

The Last Porto Alegre

Discerning the State of the World Social Forum After Five Years

By Mark Engler | February 24, 2005

It's not Paris or Tokyo, Beijing or New York. Nor is it São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro. Enthusiastic residents of Porto Alegre, Brazil will tell you that their modest city of 1.5 million people in the country's deep South is "the last bastion of socialism and rock 'n' roll." Indeed, stalls covered with black Iron Maiden t-shirts stand in the public markets, and the municipality long served as a stronghold of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT), the Brazilian Workers Party. But today Porto Alegre is best known around the globe, especially among those inclined to hold a critical opinion of capitalism, corporate power, and U.S. military aggression, as the original home of the World Social Forum.

Five years ago, after the late-1999 Seattle protests but before the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers, thousands of activists first converged on Porto Alegre to discuss the challenges presented by the likes of Enron and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). With this year's fifth consecutive summit, the idea of holding a large, participatory people's assembly to contrast with the World Economic Forum—the exclusive annual gathering of economic elites in Davos, Switzerland—is no longer novel. The World Social Forum has attracted virtually every personality from powerful heads of state to the most unencumbered of wandering counter-culturalists. It is possible that the most naive of the 155,000 who attended this year (according to organizers' counts) were those journalists who came to gape at the much-debated gathering as if it had emerged spontaneously and without precedent from the *gaúcho* lowlands.

If this year's was not the first World Social Forum, however, there are indications that it will be Porto Alegre's last, at least for the foreseeable future. The famous local progressivism that initially brought the event to Porto Alegre was called into question when an anti-PT mayor, José Fogaça, won election last fall. Recognizing the forum's multitudes as a major economic boon for the city, Mr. Fogaça toned down his past criticism of the summit as an "ideological

Disneyland." Still, other cities are clamoring for their turn to host the event. (Though four out of five forums have been held in Porto Alegre, the 2004 event took place in Mumbai, India.) Moreover, these hosting opportunities are slated to grow scarcer. The unified global gathering is becoming biennial; next year, organizers will focus on holding forums at the regional level.

So the question for Porto Alegre and for the forum's fifth anniversary is, what has become of the event that was once synonymous with the city's name? And what is the World Social Forum, alternately regarded as a laboratory of progressive vision and a rapidly ossifying political Woodstock, building toward?

"I am a political militant," bellowed Brazilian President Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva, clad in a white jacket, as he addressed a stadium full of people during the first day of workshops. "I belong here." Downplaying the roaring PT loyalists, the press would overstate the impact of a small but energetic section of protesters who chastised Lula for continuing to pay Brazil's foreign debt and for failing to buck the economic policies prescribed by the IMF. It is nevertheless true that the actions of Brazil's president, a former metalworker and union leader whom many viewed as a leftist icon when he took office two years



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ago, were critically scrutinized by a variety of panels throughout the week. As in the past, Lula also visited Davos this year. He went, he said, on a mission to confront wealthy leaders with the same demand of eradicating poverty that he championed in Porto Alegre and to elaborate a “new geography” of politics in which Southern countries would not accept an inferior status.

It is also true that Lula did not receive as enthusiastic a reception at the World Social Forum as did Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, who addressed the same packed stadium on the last day of workshops. Wearing a Che Guevara t-shirt as bright red as the berets of his watchful security detail, Chávez was less prone than Lula to speak of “partnership” with the North and more likely to denounce “imperialism.” In a press conference before the rally, Chávez declared the World Social Forum one of “the most important political events taking place each year in the world today.” After invoking his “Bolivarian revolution,” he labeled the 2002 coup attempt against him “Made in the USA.” “Ms. ‘Condolencia’ Rice,” he quipped, “may say that Hugo Chávez is a negative force in Latin America. I say the government of the United States is the most negative force in the world today!”

Even as the two presidents book-ended the forum, dozens of other speakers led simultaneous panels in tents and warehouses spanning a three-mile stretch of Porto Alegre’s Guaíba River. In past years, the events were held at the city’s Catholic University, and large morning plenaries brought together participants to hear featured speakers. This year, all of the events took the form of “self-organized” workshop sessions. Although hailed as a victory for democratic planning, this diminished the sense of common purpose at the summit and enhanced the feeling that there were many forums, large and small, going on at once.

“Three years ago everyone was talking about Plan Colombia; two years ago it was Iraq,” a friend who has participated in several Porto Alegres said to me. For this year, she identified the right to clean, public water as the forum’s emergent issue. But, with a several-hundred-page program listing panels ranging from the challenges of global poverty, trade, war, and debt to Open Source software, the trafficking of

women and girls, and the impact of culture on social change, any attempt to identify a single focus would necessarily be arbitrary.

The presence of Lula and Chávez raised its own issue for discussion and its own suggestion for what the forum might build toward: namely, state power. Far from “Disneyland,” one of the most significant changes in Latin America in past years is the rise of left-leaning governments—not only in Brazil and Venezuela but also, to varying extents, in Argentina, Uruguay, Ecuador, and Chile. This shift presents a challenge for the globalization movement, which has always had an awkward relationship with the state. On the one hand, some who argue against the power of unaccountable financial institutions have uncritically upheld the principle of state sovereignty, contending that elected governments should be able to decide for themselves what economic policies to pursue. This stance proves problematic for activists in countries ruled by right-wing elites. On the other hand, the anarchist suspicion of any engagement with the state precludes some real alternatives to neoliberalism—accomplishments like Venezuela’s redistributionist social programs and Argentina’s decision to defy the IMF and freeze most of its debt payments.

Thus far the forum’s charter, which at least formally prohibits participation of political parties, has held firm. Those who cheered Chávez’s social democratic reforms cited active participation at the local level as the most positive part of the government’s transformation. And even those inclined to defend Lula said that pressure is needed to focus state energies on the needs of Brazil’s poor majority. During each presidential address, the dozens of other panels outside strategized about how to generate this pressure—and how to apply it to all governments, no matter how friendly.

“Maybe if I were younger,” a veteran activist commented to me, “I could deal with the heat.” The late-January summer in Porto Alegre was unrelenting. Brazilians wandering the sweltering expanse of tented workshops sported bare chests, Bermuda shorts, and skirts, treating the forum like a beach. For those less acclimated, a new morning might bring a fresh willingness to believe that the seeds of a new society were being planted in the manifold meetings of the day,

but an afternoon of solar radiation had a way of intensifying one's ambivalence about whether it was all worthwhile.

Although Lula provided a place to start, it was not clear where one should go next in trying to make sense of the hot, sprawling festival. Some of the names on the program most familiar to North Americans—Arundhati Roy, Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein, even Kofi Annan—did not materialize at promised places and times, their presence in Brazil never having been confirmed. Still, there were headliners. Among the Brazilian speakers, crowds gathered around dreadlocked pop star and Minister of Culture Gilberto Gil, writer Frei Betto, and theologian Leonardo Boff. If state power represented a possible first conception of the forum's end goal, some of these prominent speakers would ultimately provide a second suggestion for what the event is building toward: a common agenda for political action.

During an event subtitled "Utopia and Politics," Nobel Laureate José Saramago and famed Uruguayan author Eduardo Galeano (sitting on a typically all-male panel) held a contentious exchange about the relevance of Don Quixote for activists today. As listeners clogged the aisles of a large auditorium, Galeano celebrated the paradoxes of a world in which a novel cherished for centuries began its life in prison, "because Cervantes was in debt, as are we in Latin America." He defended the utopian impulse as a force for social change, citing Che's statement in his last letter to his parents: "Once again I feel under my heels the ribs of Rocinante," Quixote's horse.

Saramago would have none of it. "I consider the concept of utopia worse than useless," he argued. "What has transformed the world is not utopia, but need." He insisted: "The only time and place where our work can have impact—where we can see it and evaluate it—is tomorrow... Let's not wait for utopia."

The ethos of the World Social Forum would seem to favor Galeano's view. The event's charter indicates that it is not a deliberative body; it does not take official positions on behalf of the assembly. Yet Saramago's defense of short-term demands received a standing ovation. And at the end of the week, a group of nineteen high-profile participants, including both of the writers, released a statement dubbed

"The Porto Alegre Manifesto." Among its planks, the twelve-point platform called for cancellation of debts, a Tobin tax on international financial transfers, local control of the food supply, and the democratization of international financial institutions. "We're confident that the great majority of the people of the forum will agree with this proposal," Ignacio Ramonet, editor of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, told reporters.

Critics immediately charged that the celebrities' document contravened the "horizontal" character of the forum. Some signers, like Brazilian forum organizer Chico Whitaker, took pains to emphasize that the proposal was merely one of many to emerge. (The forum's closing press release cryptically indicated that "352 proposals so far" had been accepted.) Others like Ramonet, however, made clear that they considered such a unifying platform essential if the forum is to move forward as a political force.

Ramonet is right that his manifesto would probably prove agreeable to most forum participants; he is probably right, too, that the lack of a more well-defined program of action will speed the sense that repeated world summits are growing stale. At the same time, his Group of 19 exposed a real problem. Absent formal mechanisms for representation, all efforts to exert leadership at the forum must come from self-selected bodies. When not emanating from the headline speakers, efforts at agenda setting this year were most likely to originate with high-profile NGOs. Oxfam and Save the Children, for example, were among those who used the forum to announce a Global Call to Action Against Poverty, which Lula endorsed and which received ample media attention.

Some of the major criticisms of the World Social Forum during the past few years have targeted both the cloudy role of the event organizers and the power of well-financed NGOs. The criticisms have some merit, but they end up highlighting the fact that the event as a whole is self-selecting. About 85% of participants in the forum generally come from the host country. This year Brazilians again dominated, with neighboring Uruguay and Argentina also sending prominent delegations. For everyone else, the cost of jet fuel was a serious consideration. It is perhaps unusual that more trade unionists haven't taken to

the forum, but not that large numbers of NGO campaigners attend. Some progressive-minded newspaper editors, professors, and foundation officers could be expected to fly in. But the cost for participation by community organizers, particularly those from the wider global South, is often prohibitive, so it is remarkable that the presence of this small but visible contingent has held strong.

Participants who came closest to formulating shared agendas without urging from above were those who stayed together for successive workshops in specific issue areas. Anti-war activists agreed to hold coordinated international days of action on March 19-20. (Plans for the massive protests of February 15, 2003, were birthed at a previous regional forum.) And several observers cited environmentalists' progress in strategizing around climate change as an important joint effort. Whether these advances are sufficient to justify a trip into the Brazilian summer, or whether a manifesto is needed to save the forum, is subject to continuing debate.

When the World Social Forum was held at its campus, Porto Alegre's Catholic University significantly slowed the sale of revolutionary t-shirts at the event. With no such repressive influence stemming commercialism this year, food stands and souvenir vendors lined the river and snaked through the workshop spaces. The presence of the Youth Camp in the middle of the forum furthered the fair-like atmosphere. This expansive tent city-within-a-city housed 35,000 young people. There, passersby could see jugglers and drilling drum corps, late-night bonfires, and the graffiti-covered Casa de Hip Hop.

The carnival aspect of the event has been understandably maligned by those looking to dismiss the forum. But these open spaces also provided room for participants to wander, meet, and hang out. If presidents and stadium addresses galvanized the largest crowds, and publicity-savvy NGOs the next largest, the open spaces offered room for informal interactions. And it was these small moments, rather than the forum's penchant for grand pretense, that helped to assuage some of my skepticism about the gathering. "Walking between sessions with an Italian senator, talking over ideas for our environmental cam-

paigns—that's what I got out of the forum," one friend told me.

At a reception hosted by Grassroots Global Justice, a delegation of representatives from community-based initiatives around the United States, participants told me their interactions with other activists had been "inspiring," even "transformative." When Linda Sippio, a leader at the Miami Workers Center, visited a once-idle farm near Porto Alegre that had been taken over by the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement (MST), she saw links to her own people's struggle to hold ground in their rapidly gentrifying Florida neighborhoods. "We're meeting Brazilian groups that are organizing like we are, and we're showing our support," she said. "That helps us both build power."

Strolling through the forum's open space could produce rewarding surprises. A colleague, Zeynep Toufe of the Institute for Public Accuracy, told of how, "tired, hot, severely underslept," she stumbled into an afternoon panel on land rights and the "untouchable castes" of India. She was unexpectedly blown away by the testimony of homelessness and dispossession that was offered there. "It was so uncynical that I didn't know what to feel," she admitted. And when they burst into songs or chants, she declared: "It was one of the most sincere, the least contrived instances I have ever encountered of people shouting slogans... I tried to explain what a privilege it felt like to be in their presence."

Stanford professor and free software guru Laurence Lessig wrote of walking through the Youth Camp with Minister of Culture Gilberto Gil. Gil was alternately protested by angry young people demanding free radio (Gil relished the debate) and asked to perform songs from his pop opus (The whole crowd sang along). "Here's a Minister of the government, face to face with supporters and opponents," Lessig wrote. "There is no 'free speech zone.' No guns, no men in black uniform, no panic, and plenty of press. Just imagine."

Elsewhere I watched a group of high school students pull up chairs amid the overflow crowd outside a packed warehouse where several theorists were speaking. We could not see the panelists, but a sound system carried their voices out over the stifling heat.

It occurred to me that this was a remarkable scene. To look at those teenagers in the blazing sun, listening attentively to an impossibly abstract lecture by *Empire* co-author Michael Hardt, is to gain a new faith in the patience and dedication of the next generation.

Few progressives would argue that the World Social Forum is without its faults. Yet few, even among the critics, would hold that movements would be better off if it ceased to exist. Evaluating the event involves blending criticisms and potentials, often ending in an unsatisfying shade of gray.

What, then, can be said definitively about the state of the forum?

The original concept of the event remains sound. There is value in a gathering that allows social movements that spring out of hope and need to converge, a place that invites people to devise transnational strategies for confronting globalized problems. In contrast to the top-down wealth and power of Davos, there is need for a place that draws legitimacy from its participatory character.

As a positive, proactive space rather than a reactive mass protest outside a World Trade Organization or IMF meeting, the World Social Forum still provides a unique opportunity for setting an alternative agenda for globalization. Its influence on Davos, where elites are now photographed pondering problems of poverty and AIDS, has been undeniable.

The forum is still growing; each year has been larger than the previous, so it has not stagnated in this respect. The gathering could enhance its relevance by actively recruiting social movement leaders—making efforts to balance constituents who already attend as self-selected representatives—and by setting aside more time for dialogue not based on the standard model of a university lecture panel.

The forum needs to retain its capacity for surprises. It is wise for it to move to a biennial schedule; the annual event was growing too routine, too familiar. And it was a mistake to return to Porto Alegre. The forum gained much during its year in Mumbai, and its forward momentum requires that it continue incorporating greater representation from new parts

of the world. The 2007 gathering, which will be held in Africa, holds much promise in this regard.

Yet, the need to move on is not an altogether happy truth. On the last evening of the forum, I walked along the Guaiba feeling vaguely disappointed by the lectures I had heard that day. But then I felt a breeze off the river and looked around at the crowds meandering in the dusk. A group in union shirts sat on a curb, chatting with vendors selling grilled meat; a *capoeira* troop sparred on the street; anti-Bush satirists leafleted to promote their website; a circle of people outside an indigenous rights tent performed a dance. At that moment, I felt sad to see it all go. Porto Alegre, too, will be sad for its loss.

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the International Relations Center (IRC, formerly Interhemispheric Resource Center, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©2005. All rights reserved.

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Recommended citation:

Mark Engler, “The Last Porto Alegre-Discerning the State of the World Social Forum After Five Years,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, February 24, 2005).

Web location:

<http://www.fpiif.org/papers/0502alegre.html>

Production Information:

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