



“THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM”

Article for the Spectator

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The march was pure Evita. It headed from the run down centre of Porto Alegre to the magnificent grass amphitheatre by the river. Twenty five thousand demonstrators shuffling along under the dead eyes of a hostile populace. Their rush hour was being delayed. To a man that seemed to know that the local Governor was using 1.2 million dollars' worth of their money to subsidise the event. The multiple factions of the Left were visible. Varieties of socialists, clusters of communists and a posse of French Government ministers in pre-election, cost free, radical chic mode. The herd was kept moving by professional knots of political demonstrators, apparently unaware that the world had moved on from 1968. I fell in behind a microphone truck built on the lines of an open topped double decker bus. From its roof came a continuous stream of rhetoric from a Brazilian La Passionara. Porto Alegre doesn't see many demonstrations nowadays and they don't have the money to prune the civic trees. Every two hundred yards or so the occupants on the roof of the microphone truck were forced horizontal by neo-Fascist branches, but not for one moment did the rhetoric pause. All I can see are the bosoms and the microphone of the orator, when a column of jolly Italians swings in from a side street and tries to lead the demonstration off to the left. The McDonalds hunt is on again. It dawns on me, and the Socialist organisers of the march, that a suspicious number of these Italians are dressed in black and white. A short, sharp fist fight ensues between red and black. The main body of the march heads on towards the sunset and interminable speeches from gaucho politicians.

For the second year the World Social Forum is in town. It takes over the campus of PUC - the Pontifical Catholic University. Seventeen thousand registered participants with another twenty thousand observers. For four days the mornings are devoted to conference sessions in hangar like rooms. Up to two thousand people listen respectfully to tiny figures, on distant podia, saying largely predictable things. The afternoons are for seven hundred workshops. I am lobbied with vigour to attend “The intimacy and the private life of the worker: ways to combat the Patroness' oppression”. I excuse myself on the grounds that I have already committed myself to “The Psycho-pathology of Solidarity”. Actually, of course, I am really heading for “Erosion, Technological Transformation and Corporate Concentration in the XXI century”. The event is definitely fashion sensitive. Gay campaigners, on stilts, wave a rather stylish version of the rainbow banner, redesigned with the rubic cube in mind. Its carnival time in Porto Alegre and a posse of large ladies dressed as lampshades swing rhythmically through the throng. The European participants seem to lack the Brazilian flair. Most of them seem to have settled for a Dave Davis look circa 1974, trousers too tight and shirts too open.

In all this good humoured chaos something rather important is struggling to be born. This is a meeting place for the global networks for civil society. There are two thousand serious players consolidating their own networks and liasing with parallel causes in a welter of unlikely collaboration. Ernest organisers consult their diaries like world-class opera singers committed to too many Toscas. Right at the core of the Forum something interesting is stirring. The stars of the show are first class politicians with good minds. They are tough thinkers and powerful speakers. They should really be elected politicians, were it not for the corruption of their domestic political systems. They recognise that the events of September 11th changed everything for the antiglobalisation movement. The slogan of the Forum, “Another World is Possible” is code for saying that the movement must develop from critique of the existing system, to positive suggestions for improvement. We have moved beyond the famous banner of last summer, which demanded “Replace globalisation with something nicer”. In the privacy of Porto Alegre's equivalent of the Imperial Hotel, they will admit that we are all globalisers now. Post 911, government is back with a vengeance and the belief that corporations and social movements could between them somehow dispense with the usual apparatus of political power looks as dated as dot coms and the Goldilocks economy. They struggle with the moral challenges of engaging with power. If Davos is where “power goes to copulate with money”, this gathering has not got much beyond a pallid petting. They are flattered by the presence of French Socialist ministers and do not understand

why the French Left had excluded the Belgian Prime Minister when he offered to attend. Guy Verhoffstadt, a Centre Right politician, with a sophisticated analysis for re-connecting the movements roused by globalisation with the political mainstream, is beyond their comprehension. From the platform they are offered Enron, Andersons and Argentina as justification for continuing the struggle of a movement deprived by bin Laden of its magic, its menace and its interest to the media on one September day.

A certain darkness stalks the campus. There is a real fear of the Strangelove State that appears to be growing in America, with its echoes in Europe. The Latin America correspondent of the Economist wears his blues suit and tie in sartorial protest, but he fails to convince me that the murder of three Socialist mayors in three weeks is just a statistical reflection of the levels of street crime in Sao Paulo. On the penultimate day of this gathering in defence of the excluded, the queues of the northern wealthy at the campus cash machines proves too much of a temptation. A bank guard replenishing one of the machines is shot down under the noses of the Brazilian police.

Both Davos and Porto Alegre are ersatz institutions. In a world that has created an economic globalisation without a matching political infrastructure, they float in the global political space. I am here for the Commission on Globalisation, which attempts to be a 'safe space' for discussions between all sides in the globalisation debate. I think I am the only Conservative figure amidst this sea of red and green, but I share their concern at the environmental, human rights and development challenges which the world faces. Under all the posturing and nostalgia of the gathering there is a real passion to produce real answers in a real world. The mainstream political system should not ignore the passions of Porto Alegre. There is an urgent need for functioning political institutions at global level with a real democratic mandate. If the liberal democracies don't create them, other forces are waiting.



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