

Researching the World Social Forum – My First Steps into the Field

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1. The World Social Forum - From the Outside in

The 10th anniversary of the ‘World Social Forum’, an extraordinary meeting which took place in Dakar (Senegal) this year, gathered 75,000 people from all over the world. In 2001, the first Forum, which gathered 20,000 people from 117 different countries, was the starting point of a discussion on social and ecological problems brought about by a globalization process that is deemed to be dominated by a neoliberal ideology. This inauguration took place in the south of Brazil, in Porto Alegre, the capital of the federal state Rio Grande do Sul. The idea to give the growing transnational activism a space to share common concerns and to develop alternative strategies originated there. The Forum’s slogan *another world is possible* spread all over the world and became particularly popular.

With this slogan and according to the Charta, the World Social Forum wants to clarify that it is more than just a global protest against elites. The idea is to create a platform for the transnational civil society to discuss and set forth alternatives to the criticized model of neoliberal development. Nevertheless, or precisely for this reason, the Forum is always held at the end of February, when the World Economic Forum takes place in Davos (Switzerland), about 6,500 miles from Porto Alegre. This evokes a contrasting picture of elites: Here the most powerful and rich people of the “global north“, who have segregated their congress from the urgent problems of the global poor; there the self-proclaimed representatives of the “global south“, who claim their rights at the World Social Forum. One might exaggerate by saying that this juxtaposition evokes associations of a potential transnational revolution of the oppressed against their oppressors. But a closer look at the venue, the participants in the World Social Forum and the nation-state background of activism relativizes this first impression.

Brazil for example, the host of the first World Social Forum, is one of the “Big Four” BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) representing the shift in global economic power away from the global north and towards the developing world. This is underlined by a high indicator in the human development report (UNDP 2010: 144). Moreover, Porto Alegre is one of the cities with the highest indicator in the national human development report (UNDP 2000). This gives rise to the questions of who is speaking at the World Social Forum and who is speaking for whom. For example, the results of a survey carried out at the World Social Forum in 2005 and 2007 show that most participants were able to pay for their trip to the World Social Forum themselves, had a comparatively high level of education, had travelled to other countries before, and so on. Moreover, the survey shows that many activists were studying social sciences (IROWS; Chase-Dunn et al. 2008).

These results lead to another interesting observation that can be made by immersing oneself into this field: Many researchers studying social movements seem to have a close relationship with their object of research. In Germany for example, many academics are not

only researching social movements, but also sitting on advisory boards, such as that of Attac, attending and organizing conferences at which activists are given important roles in discussions and presentations or even actively protesting against the neoliberal development model. It seems that both social scientists and activists stand to gain from this companionship: While practitioners get rid of the cliché of blunt activism, scholars shake off the reproach of staying in their ivory tower. However, blurring the boundary between theory and practice gives rise to some difficult methodological problems, the most central of them being that the researcher gets personally involved in the field and all the emotional, social and political processes.

Against the background of all that has been said and done so far, the author of this article, a young graduate student in social sciences from Germany, recently started his research project on the World Social Forum. My involvement in activism is therefore reflected to a great extent in the following descriptions and analyses of my proposed methodology, in my access to the field, and in my first impressions of a meeting of the International Council in Paris.

2. Methodology and Field Construction

This research project adopts an ethnographic stance to shed light on the phenomenon of the World Social Forum. Participant observations, document analyses and interviews will be the major research instruments in the process of delving into the sphere of the World Social Forum. But here I am already confronted with a first crucial question: Where can I observe the World Social Forum?

As previously discussed, the idea of World Social Forum had its origin in Porto Alegre, but shortly after that, this idea spread across the world. Besides the summits of the World Social Forum, nowadays, there exist forums on the supranational, e.g. the African Social Forum, the national, e.g. the German Social Forum, and even on the local level e.g. the Berlin Social Forum. One can say that the idea trickled down from the highest to the lowest level, and this happened all over the world. Regarding this point, the question as to how to define a starting point seems comparatively difficult to answer. This is aggravated by the fact that many local social forums in Germany emerge and disappear in different periods of time, as initial analyses of online web pages show.¹

This diffuse structure is also due to different interpretations of the principal Charter of the World Social Forum. Not all forums are really trying to follow the original idea by creating an “open space” for exchanges between different actors and representatives of organizations discussing the creation of alternatives to the neoliberal model. One example is the Social Forum in Passau (Germany), which decided to found a formal association. This actually violates the principles by electing a representative of the forum and by using explicitly formal structures, e.g. rules concerning membership.

Since there is a great variety of ways in which activists of the World Social Forum develop the idea on the global, supranational, national and local levels, I will start with one pragmatic element that is common to all of them: someone needs to arrange a place where

1 Some additional informal conversations I had with activists revealed that not all local forums use the internet as a platform for representation, which makes it difficult to get an overview of the existing forums.

the meeting can take place. It is rarely possible for only one person to carry out this task, so it is mostly done by a group of friends at the local level. This group fulfills its function by creating regularity and ensuring continuity at least at the beginning, but most likely also throughout the process. This happens independently from the fact that they might be trying to open a space for civil society where people can get together, get involved in discussions and share an issue or develop an action plan. There always needs to be people in the background taking the responsibility of ensuring that the process is maintained.

This group called organizational committee is often characterized by stable relationships or even friendship between its members. The members distribute the tasks amongst themselves to provide at least a place where the discussion can take place. Moreover, the ones who after some time become “old hands” can act as a group’s memory and, by constructing stories about the group’s activities, can even strengthen the ties within the group. These people and practices strike me as an interesting local facet of these transnational social movements. Setting up and maintaining an organizational committee might be a more or less easy thing to do at the local level, due to geographic proximity, but some questions remain: How are transnational relationships maintained over long periods of time, who organizes big events such as the World Social Forum, and how are these actors connected to the forums at the different levels?

3. Entering the Field

At a conference of the International Council of the World Social Forum, which took place in Paris in May of this year, the author had the opportunity to carry out a first participant observation. The group, called International Council, can be regarded as the organizational committee of the World Social Forum. Attendees of the conference were delegates from 161 organizations or movement networks, ten observers, who were mostly representatives of organizational committees on the supranational level, and a few researchers in the field, such as myself. This role assignment between observers and delegates shows that rules on how to become a member and what it means to be a member have already been created. This creation of structures is brought about by very practical factors, such as the establishment of a “solidarity fund”, which aims to enable the participation of people who are not able to cover their travel and accommodation expenses. The very fact that all participants come from different countries brings forth/leads to the need for a team of interpreters, which has to be arranged for, including all the technical equipment involved. Last but not least, one has to find a place to meet and, of course, a conference room. Hotels must be booked nearby and places to go for lunch should be found. Even though it is often taken for granted, this job makes the meeting possible in the first place. Therefore, the members have created a fund to pay for a small office located in São Paulo, Brazil. Three people work in this office: two of them are responsible for international relations and one for communications. This office not only coordinates all the practical elements needed to organize the meeting, but it also facilitates conversations between participants. This seems to be done in two ways: First of all, especially before and after a meeting, there is an urgent need for communication, e.g. inviting people, processing requests, disseminating information about the agenda, gathering documentation, preparing reports on the meeting, and so on. This emphasizes the need for a key contact. Secondly, the people working at the office are

responsible for ensuring that the framework conditions for a productive meeting are in place. This refers to the practical elements mentioned above, but also to the fact that they know everyone and therefore are able to bring people together and create a more personal and warm atmosphere.

This warm and personal ambiance was my first impression upon arriving at the conference venue, the “Scouts et Guides de France” building: Most attendees seemed to know each other very well; they greeted each other in a personal and cordial way. Those like me, who did not know anyone, were introduced to others by the coordinator from the office, so that on the first day, I already got to know quite a few other researchers or scholars from different countries participating in or observing the process. After about an hour, the room was completely filled with approximately 90 people. The interpretation team divided the group so as to offer interpretation into three main languages – English, Spanish and French. The moderators started with an introduction of the participants and presented the agenda for the next three days.

On the morning of the first day, there was a discussion about the struggles in the Arab world, during which some people from the region described the current situation, this ended with a revolutionary song started by someone from Egypt. In the afternoon, the six commissions of the International Council held their meetings. Some of the people seemed to choose the group they wanted to join spontaneously, others had clear preferences, and some had responsibilities within a certain commission, such as summarizing the arguments or documenting the consensus reached for later presentation at the plenum. These commissions are set up to work on special issues pertaining to the World Social Forum. There was the *methodology commission*, which talked about what the World Social Forum should be and how it should develop, the *communication commission*, which discussed all matters pertaining to it, including Skype conferences and representations, the *expansion commission*, which tried to find ways to include new members and decide where the next meeting would take place, the *strategy commission*, and, last but not least, the *resource commission*, in which mainly finances were reviewed.

Before these commissions reported on their discussions at the plenum, there was some evaluation of the World Social Forum in Dakar in the morning of the second day as well as some discussion about the future of the process in the early afternoon. On the third day, some members of the International Council presented their application for the next World Social Forum to be held in their country. A few of them were Spain, Canada and Croatia as well as North African states. The latter seemed to me to have a good chance as many arguments were presented in favour of showing support for the current revolutions. But no decision was made as all decisions have to be made by consensus. After this, there was again room for discussion about the ideas and proposals from the commissions at the plenum as well as some meetings of groups which had not finished their discussions on the previous day. Lastly, I sat in a meeting of the liaison group, which is in charge of facilitating the whole meeting by assigning moderation roles, setting the agenda and gathering the different opinions from the commissions.

Although I am not able to get into much detail about all the interesting impressions and inspiring conversations I had, not only during the meeting but also during the breaks for lunch or dinner, I would say that for me, this first experience has laid the foundation of a very interesting research project.

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