

## **“Youth and the World Social Forum”**

By Jeff Juris

The fifth edition of the World Social Forum (WSF) was held in Porto Alegre on January 26 to 31, 2005, a year after it was organized in Mumbai, India as an initial foray from the Brazilian city of its birth. The most recent Forum involved more than 150,000 participants, including 35,000 in the Youth Camp. Once again, a dizzying array of alternative proposals, projects, and ideas about how to best organize economic, social, and political relations in a world beyond corporate globalization and militarism were on display. So too were competing visions of the nature and role of youth. Indeed, as Carles Feixa (1993) suggests, the category of “youth” often serves as a powerful metaphor, signaling broader societal crisis, instability, and/or change. Not surprisingly, young people are frequently a focal point for debate within movements for social transformation. In this brief essay, I explore the role of young people in the WSF, focusing on new forms of political organization and recent transformations in the Forum itself.

On January 26, 2005 Brazilian President, Ignacio Luis da Silva (Lula), addressed a packed *gigantinho* stadium during the inauguration of the WSF. Two years earlier, Lula had drawn widespread adulation within the Forum as the first elected President from the Leftist Worker’s Party (PT). This year he was roundly criticized in many circles for allying himself with local and transnational financial elites against the interests of his grassroots base. When a group of hecklers began taunting Lula during his speech, the President retorted,

Those of you who aren’t from here, don’t be afraid. These people that don’t want to listen are sons and daughters of the P.T. who rebelled. That’s typical of youth, and one day they

are going to mature, and we'll be here with open arms to welcome them back (*New York Times*, January 28, 2005, p. A9)

On this view, youth represents a stage of development characterized by disobedience and rebelliousness along the inevitable path toward adulthood, which is ironic in this case given that Lula represents a movement that itself began as a rebellion against military dictatorship. Some versions of this trope construct youth as socially deviant (cf. Hall and Jefferson 1976). In Lula's formulation, young people are given to unruliness and excess, but will ultimately evolve into "mature" political beings. The category of youth is pathologized, and thus de-politicized. A related version of the generational model views youth as political actors in training, raw material waiting to be given form through careful cultivation within formal political organizations. Indeed, most politically active young people in Latin America are organized within "youth" sectors of formal leftwing political parties or institutional student-based movements, which is how the Youth Camp at the WSF originally got its name (Nunes forthcoming). Though cast in a more positive light, young people are still treated as less than full political subjects.

An alternative view floating around the Forum conceives youth as active political agents, but still projects their agency toward the distant future. For example, as Kamal Mitra Chenoy, member of the WSF Ad hoc India Organizing Committee (IOC), pointed out in *Terra Viva*, an independent newspaper covering the Forum, "The real constituency of the WSF is the youth. They are the future. And if an alternative world is possible it is for them and they are the ones who are going to build it (*Terra Viva*, January 31, 2005, p. 11)." Another IOC member pointed out during an open discussion on the future of the Forum on January 30 in the Youth Camp that, "When you are old the dreams grow faint, but when you are young the dreams are stronger (field

notes).” Here, young people are romanticized, transformed into a symbol of future hope and potential, rather than coeval participants.

In practice, many younger anti-globalization activists within and around the Forum reject the category of youth, given its paternalist overtones. Rather than “young” versus “old,” a more important cleavage thus involves what I refer to elsewhere (Juris 2004) as a conflict between “networking” and “command logics.” The latter, characteristic of traditional formations such as political parties and unions, is based on recruiting new members, building unified strategies, political representation, and struggle for hegemony. In contrast, the former involves the creation of broad umbrella spaces, where diverse movements converge around a few common hallmarks, while preserving their autonomy and specificity. Rather than recruiting new members to any particular organization, the objective becomes expanding horizontally by linking up with already existing networks, organizations, and movements. Large member organizations thus give way to flexible structures, such as the Movement for Global Resistance (MRG) in Barcelona or Peoples Global Action (PGA) at the global scale, which facilitate communication and coordination among diverse groups, including economic justice activists, environmentalists, squatters, feminists, anti-racists, indigenous rights advocates, and pro-immigrant supporters. In this sense, rather than identifying in generational terms, many younger activists see themselves as part of a new way of doing politics, potentially involving people of all ages.

In theory, the WSF represents an example of this new form of politics. For example, the Charter of Principles defines the Forum as an open meeting space for reflection and debate, while no one can represent the Forum or speak in its name. In practice, however, the Forum has been characterized by a conflict between newer and traditional actors (cf. Juris forthcoming). In this sense, hecklers have not only criticized Lula for abandoning his political base, they have also

chastised him for attempting to “represent” the Forum at the World Economic Forum in Davos. At the same time, the broader WSF has increasingly moved toward a decentralized, participatory model of organization. Young people are thus not only active political subjects (cf. Amit-Talai and Wulff 1995); they are increasingly influencing the organization of the Forum itself.

### **The Intercontinental Youth Camp**

Since its inception in January 2001, organizers have presented the WSF as heir to the wave of resistance against corporate globalization that burst onto the public radar screen during the anti-WTO protests in Seattle. The Forum was viewed as a broad space of convergence among all those opposed to neoliberal capitalism. Whereas earlier counter-summit actions had given widespread visibility to a new movement, Forum organizers felt it was time to build a concrete vision for an alternative world. However, the younger, direct-action oriented sectors most active within earlier mass protests have been underrepresented within the WSF. Many view the Forum as an attempt by the traditional left to establish hegemony over a movement that had escaped their control. Meanwhile, those who have participated have largely focused their energy on the Intercontinental Youth Camp (IYC).

The IYC began as an emergency solution to the problem of housing during the first WSF in Porto Alegre. The camp was led by traditional Brazilian youth organizations, including leftist parties and formal student movements. As such, there was scant evidence of new horizontal forms of organization, while the camp was located in a large urban park far from the center of activities. Moreover, the camp featured little internal programming. All this began to change with the second IYC and the increasing participation of newer political actors from gay rights,

homelessness, and hip hop movements (Nunes forthcoming). In particular, the participation of autonomous architecture students led to the concept of the Youth Camp as a city, involving self-managed, directly democratic forms of organization, and an increased presence of alternative media and ecologically friendly construction techniques (Ibid).

During the second and third editions of the IYC, radical grassroots activists organized the *Intergaláctica Laboratory of Disobedience*, a participatory forum for sharing experiences among resistance movements around the world. Activists from *Intergaláctica* also engaged in non-violent direct action against the official Forum, including a highly visible occupation of the VIP room in 2002, ultimately leading to its abolition (cf. Juris forthcoming). Many younger activists thus participate within the IYC along the Forum's margins, engaging in horizontal networking practices, while creatively intervening to promote what it views as positive change within the broader WSF.

In terms of sheer numbers, participation in the IYC has skyrocketed: from 1,500 in 2001 to 12,500 in 2002 to 23,500 in 2003. The most recent IYC in Porto Alegre housed nearly 35,000 activists, mostly from Brazil and neighboring countries, but also including groups from further afield. This increase mirrors the growth of the Forum itself (20,000 in 2001, 80,000 in 2002, 100,000 in 2003, 120,000 in 2004, and 150,000 in 2005). Many observers have characterized the IYC as a political Woodstock. Indeed, the camp involves thousands of shabbily dressed young people living collectively, taking communal meals, selling their wares, dancing, drinking, and listening to live and recorded music throughout the night. Moreover, the long lines for bathrooms and showers give the appearance of a mass refugee camp. At the same time, there is also significant political discussion and debate, particularly within organized spaces, such as *Intergaláctica*.

The concept of the Youth Camp as a city was taken even further during the most recent IYC. The idea was to fully transform the camp from an alternative sleeping area to an innovative space for generating new forms of social, political, and cultural interaction. Specifically, the IYC was organized into zones around seven Action Centers intended to promote the convergence of activities around similar themes. These included the *Caracol Intergaláctica* (global struggles, new forms of activism, and direct action), *Espaço Che* (culture and health), *Laboratório de Conhecimentos Livres* (free knowledge and communication), *Lôgun Édé* (human rights and sexual diversity), *Terrau* (anti-capitalist social movements), *Raizes* (cultures of resistance), and *Tupiguara* (environmental culture). Moreover, there were also numerous *axônios*, or smaller spaces, scattered throughout the camp, housing activities related to feminism, health, clowning, hip hop, solidarity economies, student movements, and religion. Cultural and expressive forms of intervention were particularly prevalent throughout the camp. As for me, I spent much of my time helping to organize the *Caracol*, which involved debates around direct action, autonomous politics and horizontality, intellectual property rights, activist-research, and critiques of the official Forum.

Moreover, the IYC was organized along self-managed, directly democratic lines. All residents were encouraged to take part in construction, administration, and decision-making tasks. Indeed, the camp was conceived as a laboratory for generating new network-based social and political practices. As the camp manual pointed out, the IYC was designed to “create a short-circuit in the old forms of political representation. It’s a laboratory of the new political militancy seeking to make resistance an act of creation, to promote counter-power.” Instead of organizing around youth-based identities and traditional notions of inclusion, activists primarily wanted to practice new models of horizontal organization. At the same time, certain “liminal” aspects of

youth (Turner 1969), involving widespread experimentation, creativity, play, and communalism, capture the ethos of the camp as a laboratory for generating innovative practices and new forms of sociality. Interestingly, as we shall see, the organization of the broader Forum would undergo similar transformations in 2005.

### **Toward the World Social Territory**

Even as big-name political leaders such as Lula or Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez continued to draw huge crowds, despite the formal prohibition on the participation of political parties, the 2005 edition of the Forum incorporated greater decentralization and grassroots participation into its organizational architecture. On the one hand, previous editions of the Forum were based at the Catholic University (PUC), located on the outskirts of Porto Alegre, far from the IYC. The Forum was not only spatially centralized; it also revolved around large plenary sessions involving high-profile intellectuals. Following the trend set last year in Mumbai, the decision was taken this year to hold Forum activities in a series of open-air tents, shifting from the PUC to a large outdoor area surrounding the Youth Camp along the banks of Guayba Lake. The 2005 IYC thus found itself at the center of Forum activities, while its decentralized, network-based organization was reflected in the broader WSF.

Specifically, the 2005 WSF was conceived in spatial terms as a “World Social Territory,” divided into eleven horizontally linked thematic areas, each involving auditoriums, stages for cultural events, food courts, markets, and information centers. Themes included: Autonomous Thought (Knowledge and Technologies); Diversity; Art and Creation; Communication; the Commons (Land and Peoples); Social Struggles; Peace and Antimilitarism; Democratic Order;

Alternative Economies; Human Rights and Dignity; and Ethics, Cosmovisions, and Spirituality. Although some participants complained of fragmentation and long distances, it was relatively easy to move fluidly among the different spaces, including the activities organized within the Youth Camp. The idea of a singular open space thus moved toward a decentralized network of horizontally connected spaces, while the entire Forum had a more popular, grassroots feel.

On the other hand, whereas previous editions of the WSF in Porto Alegre relied on the organizing committee to organize the main plenary sessions and choose the speakers, the 2005 Forum was entirely self-managed. Forum workshops and sessions were organized through an electronic consultation process, as delegates proposed the main themes and submitted proposals for their own activities within the resulting terrains. The Brazilian Organizing Committee (OC) collected, consolidated, and organized the proposals into a program of activities, rejecting only those that violated the Charter of Principles. The experiment was widely considered a success, although sessions varied with respect to quality and level of participation. I attended several excellent activities, including a workshops series around the Forum as an “open space” for communication, coordination, and exchanging ideas, a discussion on alliance building, a plenary session on alternatives to corporate globalization, and a conference on free software, knowledge, and speech in the information society with Manuel Castells, Lawrence Lessig, John Perry Barlow, and Gilberto Gil. Finally, the WSF infrastructure was also constructed using ecologically sustainable materials and open source software.

In all these senses--decentralized territorial organization, self-management and horizontal coordination, as well as physical infrastructure--the official Forum in 2005 moved closer to the grassroots, network-based model of the Youth Camp. Although as Nunes (Ibid) suggests, these changes were largely influenced by last year's Forum in Mumbai, it is hard to imagine Forum



organizers were ignorant of recent trends and innovations within the IYC. Regardless of the specific causal chain, there has been a broader process of migration, where practices and values surrounding horizontal coordination and grassroots participation once associated with informal “youth” sectors of the movement have diffused widely, ultimately reaching the larger Forum. In this sense, young people are active political subjects, and they are having an immediate impact on how the Forum is organized. Indeed, rather than youth moving toward “mature” forms of organization, things seem to be moving in the opposite direction.

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