

World Social Forum. Challenging Empires. Edited by Jai Sen, Anita Anand, Arturo Escobar & Peter Waterman, The Viveka Foundation: New Delhi, 2004. 402 pages. Index.

Published on the eve of the 2004 World Social Forum (WSF) held in Mumbai, India, this book is an anthology of articles, interviews, and documents about the WSF. Although most of the writings had already been published or disseminated on the internet, the collection is as new and current as any multi-authored volume could hope to be. The book contains 57 writings written by 39 individual contributors plus several formulated by organizations.

The WSF began in January 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and was held there for two additional years before journeying to India. The next Forum will be back in Porto Alegre. The initiation of the WSF was an innovative idea, and the early meetings succeeded in garnering media attention. As someone who perceived the WSF as important and yet has not attended it, this reviewer was eager to read the volume to see what the Forum has accomplished and how it is confronting the usual challenges of any international association. Getting started is often easier than maintaining momentum.

As Jai Sen, one of the four co-editors, explains in the first of several "Proems" that undergird the volume, the book is an attempt to contribute to a better understanding of the WSF. In my view, the book succeeds in achieving that purpose. The book provides a valuable window into the WSF annual events, and to the phenomenon of a Forum within a broader global politics. The reader will see the rich diversity of perspectives, the creativity, the complexity, the anger, the optimism, the internal contradictions, and the disorganization that all play a part of the WSF story.

The subtitle of the book is "Challenging Empires," and the authors see the Forum doing that on several levels. The Empire is revealed to be "neoliberal globalization" which is pointed to by many of the authors as the problem and target underlying the Forum. The term "neoliberal globalization" is not precisely defined, but one gets the basic idea in the WSF Charter of Principles (June 2001) which states opposition to "a process of globalisation commanded by large multinational corporations and by govern-

ments and international institutions at the service of those corporations' interests with the complicity of national governments." Much criticism is leveled at the World Trade Organization and at the United States by many of the authors in the volume.

The book is divided into five sections, each beginning with a thoughtful short Proem by Anita Anand. (Anand was one of the co-editors of the excellent 1999 volume, *Whose World Is It Anyway? Civil Society, the United Nations and the Multilateral Future.*) The five sections are: Antecedents, Diaries of WSF participants, Critical commentaries, the Forum in India, and Looking Beyond to Possible Futures and Worlds. Each section also contains a set of short documents about the WSF and related fora.

The two themes that seem to unify the book are (1) opposition to neoliberal globalization and (2) the WSF as an Open Space, rather than a movement or organization. The notion that something as threatening and powerful as neoliberal globalization should be addressed in the WSF by sponsoring a global forum, rather than through transnational organized advocacy, is a novel idea in the evolution of international associations. I am unaware of any precise historical precedent for a continuous broad international forum outside of the academic context. The much older World Economic Forum (WEF), typically held in Davos, may be a precedent to some extent (and certainly gave the inspiration to the WSF organizers), but one guesses that the WSF organizers think that they are doing something different than what they perceive the WEF to be doing. One gap in the volume is a comparative analysis of the two Forums.

The idea of an open space is contested within the WSF on two (or more) dimensions. One is whether the WSF should remain just a neutral space for knowledge sharing and dialogue, or whether it should solidify into a movement or organization. Chico Whitaker's essay discusses this conundrum in a clear and cogent way. He views the WSF as an open space that can be visited voluntarily and that serves to incubate

ideas. Such a space has no leaders. This lack of hierarchy is seen as valuable in inducing and facilitating movements, rather than seeking to command them. Another dimension of contestation is how open the WSF space should be. As Jai Sen points out in one of his essays, the Forum is not actually open to groups of all views. One has to be “opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism.” Surely this is a self-contradictory stance for a forum that should be eager to listen to and argue with the neoliberals.

Many other issues regarding the WSF are addressed in the essays. One is the challenge of spatial geography. The WSF began in Porto Alegre and for quite predictable reasons, holding it in other locations has proved difficult. Even a Space has to be located somewhere and this presents a challenge for the WSF that has defined itself as operating in a “decentralised fashion.” In his essay, Michael Albert suggests emphasizing local Forums as the foundation of the WSF and turning the annual global forum into a delegate event. In another essay, P.J. James takes note of some offshoots of the WSF such as the European Social Forum and the Asian Social Forum.

Other essays address theoretical questions. Arturo Escobar examines cyberspace and complexity theory for insights into the development of social movements. Michal Osterweil, borrowing from Boaventura de Sousa Santos, ponders whether we need a new epistemology to assess experiences such as the WSF since they will always be found wanting when gauged with established criteria. Nikhil Anand suggests that by coming to the WSF, participants are com-

pelled to give up singular discourses of marginalisation and to come to terms with more complex and multivalent relationships.

Still other essays seek to present a useful historical perspective on the WSF processes. Peter Waterman provides a very useful background. Michael Löwy compares the WSF to the four Internationals which began in 1864. Johanna Brenner looks at a few decades of transnational feminist organizing. Andrej Grubacic considers the Anarchist roots of the Forum.

One omission struck me as I finished reading the book: I could not recall much being said about law. I checked the index and saw three references to “law,” and yet when I thumbed back to those pages, nothing was there about law or the rule of law. Could it be that in this entire volume from 39 contributors, there was no discussion about the role of law in social processes? And if so, was that a blind spot of the editors, or does the inattention to law reflect its non-importance at the WSF? I don’t know the answer.

Within the inattention to law, there is even a larger gap, which is the omission of any discussion of international law. Given the theme of the WSF that “Another World is Possible,” this reviewer would have expected that better world to be one in which international legal norms play a stronger role than they do in the existing world. I would hope that the WSF vision does not understand international law as simply a top-down tool used by the Empire.

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