The World Social Forum, a Globalisation from Below?

Geoffrey Pleyers*

FNRS, University of Louvain-la-Neuve (U.C.L.), Belgium

Keywords
World Social Forum, scholar-activists, globalisation

Introduction
Like many alter-globalisation\(^1\) actors that are influential at the movement’s international level, ATTAC-France, the Committee for the Cancellation of the Third World Debt, the Mexican Network against Free Trade, the Continental Alliance against the Americas Free Trade Area and the Bangkok-based Focus on the Global South have all been founded by committed intellectuals and scholar activists. All these networks and organizations have played a major role in movement internationalisation process and have remained influential members of the World Social Forum International Council (IC).\(^2\) Indeed, the World Social Forum (WSF) initiative came out as an initiative from committed intellectuals and cosmopolitan\(^3\) activists. These international leaders largely dominated the first three WSF and gained an unprecedented influence on the alter-globalisation movement. However, besides empowering these cosmopolitan activists, the WSF also provided

\(^{*}\) The author would like to thank Jonathan Friedman, Carla Alicia Tejeda and Madhuresh Kumar.

\(^{1}\) This term has been chosen to designate the “global justice movement” because it reflects both the aim of the movement (“another globalisation”) and its global character. This terminology is now commonly used in many countries around the world. However, it does not mean to limit the movement to its international actors as many grassroots alter-globalisation activists focus on the local level and daily life.

\(^{2}\) The committee that oversees the World Social Forum (WSF) organisation and determines its location.

\(^{3}\) Friedman 1999.
an open space that favoured interactions between international leaders and activists with a distinct conception of the movement.

This article first outlines the emergence process of an influential and well-connected activist cosmopolitan elite within the alter-globalisation movement. I then focus on consequences of the divide between hyper-mobile, globe-trotting leaders and local and regional grassroots activists: while encouraged to become “active citizens” in society, activists are often kept in a passive position in the WSF and alter-globalisation organisations. However, as the final two sections of this article argue, the WSF has also favoured interactions between cosmopolitan leaders and grassroots activists in two significant ways. Firstly, by promoting a renewed interest of cosmopolitan activists in their home countries’ local and national movements. Secondly, by providing an open space for debate and cross-fertilisation of ideas between international leaders and activists promoting a more horizontal conception of the forum. I conclude by outlining some concrete results of this cross-fertilisation process on the WSF organisation.

This study is based on significant qualitative field research conducted between 1999 and 2007 at the seven World Social Forums as well as international protests and activist meetings in Mexico, France and Belgium. Two specific studies focused on social and cultural activism at the local level were carried out in Liege (Belgium) and Mexico City. This material has been complemented by textual analysis and semi-structured interviews.

From International Scholar-Activist Networks to a Cosmopolitan Activist Elite

Many academics and committed intellectuals have become major “entrepreneurs” of alter-globalisation mobilisation and of the World Social Forum in its first years. Almost half of the members of the International Council are “committed scholar-activists” and intellectuals. Indeed, the

---

4) McCarty and Zald 1977.

5) Numerous university professors and directors of academic research centres are active in the International Council: E. Taddei, manager of a wide Latin American Network of social scientists takes part in the meetings in the name of the Continental Social Alliance; A. Buzgarin from the University of Moscow is founder of Alternative Russia; F. Houtart (World Alternative Forum and emeritus professor of the Catholic University of Louvain),