



## The Intercontinental Youth Camp as the Unthought of the World Social Forum

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Despite being as old as the World Social Forum (WSF) itself – it has existed since the first edition in Porto Alegre, 2001 – the Intercontinental Youth Camp (IYC) remains a mostly unknown and untold story, perhaps even to the people who ‘lived’ there for five (2001, 2002) or ten days (2003): the way it was organized, the understanding of the WSF as open space it involved, its political origins and outcomes remain a very obscure part of the history of the WSF, even now when so much academic work has started to be done about it.

From its humble beginnings in 2000 – about 1,500 people, mostly Brazilians – to its peak in 2003 – 23,500 people from all over the world, its own social currency and a full-fledged cultural and political programme connected to, but also arguably more wide ranging than, the WSF’s – the kind of politics put into practice in the Youth Camp could already have had some of the impact that the move to India in 2004 has had in the Social Forum process.

This paper aims at describing what this impact could have been, and discussing why it did not happen; it does so by telling this untold story, including the ideas and concepts employed in the organization of the Youth Camp, behind-the-scenes stories of how it was organized, and a debate on what it tells us about the different political cultures (Portoalegrense, Brazilian, Latin American, generational) that played a great part in the first three WSF, and what this reveals about the political culture and practice of the Social Forum process itself.

### A Short Genealogy of the WSF and the IYC

One thing lacking in many of the recent accounts and even critiques of the WSF is a proper genealogy: a study of the political forces that shaped it from the inside and outside, of what Nietzsche calls the *pudenda origo*, the humble origins, as opposed to a

grand narrative of men who had ideas and how these ideas produced important outcomes. Such a genealogy does not, and cannot, begin with the WSF itself; it must refer to the political panorama of the late 1990s where it appeared.

### *From Chiapas to the WSF*

After more than a decade of neo-liberal advance in the world, and the events of 1989-1990 that saw all officially existing, self-appointed alternatives to capitalism in the Soviet bloc wiped out of the map, the mid-1990s saw a period of rampant financial speculation and the announced success – in fact, inevitability – of capitalist globalization, encapsulated in Thomas Friedman's infamous 'vanilla' theory:

There is no more chocolate chip, there is no more strawberry swirl, there is only plain vanilla and North Korea. (...) Not only is all that we've got plain vanilla, but everyone is basically happy about it.<sup>1</sup>

Then it happened: in the first hours of 1994, the Zapatista uprising in Mexico created a certain amount of disruption around the edge of this triumphant picture. Not a typical Latin America guerrilla of the 1960s-70s, it aimed not at taking power and creating a socialist regime; its communication was not the usual cliché-ridden leftwing discourse, but full of irony, poetry and sophistication; those who had 'put on masks so that they could be seen' wanted to make the voice of the indigenous communities living in subhuman conditions in the poor region of Chiapas heard; and these voices cried for 'justice, dignity and freedom', and the establishment of new, horizontalised, community-centred forms of governance.

Not only was the quick success of the EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation) in establishing a territorial autonomy from the central government a wake-up call for people all over the world, its subsequent success in surviving as a political force depended on the support, material and immaterial, of international public opinion. This turned Chiapas into an important locus of political inspiration and interchange, which led to the organization of the First International Encounter Against Neo-liberalism and for Humanity in 1996.

If anything, this is the direct forerunner of the WSF. What was remarkable about it was that, instead of looking for support in traditional Western leftwing parties or international NGOs, the people the EZLN spontaneously gathered around belonged to small, grassroots groups espousing principles of horizontal, networked-based organisation, whose appearance itself was a relatively new element in the political scene. These were also the groups organized behind the organisation of the Second Encounter the following year in Spain, which led to the creation in 1998 of People's Global Action, the first international 'anti-globalisation' network, self-defined as a 'coordinating instrument' for groups and movements struggling against international financial institutions such as the IMF and the WTO.

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1 Friedman, T. (2003) *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization*; cited in Notes From Nowhere. *We Are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism*. London: Verso, 500.

These first steps in organisation would eventually come to full fruition in the anti-WTO and anti-G8 protests of J18, Seattle and Prague. These massive, plural, spectacular demonstrations against capitalist globalization for the first time in years managed to break through the 'consensus' of the 'vanilla theory' (what the French have dubbed *la pensee unique* of neo-liberalism) and make newspaper headlines all over the world. For the first time in years, the idea of inevitability in the ways of global economy was challenged, and mostly by network- and internet-based, non-traditional, new forms of organisation, which instead of couching their political agendas within the framework of this or that nation-state (as political parties and trade unions, for obvious reasons, are bound to do), used the global situation as their background and simultaneously demanded for and helped create a transnational political sphere for their discourse and practices.

### *From Seattle to Porto Alegre*

It is only then that the WSF comes into the picture. Despite much having been said about its being something like an international party, NGO, corporate business or even CIA-funded conspiracy to coopt antagonistic movements, I would like to argue here that its history is at once more complex (as in less simplistic and more context-dependent) and simpler (as in less dependent on sweeping assumptions about the overarching power of this or that international agency). A good way to start might be by examining the decision to hold it in Porto Alegre, which moves our genealogy further back in time.

Sometime in 2000, after events such as Seattle, the moment was ripe for another, more organized (and perhaps less threatening-looking) mediatic attack against neo-liberal hegemony. This, the initiative of groups with an older background and outlook, would take the form of an anti neo-liberalism event, gathering intellectuals and movements from across the world, to raise the profile of the struggle and reach out to larger numbers of people. It would be pitched as the counterpart of the World Economic Forum in Davos, hence the name (World Social Forum, the 'social' versus the 'economic') and the date when it should be held. The political forces involved – ATTAC and Brazil-based social movements and NGOs – could quite naturally spot Brazil as the perfect place in the so-called 'Global South' to hold it; from there to choosing Porto Alegre, it was a very quick step.

All the Brazilian actors involved had some kind of long-standing relationship with the Workers' Party (PT), the largest leftwing party in Latin American history. To understand what this means, it is necessary to go back to the beginning of PT in the late 1970s. After almost two decades of military dictatorship, the last years of the 1970s saw a progressive 'thawing out' of the political sphere: a certain level of dissent was tolerated, political prisoners and exiles were given amnesty (along with torturers and the like, it must be said), and many of those started joining the ranks of MDB (Brazilian Democratic Movement), the only 'opposition' party available. Many elements were lying around, waiting for a catalyst: the 'comunidades de base' organized by the left of the Catholic Church (Liberation Theology); growing peasant movements, especially in the south; the environmental and trade unionist struggle of the 'seringueiros' (rubber tappers) in the North; ex-guerrillas, remnants of various small splinter groups who had reneged the politics of the Communist Party in the 1960s; the birth of independent trade

unionism; various political tendencies within the student movement. The catalyst came in the form of the strikes in Sao Paulo, led by a trade unionist called Lula; it was then that the idea of organising a new, grassroots-based party came about, which resulted in the foundation of PT in 1981.<sup>2</sup>

PT was not only the first case of a leftwing party in Brazil to be born out of struggles ‘on the ground’ rather than created by a mostly middle-class, educated elite; it was also an important experiment in democracy. Most of the elements that came together in its foundation remained active in themselves, despite acting under the umbrella of the new party; the organisation was based on the local nodes that had come about during the ‘pro-PT movement’ that preceded the creation of the party, and these possessed a good deal of autonomy. Everyone who, like me, grew up in the Brazil of the 1980s, felt its impact on the political scene and the role it played in politicising and engaging a great part of the population. Just seven years after its creation, the party was elected for the local government in Porto Alegre, the capital of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, where it went on to remain 16 years in power, and implement some of their most innovative policies, such as the Participatory Budget.<sup>3</sup>

In 2000, when the first WSF was planned, PT was a rather different party. As a result of being in power in many cities and states, its internal democracy had grown a lot stiffer, and its politics, perhaps as a response to the neo-liberal decade Brazil had just gone through, closer to the centre; it had grown to resemble more and more a ‘normal’ party, with its leaderships and authorities. Porto Alegre remained the place where it was arguably closer to its origins, and in 1998 Olivio Dutra, the first ‘petista’ to be elected mayor there, won the elections for state governor. Thus, the WSF could go ahead with the backing – and funding – of both the local and the state governments.

Much is said about the role played by PT in the first three editions of the WSF; it is noted, for example, that the WSF Organizing Committee – a body composed of ATTAC, the Brazilian Commission for Justice and Peace,<sup>4</sup> the Landless Workers’ Movement (MST), the largest Brazilian trade union federation (CUT), the NGOs IBASE, Cives and Rede Social, and the NGO association ABONG – was composed of organisations that had some level of involvement with PT. This is true, especially in the case of the MST and the CUT; more than simply ‘related’, they were cut from the same cloth, came from the same ‘primordial soup’ whence PT sprung forth in the early 1980s. What must be noticed here is that, more than simply an example of an ‘infiltration’

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2 It should be remarked how different this is from the political history of Argentina, for example, where State repression claimed the lives of around 20,000 activists, effectively wiping out much of the existing political forces on the left; this meant that these were much weaker at the end of the military dictatorship, and also made it more difficult for something to act as a catalyst. When something like this happened – with the 2000 crisis known to Argentineans as ‘19/20’ – it was met by a political scene with a number of self-organised grassroots movements on one side, and a myriad small political parties on the other.

3 Now functioning in various towns and even states across Brazil, the Participatory Budget is both a policy and a method of governance that allows the population, divided into regional and thematic areas and through an elaborate system of open assemblies and elected councils, to choose the priorities for the application of a part of the overall budget, and monitor its employment.

4 A commission of the National Confederation of Brazilian Bishops (Catholic).

tactics on the part of the party, this resulted from the fact that there are very few political actors in the Brazilian left that are not in some way related to it; rather than a conscious strategy, this was a contingency of local politics: if you were going to do something in Brazil, it was impossible not to do it in an environment shaped by the presence of the Workers' Party.

This was the most important role played by PT: helping define the landscape, rather than having a coordinated intervention such as choosing speakers or plenary themes. What seemed to be the common thread among the PT-related actors – the state government, some of the OC members – was not orders emanating from some point, but a shared understanding of what other political actors should be included, and what the Forum should look like.

However, the point to be made by means of this genealogy is: whereas the wave of protests that created the global political space where the WSF could happen was mostly the result of a new political culture and where 'young' people (whatever that means) had a prominent role, the organisation of the WSF was shaped by older, previously-existing political cultures and forces. In the Youth Camp, this came to be defined in generational terms: 'new' and 'old political generation'. This leads us to the subject of this article.

## The First WSF and the First IYC

What did the first WSF look like? Clearly, the idea was a mixture of old-style politics and NGO culture. On the one hand, a place for people to gather to listen to the 'thinking heads' of the global movement, who could illuminate the ways ahead; on the other, a vast amount of workshops, many of which dealing with local problems and solutions, most of which presented by NGOs.<sup>5</sup> The two categories in which one could take part were 'listener' and 'delegate' – a rather pointless one, considering there was no voting to be done, and most delegates were listening most of the time.

As such, this did not have much to do with something like Seattle: no big warehouses turned into convergence centres where people could crash with their sleeping bags, no spokescouncils, no communal meals. It was meant for a political world where people could afford hotels and restaurants, and would not be in the least fussed by the fact that the event took place in the very comfortable facilities of a private university where Coca-Cola vending machines could be found in the corridors. It seemed presented both as a one-off and as unrelated to the events of recent years – the only official acknowledgement of which being, perhaps, the resonance of the title of the opening march: 'Against Neo-liberalism and for Life'.

The Youth Camp came about as a very practical consequence of this situation: despite the fact that the event had the potential to mobilise a great number of students and

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5 The immediate Brazilian forerunner of the WSF was the Rio 1992 Summit, where outside of the governmental meetings a big event was organised by environmental groups and NGOs; that was indeed when NGO culture became visible in mainstream Brazilian politics.

young people in general, no thought whatsoever had been put by the organisers into making this possible. Therefore, the idea was raised as an emergency solution to provide accommodation for lots of people who otherwise would have been prevented from going to Porto Alegre. As it happens, the city has a massive public park right in its centre; just the perfect place for people to come and put up their tents for five days.

The organisation of the Youth Camp, as much as of the WSF itself, was a very local affair: less than two months before the event took place, a number of youth groups got together as the WSF Youth Committee and negotiated with the state and local governments their financial and structural support. To say that it was a local affair means that it was a natural consequence of its political landscape: since most youth organisation in Brazil is channelled through political parties, the groups involved were basically the youth of two different tendencies of PT,<sup>6</sup> and that of two other, smaller parties, PCdoB (Communist Party of Brazil) and PSTU (Unified Socialist Workers' Party, a group expelled from PT in 1992).

It is clear, then, where the name 'Youth Camp' came from; it makes sense in most Latin American countries, where it is used as a political category by leftwing political parties. Most of these people are engaged in student politics, which is heavily taken over by organised party structures. Again, it is a good example of how existing political cultures helped shape the Forum: in their wish to bring together 'intercontinental' 'youth', the organisers were unaware of how badly the concept translated for those people who were in Seattle and Prague. As I shall argue later, this self-branding may have been one of the Youth Camp's downfalls.

In any case, there were only two continents represented at the first IYC, Europe and the Americas. And in the end, it served mostly as free accommodation: of the 1,500 to 2,000 people who lived there for five days, most would take the bus to the Catholic University in the morning and attend the official event. A small cultural programme was organized for the evenings, mostly revolving around a very small stage; still, most people would rather go to the big concerts happening just round the corner at the Por-do-Sol Amphitheatre. A small 'political' programme was devised as well, which consisted of a 'Youth Plenary' in the mould of a Brazilian students' encounter; it was attended by around 70 people, almost all of which belonging to one of the groups involved in the organization. Naomi Klein was said to be expected, but she did not show up; she probably did not miss much.

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6 These two were Left Articulation (AE) and Socialist Democracy (DS); the latter is the largest PT tendency in Rio Grande do Sul, to which former Porto Alegre mayors Pont (1997-2000) and Verle (2002-2004) and vice-governor Rossetto (1999-2002) are affiliated. The Brazilian chapter of the Fourth International – Unified Secretariat, it is the only tendency that really became involved in the WSF (as did its sister organisations in other countries, such as the LCR – Revolutionary Communist League – in France). Contrary to what many people think, President Lula's tendency, the nationally-majoritarian Articulação, never had much interest in organising the event.

## The Second IYC, and How it (Arguably) Surpassed the WSF

Many things changed between the first and the second editions of the WSF/IYC. On the WSF's part, the realization that the experiment had succeeded and could be more than a one-off led to the issuing of the Charter of Principles, which defined the Forum as an open space and not a 'locus of power',<sup>7</sup> and the establishment of the International Council (IC). On the IYC's part, organization started as early as ten months before, when the WSF Youth Committee became the Youth Committee. It sought to replicate the change in the organizational logic of the WSF – where the IC was responsible for the politics, while the Brazilian Organizing Committee (BOC) dealt with on the ground executive decisions – in having a National Youth Committee and a Rio Grande do Sul Youth Committee, the executive body in Porto Alegre. This, however, would prove not to be such a good idea.<sup>8</sup>

Many things had changed in the world as well: the heavy repression in Gothenburg and Genoa and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 meant a further widening of the gap between those groups involved in direct action and the ones organizing the WSF; where the latter saw the need to distance themselves from anything that could be labelled violent, the former saw themselves as having been left to their own devices and, in some cases, criminalised both by the State and the corporate media *and* by political forces on the left. The gap was made evident at the WSF IC meeting in Barcelona,<sup>9</sup> when the now-extinct, PGA-related Catalunyan MRG (Movimiento de Resistencia Global), having been invited to join the IC, replied by organising an occupation of the meeting to ask why other, similar groups were not invited, and to expose the contradiction in a network belonging to a representative body.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the crisis in Argentina had given rise to various forms of self-managed grassroots experiments, and provided the world with a vivid picture of the depths neo-liberalism could create, as well as where the alternatives to it could come from.

The Youth Committee, in the meantime, underwent a very significant transformation. Gone were some of the original political party youths; in came new elements, such as queer groups, the National Homeless Boys and Girls Movement, the growing Porto Alegre hip hop movement, and lots of individuals and smaller groups. One of these was to provide extremely valuable input: the Free Metropolitan Council of Architecture Students (COLMEA). Along with the less-structured, less party-influenced organising practices of the Architecture students' movement, they brought with them the concept of the Youth Camp as a city. Both things were what would start setting the IYC apart from the WSF.

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7 *World Social Forum Charter of Principles*. Approved by the International Council of the WSF in July 20<sup>th</sup> 2001.

8 One important difference is that where the executive centre of the IYC was Porto Alegre, the BOC office was in Sao Paulo; contrary to what many people believe, the centre of the WSF process in Brazil is the latter, not the former.

9 April 28<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> 2002. Report available on [http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.asp?id\\_menu=3\\_2\\_2\\_3&cd\\_language=1](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.asp?id_menu=3_2_2_3&cd_language=1)

10 Cf. Juris, this issue.

### *The IYC as a City*

'I still have to go to work. The Forum won't make a blind bit of difference to my life', said the Portoalegrense on his way to work, before storming off the overcrowded bus, under the curious looks of a mostly European throng of delegates on their way to the Catholic University in January 2001.

The scene stuck with me as a perfect example of what was wrong with the WSF; like a huge circus, it would come to town, stay for a few days and go away without leaving many traces apart from the boost to local economy. A strange kind of circus, indeed; more people came from out of town to watch than to perform.

The IYC that year would start to present an alternative. In thinking itself as a city within the city, it not only had to deal with its relation to what was there before and would still be there after the event had ended; it also had to consider what it meant to be a city under the motto 'another world is possible'. This was done simply by tapping into what the creativity of social movements everywhere was producing. Whereas the second WSF had an emphasis on 'proposing alternatives' (another natural response to the post-9/11 attempt at conflating opposition to capitalist globalization and terrorism), the IYC was all about practicing them, and showing that they already existed.

Thus, whereas the WSF remained within the expensive buildings of the Catholic University, all the common spaces at the IYC were built with environment-friendly techniques, such as employing vernacular technology (mud, wood etc.), or recycled waste (plastic, milk cartons, etc.). Whereas the WSF still struggled to make itself heard by corporate media, and only spoke to that, the IYC was the only place for alternative media, with a free-software-based computer lab and a radio station shared by Indymedia, local community and free radios etc.; instead of Coca-Cola vending machines, most of the food was provided by social movements, organic producers and solidarity economy enterprises, and part of the litter produced was recycled by a local cooperative; while the WSF remained an event, the Harmonia Park<sup>11</sup> was a space for people to live and share, with a (although entirely successful) self-management proposal that divided the tents into zones and expected people to share the responsibility for things such as security and cleaning.

This was almost entirely the work of the Rio Grande do Sul Youth Committee based in Porto Alegre; the national body, in the meantime, had turned into a 'locus of power' taken over by political party youth groups, who just carried the infighting and practices characteristic of Brazilian student politics into the process. They were not particularly interested in the arcane discussions on how the space could and should be; they were more interested in how the Youth Camp could be used for their agendas.

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11 The name of the 3km<sup>2</sup> park in central Porto Alegre that has housed the IYC is in itself, as many things there, a political issue. Although officially named after the founder of the largest media empire of Southern Brazil, many people resist to that by calling it after the farm that used to be in that area, Harmonia ('harmony'). Cf. map next page.



In an unprecedented move within the WSF to strengthen the ties with the (mostly) Global North groups who had been prominent in the anti-WTO and anti-G8 mobilisations, and to establish a line of continuity with recent history, the city was named ‘the city of youth Carlo Giuliani’; some friends of the young Italian who was murdered by the Genovese police showed up, and built a totem in the central square of the Youth Camp as a tribute. Besides, a specific space was provided for an encounter of horizontal, anti-hierarchical groups from all over the world, the Intergalactika Laboratory of Global Resistance.<sup>12</sup> The participation of Brazilian groups, however, was remarkably small, and by then most eyes were turned to Argentina anyway; after the encounter, some of the ‘Northerners’ who attended went to Buenos Aires, which was to create strong ties between groups in Argentina and Europe and North America; not much, however, happened in Brazil, let alone in Porto Alegre.

If the Intergalactika Laboratory was the result of the work from different parts of the world and some people in Porto Alegre, the National Youth Committee devoted itself to organising something called the International Youth Encounter. Symptomatically held in a big room at the Catholic University, it was an amplified version of the Youth Plenary of 2001: without a clear purpose, with a chair full of representatives from big youth organisations directly or indirectly connected to political parties, it came crashing down when there could be no agreement on its bombastic final statement: some groups demanded that it were titled ‘a socialist world is possible’, whilst others argued that not everyone in the room was a socialist, and the vast majority probably could not care less.

That could not diminish the impact and success of the IYC – in fact, it helped to prove a point. The IYC made many of the WSF-related headlines, and most of the pictures: for the media who could only see exoticism in what was going on, what could be better than thousands of fresh-faced, body-pierced, tattooed, dreadlocked youngsters living in tents? Or the bonfire in the middle of the central square, around which people gathered everyday at sunset to join the epitomic Mexican shaman Oscar? There were 12,500 people from all continents living there in those five days, and the IYC had its own programme of cultural activities (music, films, visits to MST and MTD<sup>13</sup> settlements, exhibitions) and workshops where the emphasis was on collective, informal environments rather than the ‘talking head’ framework employed by the WSF.

Still, most of the comments read afterwards focused on bad aspects, like the showers not being clean – showing perhaps that some people understood that not as a space they were responsible for, but as an event like a concert. Even thornier was the police issue, which arguably had more to do with the local political environment of those years than with the Forum as such: the PT state government had started tackling head on the problem of institutionalised violence and bigotry in the police – the ostensive police

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12 The first Intergalactika Laboratory of Global Resistance was attended by people belonging to groups such as MRG (Spain), AAARG (France), Disobbedienti (Italy), Reclaim the Streets! (UK), Colectivo 501 (Argentina), as well as Independent Media Centres belonging to the Indymedia network from all over the world, and ATTAC ‘youth’ groups from places such as Argentina and Germany.

13 The acronym ‘MTD’ is shared by movements of unemployed workers in Brazil and Argentina; there is one important difference between the two countries, however, in that whereas in the latter this is a generic name for various local groups with different political profiles, in Brazil there is one national organisation with that name.

presence inside the park, allegedly there to protect the campers from the possibility of theft, was clearly instructed not to act against the ‘visitors’; there was no case of anyone being arrested for drug possession, even though drug use was also quite ostensive. Were they there to repress any possible riot, as most outsiders complained? It is hard to say, since nothing of the kind happened. The state government was under permanent attack from the press for being ‘soft’ on ‘criminals’ like the MST, and the homeless movement had occupied a building right in the middle of the opening march that year. It was possible to tell from the looks of some of the policemen they would have loved to lunge on us; it was also clear they were under pressure from above not to do it.<sup>14</sup>

These are just a few examples of how the second IYC seemed to be a great opportunity for dialogue that was partially lost. There was never any dialogue between the two extremes of the ‘youth’ assembled – the youths of political parties and the horizontal, non-hierarchical networks – the two inhabited parallel universes. Insofar as the latter political culture was more characteristic of the groups coming from the global North, and the former from the global South (and specifically Brazil), an exchange between these different cultures never really happened. Finally, as it could be seen from the subsequent negative comments, many people missed the point of what the IYC was trying to do. The sense of shared space was never really a shared one. The differences remained mostly where they were, and the ‘autonomous individuals’ working in the organization were often caught in the crossfire between the two camps, trying to mediate a few common grounds.

Still, for those paying attention, the IYC pointed ways forward. Not only was it the first time that the historical link between Seattle and the WSF was explicitly made from within; it also pointed to new ways of practicing politics that seemed increasingly at odds with what the Forum had been so far. The second IYC wholeheartedly embraced the ‘prefigurative politics’ of those new movements, trying to ‘be the change it wanted to see’. The comparison between the Intergalactika Laboratory and the World Youth Encounter pointed to another problem of the WSF: if it was supposed to be a place for people to get together to network and coordinate, what was the point in having hundreds fill a room to listen to a few people no-one knew who had put there? Unfortunately, between the cynical, self-interested support and an almost immediate rejection, there seemed to be few people left to ask these questions.

It was by then that the concept of ‘new political generation’ started being used by people in Porto Alegre. What it meant did not have much to do with age as such: it referred to new ways of organising and practicing politics, to that new political sensibility that had made itself visible in the late 1990s. Thus, the ‘new’ referred to the

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14 The IYC 2003 already took place under the new, centre-right state government, who had used the ‘crisis of public security’ as one of the staples of its campaign. On the afternoon of the penultimate day some policemen repressed an Indigenous girl bathing naked in the open-air showers, which led to a ‘naked protest’ later that evening. The police said they would not do anything to the protesters if they stayed within the park, but when around thirty of them tried to walk to the Por-do-Sol Amphitheatre they were charged at by policemen on horseback, leaving between 5 to 10 people wounded. Generating a rift between the ‘petistas’ and the ‘autonomous’ inside the IYC, the IYC OC was entirely bypassed by the WSF organizers and some local PT politicians, who decided they would take the problem in their hands. Nothing happened.

appearance of new practices and new political actors, not to age. And it was true that, from 2002 on, the IYC had little to do with 'youth' as such, either in the sense of 'young people' or with the qualification 'in a political party'; the involvement of social movements such as the MST, homeless, environmentalist, free software, solidarity economy, Argentinean *piquetero* and *desocupado*<sup>15</sup> groups – all implicated in the functioning of the 'city' – blurred definitions and made the picture much more complex.

Therefore, when the Bangkok meeting of the WSF International Council later that year decided that the IYC was an integral part of the WSF, and should happen wherever the WSF went, the recognition had a bittersweet taste. Was it because the 'old' political generation that ran the show had realized they had underestimated the Youth Camp? Was it because they thought it was useful for establishing a connection with those groups – or that political sensibility – that had got the ball rolling in Seattle? Or was it because the concept of 'youth' sounded most unthreatening, since it either meant fairly depoliticised young people, or the young people who would 'grow up' within the framework of an older type of politics? Or was it because it brought numbers and made good copy, and they had not cared to pay attention to what had been done there? Was it because they recognized all those volunteers were indeed very competent free labour?

Some of these questions would answer themselves in time.

## Porto Alegre 2003, and How the Future Failed to Pass

The failed experience of the National Youth Committee and the resounding flop of the World Youth Encounter it had organized led to its dissolution. The decision-making and executive bodies were merged into what became the Porto Alegre-based IYC Organizing Committee; by now, it had grown larger and undergone several transformations in its composition: many new groups, movements and individuals had joined, quite a few others had left. The relative weight of the youths of political parties had grown much smaller, and it was clear that now the 'autonomous individuals' by far outnumbered the amount of people who were in any kind of political organization. It was under these conditions, with the bittersweet experience of the previous year, that the work on the next IYC began.

By now there was not only a very clear distribution of tasks among working groups (infrastructure, environment, culture, communication, food, etc.), the idea of what to do was a lot clearer. The point was how to do the same, but better and bigger: the next IYC was to last eleven days (spanning the World Education Forum and the WSF) and the expected attendance was 30,000.

In fact, the third IYC tried to improve on the second's improvements. 'Only' 23,500

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15 'Desocupado' is the word Argentinean movements use for 'unemployed'; 'piquetero' is literally someone who practices the tactic of picketing – one of the most recurrent (and efficient) methods the Argentinean MTDs have for getting governmental response to their demands.

people showed up,<sup>16</sup> but this meant a substantial increase in the area employed, which included the annexation of a nearby patch which was then officially declared part of the park by the local government. The spaces for seminars and workshops were exported to the other side of the avenue separating the park from the shore of Lake Guaiba, a stretch of public land very seldom used by anyone. New public toilets were built with money donated by the Geneva local government. The other things – free software computer lab, eco-constructed spaces, food provided by organic producers, social movements and solidarity economy enterprises etc. – were all there, but in larger quantities. What was probably the greatest novelty is that now the ‘city’ had its own internal currency as well: called ‘Sol’ (from ‘solidarity’, but also ‘sun’ in Portuguese and Spanish), it could be exchanged for *reais*<sup>17</sup> on a 1:1 rate, and was accepted by all the stalls inside the camp and some outside, thus providing an incentive for people to spend their money there, which in turn helped the profits of those groups providing the food. There was an advance in the self-management process, and some of the areas of the Camp indeed became pretty much self-managed.<sup>18</sup>



Another area that tried to introduce new ideas was culture. ‘Culture’ in the WSF had always meant ‘entertainment’, usually translating into big concerts; a similar thing could be said about the IYC, although by dint of its very nature of a diverse environment where people shared the same space for days, it was very natural that a whole different level of cultural exchange and cooperative creation would be permanently taking place. There was some attempt at tapping into this, while at the same time adding another layer of politics to it, inspired by the growing barter trade movement in Argentina; that led to the Cultural Exchange Fair, which employed its own internal currency (half-jokingly called ‘Moon’). This, however, worked only for a few days; perhaps the most successful attempt at updating the WSF’s cultural agenda – or rather, to challenge its instrumentalising and simplistic approach to culture – was the Flag of the Flags, a patchwork of flags of parties, groups and movements collected at the IYC and sewn together by a local solidarity economy cooperative. Dissolving the various ‘logos’ into one, it created a multitudinous visual identity where all logos became none, and questioned ideas like ‘the work of art’ and ‘authorship’: it had no author, or a multitude of them; it was not made to be hung and shown, but to be carried in the streets.

16 Examining the official numbers of the WSF, it can be said that the IYC steadily followed the growth of the former, always housing around a third of the overall attendance.

17 *Real* is the Brazilian currency.

18 It is interesting to notice that the areas where this was more effective were occupied by groups with a living experience in self-management practices, such as Argentinean *piqueteros*.

It was this idea of a global sphere of cooperation and production, innovation and transformation, exchanging in ways that were not necessarily mediated by capitalism that was translated in the word 'community' in the call-out to the Youth Camp. The first 'official' text of the WSF to employ the expression 'movement of movements', peppered with ironic covert quotations, it went against the grain of the overhyped celebration of 'the spirit of Porto Alegre' of that year's edition in saying:

The springtime of the peoples does not begin in Porto Alegre. It begins nowhere, it begins everywhere, in each place where men and women are today experimenting with forms of living in society that go beyond capital.

However, (...) this has been one of the places to which people have looked to see that yes, other worlds are not only possible, but are being bred today. The present is pregnant with the future, and the future lasts a long time.<sup>19</sup>

By then, it was already common usage to say that the WSF was not an event, but a process. In using these words, the IYC was once again trying to create a line of continuity between what came before the first edition in 2001 and the process that had come to exist after it. However, it seemed that it was more of a process for some than others: while some groups were indeed coming together and working on common campaigns and actions (e.g. the Social Movements Network), many others remained mere observers, and many parts of the potential constituency were not even in the organisers' imagination.



Inside the eco-constructed  
Independent Media Centre in  
2003. The community and free  
radios were next door.  
Photo credit: Eduardo Seidl

The WSF had grown to be a much stronger, but apparently increasingly self-referential, self-congratulatory process. Besides, by dint of its spreading through regional forums to other areas (Europe, Argentina, India), new local dynamics of cooperating and clashing political cultures started adding up to the overall complexity. The centripetal movement that brought actors from more and more different places towards the 'centre' that could

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19 Intercontinental Youth Camp Organizing Committee 'We Are New, but Are Also the Same as Always', Call-out for the Third Intercontinental Youth Camp, in Intercontinental Youth Camp Organizing Committee. *Camper's Guide to the Third Intercontinental Youth Camp*, 6.

be identified as the International Council was a success according to all standards the main powerbrokers in the process could have; what they failed to see was the corresponding centrifugal movement, that made other actors drift further away from the Social Forces process precisely because of the local forces that started constituting themselves around it.

That would be visible in the sequel to the Intergalactika Laboratory in 2003. The European groups involved had already gone through their own social forum, where instead of dealing with forces they were not very familiar with (MST, CUT, PT, etc.), they could see nodes of power being organised around the more traditional left they were critical of in their countries. Many of them had grown more critical of the whole Social Forum experience, and that year's Intergalactika, despite having been very positive for those who attended, was a mostly internal affair, very little publicised and invisible for those who were not already 'in the loop'.<sup>20</sup>

In fact, most activities that year apart from the massive official rally-like plenaries were very badly publicised. Both the 'main' WSF and the IYC had serious organisational failures in making the programme and the spaces for workshops and seminars available. The feeling was of something huge, but amorphous; perhaps due to the aftermath of Genoa and 9/11 having sunken in, or because of the smell of the new Gulf War that hung heavily in the air, or the uncritical celebration of PT's presidential victory, or perhaps because of the sheer size of everything – the crowds, the uncountable plenaries – the general mood seemed to be one of slightly pointless, rather alienating celebration, as if the 100,000-strong attendance meant transformation in itself. If after the decision taken by the WSF International Council at the Bangkok meeting the IYC seemed poised to finally receive some recognition that would go beyond the acknowledgement of its existence, that year's WSF simply seemed a big effort with no output at all. Not only because they were happy to see the big picture become a lot more complicated and the Brazilian Organising Committee having to share some of its power, most people in the IYC Organising Committee were quite glad to know that the next edition was going to be in India.

## After India

Not having been to India, I am not in a position to evaluate what happened there. What I can do is sketchily present how the 'transfer of knowledge' (and decision-making power) happened between Porto Alegre and Mumbai, and the impact the experience of the WSF 2004 had in the Brazilian organisers.

After the International Council meeting in Porto Alegre that decided the following WSF would be in India, two 'safeguard clauses' were introduced by the Brazilian Organising Committee: one, that it should come back in 2005; two, that the BOC would become the

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20 For a lively report that also sketches the kind of 'critique from the periphery' I will advocate in the last section, cf. Osterweil, M. (2003) 'Decentering the Forum: Is Another Critique of the Forum Possible?', in Sen, J., A. Anand, A. Escobar, and P. Waterman (eds.) *The World Social Forum: Challenging Empires* [[http://www.choike.org/nuevo\\_eng/informes/1557.html](http://www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/informes/1557.html)].

Executive Secretariat (ES) of the International Council, thus still being able to actively engage with the organizing process in India. No such thing happened with the IYC; there was very little ‘independent’ contact between Porto Alegre and Mumbai, and no prioritisation on the part of the ES in terms of helping some kind of exchange to take place. This might have had something to do with the fact that some of the main actors in India were the youths of Communist parties, who would probably recognize their Brazilian counterparts as either too ‘autonomous’, or as PT members. In the end, the ES provided four plane tickets for people from the Porto Alegre IYC OC (three ‘autonomous’, one a PT member) to travel to Mumbai.

It is obvious, however, that the WSF 2004 represented a new point of departure for the process. For the first time not in charge of the executive decisions, the BOC/ ES watched as the Indian Organising Committee refused money from the Ford Foundation, employed free software on all levels, and instead of the comfortable installations of a top-level university held the main event in an abandoned factory whose inside was transformed by means of relatively cheap, vernacular architectural techniques. More importantly, the plenaries in which the ‘intellectuals’ of the ‘movement’ spoke were largely unattended, whereas the self-organised activities overcrowded rooms. Even the cultural programme was a big challenge to the lacklustre and limited understanding shown by the three Porto Alegre editions. From now on, the actors involved in the Indian process were forces not to be reckoned without, and the Brazilian groups had to show they were capable of keeping up.



One of the eco-constructed workshop spaces by the river in Porto Alegre.  
Photo credit: Eduardo Seidl.

One of the immediate moves was the enlargement of the BOC, including among others the two members who had ‘conquered’ the right to be there by virtue of their initiative within the process: the African-Brazilian WSF Committee, and the IYC OC. This was followed by the creation of International Council working groups in areas such as programme, communication, translation and solidarity economy.

The incorporation of the IYC OC, however, went much further than its simple inclusion in the Brazilian Organising Committee. After India, the discussion turned to how the

next Porto Alegre could be entirely different from the previous three, and the only ones in the Brazilian WSF process who could boast some experience in doing just that were those involved in the IYC organization. This began with a spatial incorporation of the Youth Camp: the next WSF would happen entirely in public spaces on the bank of the Guaíba Lake, with the Harmonia Park right in its middle. Since these spaces had to be used in creative and environment-friendly ways, the people responsible for the whole of the WSF infrastructure were now PK Das, the architect who designed the Mumbai WSF, and the infrastructure working group of the IYC OC. The latter also had important input in International Council working groups such as solidarity economy and communication (by virtue of its internal dynamics, the culture working group remained the least open and the only exclusively Brazilian of them).

This, however, did not represent a significant transformation in the BOC's (or the IC's, which is mediated by the former) relationship to the Youth Camp. It was clear in the vast amount of texts written by key members after India that it was only in Mumbai that they 'discovered' the importance of free software and alternative media, or that the event worked better if downsized and practicing what it preached. All of these were identified as 'the lessons of Mumbai', even though they were already present in Porto Alegre since 2002.<sup>21</sup> This was made clear in the presentation of the overall design of 2005 WSF, were both the then mayor of Porto Alegre (himself a relative newcomer to the process) and the head of the Porto Alegre WSF office spoke of the changes as being entirely the consequence of the learning process of India.<sup>22</sup>



The famous outdoor showers.  
Photo credit: Viliano Fassini

Even if we assume that this is indeed the case (which means that some of the most important actors of the WSF process paid no heed whatsoever to what was happening inside the very process for over two years), some things sound more disingenuous than others. The space occupied by the event in 2005 was named 'World Social Territory', and was called 'a city within the city', 'the territory of a possible world', all

21 For instance, see HONTY, G. *Las lecciones de Mumbai*. Text circulated by the author.

22 Weissheimer, M. A. (2004) 'Porto Alegre Começa a Construir Território Social Mundial' [<http://agenciartamainor.uol.com.br/agencia.asp?coluna=reportagens&id=2464>].

formulations close if not identical to the 2002 IYC proposal. True, the oversized 2003 edition and the failure of the big plenaries in 2004 have caused the format to be entirely transformed, but the solution that was found was very similar to one found in 2003 by the Youth Camp.

Instead of having five thematic axes around which plenaries, seminars and workshops were proposed, the 2005 WSF saw its 'territory' divided into eleven 'thematic terrains', areas with installations for the realization of self-organized activities around certain key themes; instead of the BOC proposing activities, these resulted from the merging of proposals from different organisations, with the intention of facilitating common projects and campaigns resulting from their encounter – like the IYC after 2002, the event was entirely self-managed. This is very similar, but still less than the idea of Thematic Convergence Spaces of the 2003 IYC, where groups were invited to get together in proposing activities, organizing the programme, managing the space and (as the expected result) working together afterwards.<sup>23</sup>

And thus some of the questions raised after the IC Bangkok meeting may find their answers.

## Conclusions

The question of why the IYC has remained the 'unthought' of the WSF process – that which is present, but not visible or articulable – may elicit two kinds of answers which are not *per se* mutually exclusive. One points to its intrinsic problems and determinants; the other looks at the WSF process as a whole.

On the one hand, we have the evident gap between the kind of thing the IYC set out to do from 2002 on and the prevailing 'youth' political culture of Porto Alegre, Brazil, and to a lesser degree, Latin America. The label 'youth' remains caught up between two different meanings: that of marketing and commerce (the 'young' market) and that of the youth of political parties, with all its patronising connotations. This is reflected in the media coverage received by the IYC, half of it focused on the exoticism and exuberance of most of its constituency, half of it oblivious to the autonomy of its organizing process and taking its cue from the 'adults' in the BOC or other political authorities.<sup>24</sup> Between these two poles, young people appear as recipients – of marketing subjectivities, of public policies, of orders coming from higher cadres – never as protagonists.

As such, the Youth Camp became permanently stuck between the ambition of its ideas, and the conservatism of its original conception; while the former tried to incorporate new elements into the prevailing political culture it moved in, the latter showed precisely the limits it would have to transpose. One of the possibilities for this

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23 This idea is fleshed out in my other article in this issue.

24 One of the most important leftwing magazines in Brazil quoted an employee of the local government of Porto Alegre as the 'mayor' of the IYC, belying an understanding of it as something organized for the 'young' by the 'adults'. Such a mistake is in fact not uncommon.

transposition lay precisely in the possibility of establishing a dialogue between different political cultures, particularly (but not exclusively) that of the 'new political generation' of the Global North, and the 'youth' of Latin America. For various reasons, structural and conjunctural, it never happened. These range from material conditions (access to the internet, language skills, mobility, etc.), to fluctuations in the political landscape (Genoa imposing a change of direction to groups in the Global North, the victories of PT still carrying some belief in party politics); from deep underlying differences (in terms of what social demands are in Europe and Latin America, for instance, or the relative weight of party politics) to sheer mutual incomprehension.

The extrinsic problems are also epitomised in the self-branding. Because of the vocabulary in which it is inscribed, 'youth' immediately means something of a lesser importance. The political landscape determined by this vocabulary is precisely that of the 'adults' in the Brazilian Organising Committee and the International Council; as late as 2004, immediately before the Forum in India, one of the main actors in the BOC/Executive Secretariat was asking the question 'what are *we* going to do to include the youth?' It showed his position to be oblivious of the existence of the IYC and other autonomous spaces, and the fact that the 'youth' were 'old enough' to occupy their own space without having to be recognized by anyone, and had enough to say so that their inclusion did not mean attending the big plenaries.<sup>25</sup>

Despite all its innovations, even at the time of its incorporation by the WSF, the Youth Camp remained invisible to the main actors in the International Council and the Brazilian Organising Committee. This could be understood in either of two ways: that there is an important part of the post-1990s political scene (the 'new political generation') that remains largely unseen by these actors; or that there is a deliberate effort to ignore it. The two, of course, are not mutually exclusive, and are probably both true to a certain extent. In fact, they point to a critique and a counter-critique of the WSF that I would like to discuss briefly.

The most common critique of the WSF sees it as something emanating from a centre of gravity, the OCs (Brazilian and Indian, the former also constituting the Executive Secretariat) and the IC. The stronger form of this critique would argue that this is where decisions are made, and that these belie a conscious political project, an alliance policy etc.; the weaker form would simply focus on these as the decision-making bodies in which only a certain number of actors, all of them sharing similar backgrounds and political cultures, wield any power. I expect my argument throughout this essay to have moved closer to the latter: there is a plurality – though, unfortunately, a small one in both qualitative and quantitative terms – of political projects and cultures being played out in these bodies, and any attempt to reduce everything to just one of them would be unconvincing.<sup>26</sup>

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25 Gryzbowski, C. (2004) Olhar Atento Sobre o Forum [[http://www.novae.inf.br/fsm2004/olhar\\_atento.htm](http://www.novae.inf.br/fsm2004/olhar_atento.htm)]

26 See, for example, accusations that the WSF was used in Brazil to raise PT's profile. Although it is certainly true it had this effect, I believe this was mostly marginal, and attributing to that a driving power in the initiation of the process seems to ignore a) the risks it also represented, especially in a moment when the party was moving quickly to the centre; b) the strange economic rationality such a

Although this line of thought is fair, it is only so to a certain extent. What it fails to acknowledge is that, once begun, the process was much too big to be ‘controlled’; regional forums, for instance, enjoy total independence from the International Council, the Executive Secretariat and the Organising Committees; the space taken up by the IYC in the process was usually occupied rather than offered. In fact, the incapacity of the ‘centre’ of the WSF process to acknowledge the IYC, while at the same time incorporating its experience, could be seen as a counterfactual argument for a politics that prizes connection over accumulation.

Instead of ascribing infinite powers to the decision-making bodies that turn any sort of engagement always unbalanced, a more productive approach is for groups and movements to focus on the pores and, by trying to understand how the process works, find the ways in which it can be best used to their advantage: for publicising campaigns, internal organisation, network-building etc. Instead of the old ‘abandon’ or ‘contaminate’ dichotomy, or even the disillusioned ‘consume’ option, this critique points to a fourth alternative: ‘use’. Here, one can see that some of the ‘peripheries’ of the WSF process were a lot bolder and forward-looking than its ‘core’: while the IC/BOC went from seeing the WSF as a traditional talkshop to realizing it as a larger process, but were unable to make the passage from the first, rigid model to a more fluid one, ideas coming from ‘fringes’ such as the IYC would prove more productive and offer a way forward.<sup>27</sup>

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gamble would have involved; c) the fact that the Rio Grande do Sul PT, and the forces within PT which were closely involved in the WSF, are not the same of the party leadership and President Lula.

27 We could note, for instance, that the idea of the Thematic Convergence Spaces in the IYC 2003 came from a similar concept employed in the Argentinean Social Forum in October 2002. This was an attempt to answer the same question the IC was asking itself at the time – how to go from a diverse gathering with diffuse ideas and proposals to concrete convergence? This is a very good example of how the answer came from the ‘periphery’, and would take long to be appropriated by the ‘core’.