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RENDEZVOUS AT MUMBAI

THERE WAS AN obvious irony in shifting the 2004 World Social Forum from Porto Alegre, home of the participatory budget, to an indifferent Mumbai, the city most starkly symbolizing the impact of neoliberalism in India. Mumbai's booming stockmarket and Indian GDP growth figures of around 8 per cent for 2003–04 are constantly cited as evidence of a new Shining India, the feel-good slogan that has been rapidly internalized, courtesy of incessant media repetition, by the Indian 'middle class'.¹ Annual software exports have now reached the \$16bn mark, and the country has \$100bn in foreign reserves. The Central government is pushing ahead with its privatization programme, selling off stakes in the big profit-makers—companies such as the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation and Gas Authority of India—while starving potentially healthy enterprises such as Air India and Indian Airlines of necessary investment until failing balance sheets can be used to justify privatization.

In fact, the GDP growth figures have been lifted largely by the spectacular monsoons of 2003, which dramatically raised agricultural output. Averaged over five years, the growth rate remains around 5.8 per cent, the level the Indian economy has sustained for the last two decades, while foreign investment has not yet surpassed the 1997 peak of \$4bn. Social and regional inequalities have worsened, with the consumption expenditure of the urban top two deciles rising by a historically unprecedented 30 per cent in the six-year period 1997–2002, the material basis for claims of 'Shining India'. By contrast, the rural top two deciles had a consumption rise of 10 per cent but the remaining rural population—the

vast majority of Indians—witnessed a consumption decline.² More striking still is the relatively jobless character of current growth patterns, even compared to the 1980s. The number of unemployed was nearly 35 million in 2002, and is expected to be over 40 million in 2007. The employment elasticity of output has fallen from 0.52 for the period 1983–94, to 0.16 for 1993–2000. There were 740,000 applicants for 20,000 posts in the lowest, Group D category on the Indian railways last year—essentially, gangmen’s jobs. Among the applicants were MBAs, post-graduates and engineers. The outsourcing of US white-collar work to Indian call centres, etc., currently exercising American voters, accounts for a tiny drop in this ocean. There were approximately four hundred call centres in India in 2003, employing around 100,000 people; 40 per cent of their business is domestic.³ It is here that the political weak spot of Indian neoliberalism resides: in the not-too-distant prospect of a substantial layer of youth from the low-to-middling echelons of the ‘middle class’, mainly educated in provincial colleges, becoming disillusioned with the heady promises of a neoliberal project that currently still retains its appeal.

Sanctified massacres

Politically, the last two years have seen a qualitative move to the right in India. The nightmarish anti-Muslim pogroms in Gujarat in the spring of 2002, perpetrated with the full complicity of the state government under BJP Chief Minister Narendra Modi, have proved a terrible watershed. On 27 February 2002 activists from the Sangh Parivar—the *Hindutva*

¹ Far from being a median category, the misnamed ‘middle class’ is better understood as a mass elite, comprising the top 10 to 15 per cent of Indian society. For a fuller treatment of the Indian economy’s basic character, the rise to power of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata (Indian People’s) Party (BJP) and institutionalization of *Hindutva*—the ‘politics of Hinduness’—see my ‘India’s New Right’, NLR 9, May–June 2001.

² I am grateful to Abhijit Sen at Jawaharlal Nehru University for sharing data from his latest study, ‘Poverty and Inequality in India: Getting Closer to the Truth’, *Economic and Political Weekly*: forthcoming. There has been an intense debate in the EPW, to which Sen has made a key contribution, over the accuracy of poverty figures in India following the government’s methodological changes in 1999–2000. His estimate for numbers below the poverty line in 2002, by ‘monthly recall method’, is 35 per cent of the Indian population, some 364 million people.

³ According to the National Association of Software and Service Companies: www.nasscom.org

family of organizations, whose main components are the cadre-based Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the BJP and the lumpen storm-troopers of the Bajrang Dal (Lord Hanuman's Troops)—were returning to Gujarat by train from a 'March on Ayodhya' when the molestation of a Muslim girl on the platform of Godhra station provoked an attack by an angry Muslim mob. One of the train carriages was torched and fifty-eight people died in the flames. The assault served as the awaited trigger for a carefully pre-planned, state-backed 'retaliatory' pogrom, in which orchestrated violence against the Muslim population spread throughout Gujarat, lasting for over a month. More than 2,000 Muslims were butchered and around 150,000 driven out of their homes. There was looting, property destruction, sadistic beatings, injuries and rape on a massive scale.⁴

This was not only the worst case of sustained communal violence since Partition, but the first time that a state government had been so deeply involved in preparing and carrying out such a massacre.⁵ What marked it as a turning point was not so much that the direct perpetrators got away with their criminal behaviour—this has happened often enough before—but that the Sangh and the BJP got away with it politically. During the month-long pogrom there was strong condemnation of the Modi government's role not only from opposition parties but even from the BJP's allies in the ruling coalition, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Massive extra-parliamentary mobilization by the opposition at national and regional levels, inside and outside Gujarat, could have broken the coalition government. This never happened. The Congress, which should have led such a campaign, had neither the courage nor the anti-communal commitment to do so.

⁴ A broad range of reports on different aspects of the Gujarat pogrom are available at www.onlinevolunteers.org

⁵ While the official tally of deaths in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots after the assassination of Mrs Gandhi was around 3,000, they pale in comparison to what happened in Gujarat. Although the local Congress leaders behind the 1984 violence have not been punished, the party has publicly apologized for what happened. The brutality and sadism, the scale, geographic extent and duration of communal violence were much greater in Gujarat, as was the degree of state-apparatus complicity. Given the deeper historical roots of anti-Muslim sentiment and the existence, in the Sangh, of a powerful grassroots organization dedicated to cultivating and exploiting it for political ends, the negative implications of Gujarat 2002 are much more profound.

As a result, Prime Minister Vajpayee was free to make the agenda-setting speech at a BJP gathering in Goa, at the end of May 2002, that can in retrospect be seen as the official proclamation of the Indian polity's rightward shift. Vajpayee defended the pogrom as an unavoidable reaction to the Godhra incident. He categorically rejected the demand from his NDA allies to remove Modi as Chief Minister of Gujarat, effectively challenging them to make their choice—either to pull down his government and precipitate early elections or fall quietly into line. He also made an international pitch, linking the BJP's stand to that of the US Administration, by declaring Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism the world's principal danger. The NDA coalition thus remained intact, with the BJP's authority within it greatly strengthened. Modi called early polls in Gujarat in December 2002, campaigning on an openly communal platform which not merely justified but celebrated the pogrom—a tactic that the Congress was scared to oppose directly, instead highlighting the Modi government's 'general performance failure'. For the first time ever, the BJP obtained a two-thirds majority in the provincial assembly, due to a massive gain in votes and seats in Central Gujarat where most of the violence had been concentrated. The result only further deadened the enfeebled anti-communal reflexes of the Congress.

End of the Congress?

The provincial assembly elections of December 2003 in the key Hindi heartland states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Delhi were a further boost to the BJP. Here Hindutva was not the major factor behind the debacle of the Congress, but it nevertheless contributed to the BJP's success. The governing party gained absolute majorities in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, where the Congress had previously been in power and was expected to do reasonably well, holding on to two if not all three of these states. It ended up retaining only Delhi, on a very low turnout—53 per cent, compared to 67–71 per cent for the others. Suddenly, the most sober assessments of the coming general elections, now advanced to April 2004, suggest that the BJP-led NDA coalition has easily the strongest chance of coming back to power. Although the NDA parties, BJP included, would seem to have reached their electoral peak in terms of seats secured during the last general elections of 1999—with the BJP tally reaching a plateau of around 180 Lok Sabha seats, out of 542—the coalition's ranks could

well expand further through the wholesale defection of some of the pre-poll Congress allies.⁶

The 2004 elections could prove a turning point not because the BJP makes a qualitative leap in its share of the vote but because the Congress may collapse as a national party. Programmatically, it is in all key respects a softer version of the BJP, although without either its powerful cadre base (courtesy of the RSS), its aggressive policy of using major personnel changes to transform governing structures or its determination to remodel India as a pure 'Hindu nation', the monocultural Hindu Rashtra. Socially, the Congress is now losing its last, hitherto stable base, the Central Indian Adivasis—'original inhabitants' or indigenous people—to the BJP.⁷ For a full five decades after Independence, every single breakaway from the Congress quickly faded into oblivion, even those with leaders whose national stature had been forged in the great pre-1947 freedom struggle. Since 1997 two such breakaways, the Trinamul Congress of West Bengal and the National Congress Party of Maharashtra, have stabilized as major regional parties not in the least afraid to hobnob with the BJP.

What holds the Congress together today is not ideology or organizational solidity but the promise of power at the Centre. If it fails once again to achieve this goal, as the hub of an alternative ruling coalition (supported from the outside by India's two mainstream left parties, the CPI

⁶ In the 1999 Lok Sabha (People's Assembly) elections, the NDA won all the 23 seats of Haryana, Delhi, Himachal and Goa put together; 20 out of 26 in Gujarat, 36 out of 42 in Andhra Pradesh, 16 out of 25 in Rajasthan, 26 out of 39 in Tamil Nadu, 28 out of 48 in Maharashtra, 41 out of 54 in Bihar, 19 out of 21 in Orissa, 29 out of 40 in Madhya Pradesh–Chhattisgarh.

⁷ Around 8 per cent of the overall population, Adivasis make up some 25 per cent of the electorate in the Central Indian forest/tribal belt also covering parts of Rajasthan, MP and Chhattisgarh, where they are mainly small farmers, gatherers and hawkers of forest produce or informal-sector labourers. Long-term grassroots activism by RSS cadres has built up a network of Vanvasi Kalyan Ashrams (the Sangh prefers the term *vanvasi*, forest dweller, to *adivasi*, since for them Aryans must be India's original inhabitants) catering to their welfare needs with clinics, dispensaries, etc. The RSS's campaign of 'reconversion' to its own peculiar brand of Hinduism (a large proportion of Adivasis are Christians) has the appeal of psychological and cultural upliftment, through identification with a socially stronger and more prosperous 'Hindu' community. Aided by Congress complacency, and their own sophisticated micro-management of local electoral processes, the BJP has won 77 out of the 99 constituencies reserved for tribal candidates; the Congress carried sixteen.

and CPM), it will likely suffer serious defections to the BJP/NDA as well as further splits into one or more regional parties in the northern states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. The Congress is now prepared to make the kind of parliamentary concessions it never contemplated before—leaving 150 to 200 seats for its coalition allies to contest; assuring them that prime ministership will be decided collectively, and not automatically devolve on Sonia Gandhi as leader of the largest single party in the bloc. Rahul and Priyanka, the son and daughter of Rajiv and Sonia Gandhi—and, unlike their mother, Indian born—are likely to be thrown into the fray, a measure of Congress desperation in its attempts to counter BJP promotion of the ‘Vajpayee charisma’. If the Congress does collapse, as seems entirely possible, the BJP will become the only national party. Within the space of fifteen years, it will have made the journey from far-right outcast to natural party of government and institutionalized its status as the normal fulcrum of bourgeois political rule; a development with momentous and deeply disturbing implications.

Post-industrial sprawl

It was within this context that the hundred thousand delegates to the fourth World Social Forum gathered in Mumbai between 16th and 21st January 2004. The city itself is a heavily polluted, financial-commercial centre, a vast conurbation of some 17 million people, over 40 per cent of them living in slums. For the past ten years the Greater Mumbai municipality has been run by Shiv Sena, one of the most virulent components of the Sangh Parivar, which has extended its tentacles deep into the lucrative construction industry while simultaneously institutionalizing its politics of patronage in the slums. Once India’s greatest textile and industrial city, Mumbai could formerly boast over sixty giant cotton-mills, mainly housed in the southern districts, as well as engineering units, metallurgical foundries, chemical plants, pharmaceutical industries and electrical-goods factories, in a huge swathe stretching north from the central zone, then branching east and west. In the great textile strike of 1982, a quarter of a million cotton workers came out for over a year—the last courageous but ultimately unsuccessful act of resistance by organized labour in the city.

Today, production has either ceased or shifted to the lower-cost towns of the hinterland—Nagpur, Aurangabad, Nasik; the small power-loom plants of Bhiwandi. Pharmaceuticals have been transferred to new-built

units as far afield as Gujarat, to take advantage of cheap labour and tax incentives. In Mumbai, the factory lands left derelict by de-industrialization have been partially redeveloped with the standard construction package of food-and-entertainment plazas, shopping malls and office complexes. The slum districts, stretching northwards from the centre, for the most part exist cheek-by-jowl with these commercial centres, since this is where informal-sector activities are most likely to thrive. Indeed, Asia's largest single unified slum area, a virtual township called Dharavi—home to around a million people, and encompassing not just shanty-town eateries, services and residences but also numerous small-scale workshops—is situated right in the city centre, minute's away from the glass and concrete towers of the Bandra-Kurla financial district.

The choice of the wsf venue—a dusty, environment-unfriendly, long disused industrial site in the northeast of the city—completed the symbolism. There was a legitimate worry that moving the wsf from Latin America, the continent of greatest resistance to neoliberalism, to Vajpayee's India, could be a mistake. From the *piqueteros* of Argentina to the indigenous insurgents of Bolivia or *barrio* mobilizations of Chávez's Venezuela, it is there that mass politicization is at its deepest and widest today. Nor has the Subcontinent anything comparable to Latin America's historical popular revolutionary traditions. At Mumbai, the flip side of the wsf's extraordinary diversity—the striking displays of music, dance and street theatre, the strong presence of Dalits, tribals, women's groups and trade unions—was the fact that political awareness was more limited and sectoral in character. Neither leaders nor ordinary members of many of the large movements and groups gathered there showed much interest or involvement in the conferences, seminars and workshops lying outside their specific areas of concern. Low literacy levels and breakdowns in the technical facilities provided for translations did not fully explain this weakness, whose basic roots are political.⁸

But the restricted area of the Mumbai site, contrasting sharply with the sprawling geography of Porto Alegre's wsf, forced an extraordinary commingling of the 100,000 participants, more than 15,000 of whom

⁸ Inadequate infrastructure obviously hampered discussion and mass participation, especially in the big conferences. This failing was linked to the otherwise laudable determination of the organizers to limit foreign funding and keep overall costs low—around \$2.4m, a third that of Porto Alegre.

came from outside India. Asia, from east, south and west, was well represented, as was Western Europe.⁹ Coupled with the unmatched social and cultural diversity of India itself, fully present at Mumbai, this created a general atmosphere of collective solidarity and vitality that has set a new standard for future wsf.s.¹⁰ By contrast, the social composition of participants at the third wsf was younger and far more middle-class. If the youth camp in Porto Alegre was a considerable success, in Mumbai it was organizationally and politically a disappointment. The ironies and contrasts do not end here. Lula, unwanted at, and uninvited to, the wsf was the honoured guest of the BJP government at this year's official Republic Day celebrations on January 26, 2004.

India's Left

The Social Forum project that first emerged in Latin America in 2001 reflected a new historical conjuncture—not just the two-decade assault of neoliberalism on that continent but also the effective disintegration of the old left and its replacement by a more inchoate, plural and diverse set of progressive actors.¹¹ Their growing radicalization in the late 1990s catalysed into the hope of a new type of internationalism at the WTO protests in Seattle in 1999, and found its organizational expression in the wsf and its associated 'politics of the open space'. India, however, is where the old left (still largely unrepentant about its Stalinist and Maoist legacies and traditions) survives as a substantial force, replete with its own mass fronts of trade unions, women, peasant and student

⁹ Approximate numbers of participants included: Middle East: 200, with Egypt, Palestine and Turkey (in that order) the largest contingents; China: 200; Japan: over 1,100; South Korea: 200; Philippines: 400; Sri Lanka: over 450; Bangladesh: over 1,200; Pakistan: 800; Bhutan: 500; Burma: 100; Nepal: over 1,300 (includes those resident in India); Thailand: 200; Malaysia: 50; Indonesia: 150; Afghanistan: 60. There were also 100 South Africans present, and 500 came from Kenya (the strongest African candidate for holding wsf 2006).

¹⁰ The remarkable diversity of Indian participation was ensured by the involvement of 190 organizations in the Indian General Council, the ultimate decision-making authority for the fourth wsf. Last year's Brazilian General Council comprised 8 organizations. The IGC nominated the main executive body, the Indian Organizing Committee, which in turn selected the Mumbai Organizing Committee. In the 10c the CPI, CPM, certain NGOs and a number of big Dalit organizations from southern India played major roles.

¹¹ For the origins and prospects of the World Social Forum project see Tom Mertes, ed., *A Movement of Movements*, London 2004, passim.

wings.¹² Since only 3 per cent of the total 340 million labour force are unionized, it is hardly surprising that there also exists a breathtaking array of social movements, single-issue groups and a spectrum of NGOs, from the most radical to those whose principal function is to be the providers of newly privatized services, offsetting the impact of the neoliberal state's abandonment of its multiple social responsibilities in health, education and basic needs.

All these contradictions were clearly present in Mumbai. Where else would you find, for the first time, an alternative world social forum called Mumbai Resistance being organized across the road from the official one, by a variety of Maoist groups and fronts whose principal ballasts were the Peoples War Group of India and the Communist Party of the Philippines? Much smaller, with an overall attendance in the few thousands, MR's main purpose was to call attention to itself. Its inaugural function spent nearly as much time criticizing the WSF as it did attacking neoliberalism or US imperialism.¹³ But even outside the entrances of the main WSF, inconsistent certainly with the prevailing spirit of the Social Forum project, the CPI and the CPM had strategically placed huge billboards (hitting visitors' eyes well before the WSF signs themselves) declaring that their idea of another world was the 'Communist Future'. A strongly instrumentalist attitude towards the Forum still prevails amongst these left parties.

¹² The original Communist Party of India split in 1964, along broadly Moscow/Beijing lines, into the CPI and CPM (Communist Party of India/Marxist). The CPM-led Left Front coalition has governed West Bengal, a province of over 60 million people, since 1977. Little different from any other state in its attempts to attract private capital through low labour costs, subsidized infrastructure and tax concessions, it is currently pushing through a Central government scheme for contract-hiring teachers at a miserable Rs. 1,500 a month, raising charges in schools and hospitals, and carrying out slum evictions in Kolkata (Calcutta). Nevertheless, it has a better than average record in agricultural growth, poverty alleviation, democratic devolution and—with proportionately the second largest Muslim population of any state—has made a genuine contribution to sustaining communal tranquility.

¹³ Though many of their criticisms are valid—the political limitations of the WSF as currently constituted; the continuing legitimacy in certain situations of violent self-defence; the dangers of NGO-ization, the ulterior motives of certain funding sources—none of this precluded their participation in the WSF, where they would have been free to argue these points. Respect for the role played by some of the groups in MR in defending the poorest sections of society (this is certainly the case in India) should not prevent a counter-critique of their time-warp politics and unfortunate sectarianism.

Nevertheless, after allowing for all reservations and qualifications, the end results justified the decision to hold the fourth wsf in India. In 2003, Porto Alegre brought together for the first time the two chief streams of global opposition—the movement against neoliberalism and that against us imperialism. This confluence was sustained and further consolidated in Mumbai. The Indian organizers gave some shape to the otherwise amorphous character of the ‘politics of the open space’ by holding a series of wsf-sponsored events focusing on five broad themes—imperialist globalization; patriarchy, gender and sexuality; militarism and peace; casteism and racism; religious fanaticism and sectarian violence. Further discussions included the questions of sustainable development; food, land and water sovereignty; media culture and knowledge; labour issues; health, education and social security.¹⁴

Movements and parties

In addition, a conscious effort was made (with uneven success) to promote more thorough reflection on the relationship between political parties and social movements, alternatives to neoliberal globalization and the contemporary role of the nation-state and nationalism. The extent to which various activist groups were also able to utilize the Mumbai wsf to enhance international co-ordination, networking and planning for common actions clearly varied, and the results of their endeavours will only become evident in the future.

How should we assess the impact of Mumbai on the current Indian political scene? One of the central purposes of the Indian organizers

¹⁴ Keynote speakers: *Imperialist globalization*: Immanuel Wallerstein, Samir Amin, Walden Bello, Arundhati Roy, Abdul Amir Al-Rekaby (Iraqi National Democratic Coalition); *Gender*: Nawal El Saadawi (Egypt), Saher Saba (Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan), Brinda Karat (CPM); *Militarism*: Jeremy Corbyn (UK), Dennis Brutus (South Africa), Muto Ichiyo (Japan), Chandra Muzaffar (Malaysia), Beverley Keene (Jubilee South, Argentina), Nguyen Binh (Vietnam), Mustafa Barghouti (Palestinian National Initiative); *Religious fundamentalism*: Shirin Ebadi (Iran), Pervez Hoodbhoy (Pakistan), Tanika Sarkar (India); *Casteism*: Blanca Chancoso (Ecuador), Ram Dayal Munda (Jharkhand tribals’ leader), Gopal Guru (Dalit intellectual); *Food and water sovereignty*: Maud Barlow (Canada), José Bové (France), Medha Patkar (India); *Media*: N. Ram (editor of *The Hindu* and *Frontline*), Richard Stallman (Free Software Foundation), Roberto Savio (Inter Press Service, Italy), Bernard Cassen (*Monde diplomatique*); *Parties and movements*: Fausto Bertinotti (Rifondazione, Italy), Aruna Roy (Right to Information Campaign), Luis Ayala (Chile), Alejandro Bendana (Nicaragua) Prakash Karat (CPM), D. Raja (CPI).

of the wsf was that it should stimulate the further development of a national 'anti-communalist front' against the Sangh/BJP. The intent here is not just an electoral bloc but the formation of a long-term alliance of left parties and their mass fronts, the big social movements and a range of progressive NGOs, to mobilize collectively against the depredations of the Sangh. Have the wsf 2004 and the Asian Social Forum at Hyderabad in January 2003 helped bring these forces together? Mutual suspicions and tensions remain within the social movements and parties as well as between them. There has been constant jockeying for public representation in the 'star system'—a seemingly unavoidable aspect of the Social Forum process. There are inevitable fears about manipulation and doubts about ulterior motives. One of the important issues thrown up by the wsf is whether it might not be better for parties to participate openly, instead of exercising their substantial influence informally and behind-the-scenes as they do now—whether in Brazil (the PT) or in India (CPM and CPI)—in response to the 'anti-party' stance of some NGOs and social movements.

This could result in a more honest dialogue between party spokespersons and others. The former could no longer dodge direct critiques of their record, in and out of office. This would surely encourage a less manipulative relationship, whereby genuine adjustments and greater mutual respect could be forged. The fear in India is that Social Forums could become arenas in which the pressures of electoral competition trump efforts at accommodation—all the more possible if mass fronts but not parties themselves are present. It might also help to clarify the basis on which parties are to be allowed in or kept out. If the CPM, which has made major concessions to neoliberal pressures in West Bengal, can participate, then why not the Congress?

Overall, it would be fair to say that the mass fronts and substantial sections within the left parties, including many of their major leaders, have moved closer to the social movements and progressive NGOs, and vice versa. These steps toward joint work are still hesitant, wary and uneasy. There remains a lack of that kind of general perspective that could help systematize forms of collaboration going beyond occasional common actions. But the movement forward is real. Internationally, the Indian left has nowhere to turn except towards a global radical milieu that is naturally anti-Stalinist and much more developed in its attitudes on sexual choice, female oppression and ecological sustainability.

Domestically, greater co-ordination amongst radical forces is required to confront the neoliberal project as well. In this respect, public opposition in India is likely to grow. In Latin America what tipped the balance towards mass resistance was the antagonism of whole swathes of the middle class, whose savings were destroyed by the combination of unstable currencies, recession and unemployment. This has not yet happened in India. The neoliberal reforms have a shorter history, and a more cautious approach to capital convertibility has provided a measure of protection. But the problem of educated unemployment is rising to serious proportions. A growing crisis of expectations is starting to emerge.

International perspectives

Parallel concerns exist at the international level. Greater collaboration between the main radical actors—parties, unions, movements, the best NGOs—is urgently required. The crucial task remains what it has always been—how best to combine the politics of the universal and the politics of the particular. The first is most powerful and effective precisely when it encompasses and respects the latter. Historically, the classical, indeed only, organizational form that has shown itself capable of embodying this combination has been the political party. One need not assume that this must remain the case. But the principal challenge facing the Social Forum project is whether it will be able to contribute to the creation of those new organizational forms equipped with the general vision and capacity to simultaneously and systematically pursue the politics of the universal and the particular. Insofar as the state remains a crucial node of concentrated bourgeois power, no radical strategy can afford to ignore or sidestep it.

Rather than maintain the hectic pace of a WSF every year, which drains the time and energy of too many activists from their basic areas of implantation and concern, it would be much better after the fifth WSF in Porto Alegre next year to schedule these global gatherings for every second or even third year. This would allow for more forums to be held at intermediate (city, provincial, national and regional) levels. The time has surely also come to take a breather and synthesize the experiences and lessons of the project so far. The one great lacuna has been the failure to extend the forums to North America, particularly the US. Even at the WSFs, American participation has always been disproportionately

smaller than the showing at Seattle might have augured. This insularity must be broken.

It can legitimately be claimed that, without the Social Forum project, neither the global anti-war mobilizations of 15 February 2003 nor the protests at the Cancún WTO conference in September 2003 would have been anywhere near as successful. By that measure the international demonstrations against the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq called for 20 March 2004 will be a major test. It is unlikely that these will reach the level of February 15th last year. Demanding an end to the US occupation will not mobilize all the constituencies that were prepared to come out before the war. But a million marching worldwide would be an undoubted step forward for anti-imperialist forces—including those in Iraq itself. More than the Social Forum project is at stake.