I made connections to a group of academics from Canada, the U.S., Europe, and Latin America who were organizing in preparation for the WSF. Our aim was to bring forward some of the lessons learned from discussions at previous social forums at the global, regional, and local levels and to identify concrete steps we could take to unify our efforts in the struggle for global justice. We hoped to begin building a more coordinated network to facilitate transnational cooperation over the long-term.

We met over three separate days to explore different possibilities for alliances between universities and civil society, to compare experiences in diverse campaigns for social justice, and to address the question of “where do we go from here?” The sessions drew over a hundred participants, and we identified three key areas in which academics are involved in this global movement. First, they play a role in **supporting civil society**. Second, they are involved in the struggles over **access to knowledge and education**. Third, they are involved in struggles related to the **influences of neoliberal globalization on campus**. Workshop participants discussed a series of specific actions that could be taken in each realm of action, and each participant agreed to take at least one action over the coming year in support of this global struggle. In addition, the meeting generated proposals (and more importantly volunteers!) to help further efforts to strengthen this

emerging network. The table below summarizes some of the key suggestions for action, and we encourage our colleagues to join us in promoting these initiatives. We also invite you to participate in this global network, and information on this can be found at www.sociologistswithoutborders.org.

**“Breaking Down the Ivory Tower:
the University in the Creation of Another World.”**

This was the title attached to SSF-cosponsored sessions at WSF-V. Participants in these workshops were clearly conscious of their roles as actors in routine struggles over resources and political inclusion. However, many academics (such as those hoping to “save sociology” from the likes of public sociologists) want to claim a “neutral” role of detached scientists in these debates. But can academics in any discipline remove themselves from their social roles as part of civil society? Moreover, whether we think about it or not, when we publish and teach we contribute to the limitation or expansion of the availability of information and educational opportunities to less privileged groups. And finally, when we speak out against (or more often ignore) the increasing casualization of the academic workforce, cuts in public funding for education, and the growing corporate influences on our campuses, we affect the struggles over questions about how our societies should be governed.

As Brazilian scholar-activist Paolo Friere observed, “[w]ashing one’s hands of the struggle between the powerful and the powerless is to side with the powerful, not to be neutral.” If another world is indeed possible, academics will play an important role in helping people envision a more desirable world and in helping identify paths to its realization. As our conversations with our international colleagues helped clarify, it is in our own personal and professional interest to be part of this struggle.

**Universities in the Global Justice Movement:
Selected Proposals for Action from the 2005 World Social Forum**

<p>Supporting civil society</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sponsor public educational events--on and off campus; • Promote education for global citizenship; • Support recognized “global days of action” for peace, and global justice (March 19, April 16-20, September 10, and November 16) by supporting student participation in action or organizing teach-ins; • Foster enduring and mutually-respectful ties to community organizations; • Frame research questions and write analyses that speak to needs of under-represented groups; • Support local and regional social forum initiatives
<p>Expanding access to knowledge & education</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support and promote the “copy-left”/ open source movement against the enclosure of the global knowledge commons; • Support efforts to expand access to academic journals in poor communities and countries; • Support campaigns to encourage public funding of universities and to limit increases in student tuition and fees;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Participate in “global day of action” for freedom of information (November 16);
Resisting neoliberalism on campuses	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Support labor struggles on campus- for academics and non-academic workers;• Monitor university relations to private sector and establish code of ethics;• Promote fair labor policies on campus and by university subcontractors and licensees;• Promote ethical university investment standards;• Protect access to public spaces on campus by non-commercial interests