

A short analysis of the socio-political role of the WSF-ESF

This text was discussed and prepared over a six-month period through a series of discussions, WOMBLES meetings and open forums to decide our reaction to the European Social Forum [ESF] planned for London in October 2004.

Our consensus analysis decided that the ESF is incapable of achieving revolutionary change because it accepts the current hierarchical system and seeks minimalist-reformist change inside current governmental structures. We speak for our group and no-one else.

These texts formed our position for the workshops at the recent European meeting of Peoples' Global Action on Autonomous Spaces.

At first we must understand the World Social Forum (WSF) - and subsequently the European Social Forum (ESF) - as institutions which parallel the development of capitalist institutions of governance.

Over the last 30 years, capital expanded both horizontally (over the whole planet) and vertically (the commodification of everyday life i.e. leisure). New institutions were created to manage the dynamics of the world markets, such as the World Bank, the Group of 8 (G8), the World Trade Organisation (WTO) etc. The WSF was originally created as an "opposition" to such institutions, and more specifically as an "opposition" to the World Economic Forum which took place in Porto Alegre in 2001. The

ESF is the child of the WSF and focuses its criticism on the policies of the European Union (EU).

But what does the WSF-ESF really oppose? Having a look at its principles and objectives (and even worse at some of its members' goals) we mainly see reformist demands such as taxes on corporations, protective/anti-privatization policies from governments, power to "civil society" etc. These demands are basically "systemic"; they try to control the "bad" effects of neo-liberalism, as if policies are the problem and not capitalism itself and its institutions as a whole system ^[1].

To put it differently, the WSF does not advocate anti-systemic change. It merely asks for "capitalism with a human face", "a new social contract for global justice". So, we can see the WSF, and so the ESF, as a new "reformist International", as "extra-institutional social democracy" which has adjusted itself to the new internationalised politics of capital (and the simultaneous decline of parliamentary politics at the level of the nation state).

Practically, the ESF, as an extra-governmental agent which tries to influence EU policies, must present itself as "a legitimate negotiator". Thus, it acts within the limits of present institutions without challenging them at all. Its co-operation with institutions of the status quo, such as national governments and parties, and the condemnation of any anti-systemic movement that radically breaks the imposed limits of social control ^[2] are manifestations of its compliance.

The synthesis of the ESF is quite problematic. Its main characteristic is "plurality/diversity", as it results from a drive for inclusivity. This plurality/diversity helps the circulation of different experiences, ideas, struggles. Moreover, it manages to attract towards politics a lot of people who are starting out in their political activity. So, it seems to have positive aspects. Yet, it unavoidably displays a lack of a comprehensive, common social analysis and common action of participating ESF groups, which

in turn drives the ESF, as a body of power ^[3], towards minimalist objectives.

Let's take this point further, as differences in the analysis suggest different goals in the social struggle. Very briefly, as anarchists/anti-authoritarians, we conceptualise capitalism as a system which develops through two dynamic streams - the first one has to do with "capitalists' competition"; the competition between capitalist institutions (such as companies) which is grounded on the market economy and leads to "economic development", to the commodification of every aspect of our lives (vertical expansion) and to the marketization of every part of the planet (horizontal expansion). The second trend, and more important for us, is "social competition", the competition between capital and society, related to the historical development of the state (i.e. from the liberal state and its crises to the welfare state/social-democracy and now to the "security networks"/neo-liberal state; from the society of discipline to the society of control etc.) ^[4].

The lack of such analysis by the WSF-ESF as a whole leads it to the inclusion of organizations i.e. non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which are a-critical and indirectly facilitate capital's expansion, both in terms of commodification and marketization (NGOs speaks about "under-development" in North Korea and then Nike comes in) and social control (Amnesty International throws the "bombs of ethics" in Yugoslavia and then NATO intervenes). In other words, it leads it to the inclusion of groups and organizations whose actions are not anti-capitalist at all ^[5]

Another problem regarding the lack of a comprehensive analysis is given by the following example: in the WSF organised in Porto Alegre in February 2002, Lula da Silva (the present president of the Brazilian state) participated with his party. In collaboration with the nationalist Basques of Batasuna and other "enemies of neo-liberalism", they promoted an action against the FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas, which the US controls). But can we really consider Lula a real enemy of neo-liberalism? Of course not. Lula was against the FTAA because it challenges MERCOSUR, an economic union of Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay which is basically controlled by Brazil and

supported by the EU. In other words, Lula wanted to protect his (state's) capital. So the actions that the WSF undertook were basically a part of "capitalists' competition". But most of the WSF delegates did not seem to understand what they were really supporting.

Another frustrating aspect of many groups and organizations that participate in the ESF - as a result of their lack of a comprehensive analysis - is the fact that they seem to identify problems of capitalism only at an international level, and they neglect capitalist relationships and their consequences in our everyday life. The indirect effect of this stance is to put emphasis only on the central (to the "injustice of the EU's policies") and totally neglect the local (what specific governments, local councils or the bosses do).

This emphasis on the "central" is also demonstrated by the ESF's organizational structures. Even if the ESF publicizes itself as "decentralised participatory democracy", it is in reality hierarchical and thus becomes a field where other hierarchical organizations, such as political parties, try to control it in pursuit of their own interests. The neglect of the local London Social Forum (LSF) is a good manifestation of these organizational tendencies.

To sum up, the ESF analysis criticizes neo-liberalism as an ideology promoted by the powerful of the world, and not capitalism as a whole, as a socio-economic system and an everyday relationship. Moreover, the ESF does not provide any comprehensive critique of other domination mechanisms like the nation state, which is directly connected with capital. As a result of this analysis, it promotes reformist demands by using symbolic (and not direct, material) ^[6] pressure and it promotes a vague vision of a "democratic civil society".

Thus, the ESF is the perfect "opponent" for the present networks and institutions of power - an opponent which does not really challenge, an opponent with minimalist objectives which perfectly matches the image of "good, pluralist democracy". And to take it further; the fact that the WSF-ESF has tried until now to represent the anti-globalisation movement ^[7] and "civil society"

demonstrates its potentially dangerous role on the global scene - that of becoming the new "pool" where people will feel that they are active, political participants, but where their hope, disappointment or anger will be filtrated not to radical, emancipatory demands and visions, but to reformist ones.

Autonomous spaces during the ESF

As we believe that every person has the potential for radicalisation, both in thought and action, we want to organize events which promote, not only different (horizontal) ways of organization but rather, a radical, anti-authoritarian critique of the contemporary institutions of domination - and we consider the ESF as one of them.

The distinction of the LSF from the main ESF procedures is, for us, a clear example of the radicalization processes. Thus, we accepted, after a lot of meetings, hesitation and skepticism, to work with the LSF, Indymedia and other groups at a loose level of co-ordination so as to promote some autonomous spaces during the period of the ESF. Keeping our differences explicit, we consider that many of the groups in the ESF, but also many of the individuals who are coming for the event, will be interested in a more radical social analysis and direct action.

So, instead of letting the ESF become the new representative body of "sensitive, political active citizens", we want to demonstrate "another possible world" which is already here today. The world of...

Self-Organization - Solidarity - Autonomy - Direct Action

Notes

¹ See for example the WSF principle 4 as indicative of the WSF analysis: "The alternatives proposed at the World Social Forum stand in opposition to a process of globalisation commanded by the large multinational corporations and by the governments and international institutions at the service of those corporations' interests, with the complicity of national governments". So, is the problem bad corporations and bad governments? In our opinion, no. It is the "nature" of capital to expand and become

global, as corporations have to develop (or "die") continuously because of competition in a market economy. The states' or international institutions' policies/commands/laws (whether social-democratic or neo-liberal) just regulate the rhythm of development; but they cannot stop it (as the failure of social democracy showed), unless we totally abolish the market economy and the capitalist relationship which promotes capital accumulation and expansion.

² See for example the demonstrations in Genoa 2001 or Thessaloniki 2003 where the social forums promoted the distinction between "violent" and "non-violent" protestors so as to be compliant with the status quo and be seen as "the legitimate representative of the anti-globalization movement". Its needless to speak about the level of active solidarity that the social forums, as a whole, gave to political prisoners after these demos; only very few of its participant groups showed any real interest...

³ There is an argument that the ESF is not a body of power, only a forum. That is inaccurate as practically (if not officially) the ESF had the power to do things i.e. call for big anti-war demos.

⁴ Unfortunately, the 20th century was dominated by marxist politics which placed the control of the state as the basic aim of the anti-capitalist social struggle, without taking into account that the state, as a separate institution of governance from society, is a centralised source of domination over society itself. This is why "social competition" played such a crucial role in the state's form and role development.

⁵ Not to speak about the ESF members' stance towards nations states.

⁶ Let's remember here the huge anti-war demo in London on February 15th 2003. The Stop the War Coalition, dominated by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) (as it happens with the ESF in Britain right now), managed to bring 1.5 million people on the streets. If all of these people, as they were passing by, could have thrown just one small rock at Parliament's wall, the wall would have fallen down; it would have fallen down because 1.5 million small rocks would have hit it. But the SWP, like the social forums in other countries, preferred "symbolic pressure". Did they stop the war? No. What we want to say here, as a general conclusion from a very simple example, is that symbolic pressure is good, but not efficient by itself to bring real social change.

⁷ The anti-globalisation phenomenon is anyway too diverse to be truthfully named a "movement".