

Society & Social  
Problems

# Happy (?) New Year

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Social critics who claim the high moral ground should be looking to reclaim the streets instead

First thing New Year's morning, I received a cryptic SMS greeting that wished us a "Happy New Year in the midst of a tsunami crisis" and urged the blessings of God to make us wiser and stronger. For a scary moment, I thought the Jamaat-e-Islami had gotten a list of new year's eve revellers and sent out this message, so that all the party-goers could repent the morning after. I discovered the sender was a liberal instead and it reminded me of the nexus between the conservatives and liberals when it comes to claiming the higher moral ground.

The tragic effects of the Asian tsunami are not lost on the world community. At the time of writing, some US\$2 billion have been collected to aid the victims as a practical strategy and volunteers have flown in to the affected areas to assist in whatever way they can. On a more abstract level, as a token of respect and to show solidarity and compassion, candle-lit vigils were held, official mourning days were announced and even New Year celebrations were either cancelled, toned down or converted into fund-raising events for the tsunami victims. All noble efforts, but there is a danger sometimes in these symbolic acts. They allow us to pacify our consciences that we did something - even if it was to not party that one day.

One is not alone in the sceptical response to global aid when events like this take place. Consider the wave of criticism for the US aid amount for the tsunami disaster which was raised from the initial US\$15 million to US\$35 million due to UN castigation (raised later to US\$250 million). Consider also that in comparison, one company alone, Pfizer, has given US\$35 million. Apart from the obvious comparison, and having noted that the amounts will obviously assist in rehabilitation of the survivors to some extent, we need to understand the symbolism of these acts rather than the numbers themselves. The French paper, *Le*



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*Figaro*, notes that much of the aid is driven by Asia's economic prospects and the decision to give a competitive sum may be motivated as a 'diplomatic gesture' by the European and other governments. It may be my over-worked imagination but it also disturbs me when they keep announcing these amounts as 'aid' rather than donations or contributions.

**Yes, there remains little to celebrate as each year passes but rather than abstinence, perhaps it would be more productive to use all existing space and platforms where we can reflect and find new ways of 'reclaiming' social expression and turning it into responsible action**

The worry is that in development jargon, 'aid' is often a euphemism for a soft loan or disguised within a loan package. One hopes that the tsunami survivors will not end up paying back this 'aid' ten times over in the years to come. Such is the politics of aid.

The noble gesture of big, profitable, multi-million dollar pharmaceutical companies seems more of an insult, when you consider that unaffordable medicine prices have denied millions the right to live, in these impoverished countries. Why couldn't every pharmaceutical company have subsidised medicine by US\$35 million more for each of these countries in the first place? Because the gesture of sending free medicine makes for great PR - in reality, it is a slap in the face of all the diseased and helpless who could not

afford to live *before* the tsunami. Now all we need is tobacco companies to send in donations of millions of cigarettes in the spirit of compassion and care.

The other consideration is tokenism and expressions of solidarity for the victims. It's an exhausting debate on the importance of protests and camaraderie but somewhere we have to decide how to go beyond that. Just as the MMA in our country has to decide when to go beyond the symbolic importance of say, the uniform of the President, and raise the bar on the debate about how this is a military state in which its citizens really have no part to play and review their own role in legitimising this government.

road, occupied construction cranes, blasted music and blew kisses at the police and demolition workers and built art installations as barricades. By the time Claremont Road was levelled in 1994, it was considered the most creative, celebratory street in London.

RTS was formed in May 1995 with the intention of repeating the 'reclaiming' process of Claremont Road. Essentially the movement came to be a mergence of subcultures ranging from ravers, club frequenters, squatters, anti-corporate activists, political artists and even deejays. Five hundred people came to the RTS party on Camden Street in May '95 to dance to a bicycle-powered sound system. Three thousand came to the next street party and this combination of rave and rage spread from Manchester to Brighton with twenty thousand people at the Trafalgar Square event in 1997.

Reclaiming the Street parties went international and chapters share cop-avoiding and traffic blockade strategies. The media suggests RTS events are anti-car protests but this is a simplification of their goals. Many street parties have been organised with striking or sacked workers and on ecological and human rights records of international corporations. (For more on the RTS see Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, 2000, Vintage Canada).

The lack of identifiable leaders, centre or rigidity in membership and style of these street parties is considered the success of the RTS in capturing the imagination of thousands of young people globally. RTSer, John Jordan asks rhetorically, "Is a street party a political rally? A festival? A rave? Direct action? Or just a bloody good party?"

I agree with my liberal friend that there remains little to celebrate as each year passes but rather than abstinence, perhaps it would be more productive to use all existing space and platforms where we can reflect and find new ways of 'reclaiming' social expression and turning it into responsible action.

One recent jump from the margins of symbolism to a meaningful, participatory methodology of political expression is a movement called Reclaiming the Streets (RTS), that emerged most dramatically in Britain in the mid-90s. And it all started as a party.

In 1993, the Department of Transport in Britain proposed the M11 Link Road. To build it they needed to knock down 350 houses, displace thousands of people and cut through one of London's last ancient woodlands. Apart from community displacement, a quiet London street, Claremont Road would disappear under the new expressway. The city ignored local opposition, so a group of activists literally pulled sofas into the streets, hung TVs from branches and painted a giant chessboard in the middle of the

# Which way should th

By Owais Tohid

**T**HE World Social Forum, created five years ago as an anti-globalization movement's answer to the World Economic Forum, the corporate world's annual congregation at Davos, now finds itself at the crossroads. The question being raised is: should it become a formal organization with a defined programme or just continue to remain a carnival-like assembly of activists representing diverse groups from various countries and communities.

This writer, while attending this year's annual meet, saw a growing realization among the participants the need for carving out the future of the WSF. Many were of the view that a firm programme should be adopted to effectively channelize the vigour and energy of its participating groups towards achieving a well-defined objective. Others thought that the forum should continue for some time to provide a 'horizontal, open space' to all the groups, as it has been doing so far, and wait for an opportune moment to transform itself into an organization with a political ideology.

The WSF was conceived and initiated by political activists, socialist revolutionaries and anti-globalization protesters as a platform where groups of various hues could assemble to take stock of the pace of struggle they had been pursuing in their respective countries or communities, share their experiences, exchange new ideas and formulate proposals for an effective action in the months ahead.

For the last five years, the forum has been raising its voice against capitalist globalization, Third World's economic exploitation, growing militarism and fascistic policies of the United States, in a highly effective manner. The idea has worked well insofar as coming

together of diverse groups is concerned. Porte Alegre, a Brazilian city where the meetings take place every year, drew this year activists of all kinds from all corners of the globe such as Dalits of India, Argentinean prostitutes, South African farmers and Palestinian women activists.

Doubtlessly, the forum has strongly championed the causes of the oppressed peoples of the world. But since those attending its sessions are essentially the liberals, progressives and leftists and tend to agree with each other ideologically, one felt there was need for more participation of the representatives of very poor communities to bring about a coherence between them and the intellectuals and create conditions for a collective action plan at grass-roots level.

Thus, the key issue the activists need to thrash out is whether the World Social Forum should transform itself into a well-organized political body with a particular objective or just continue to be a loose gathering. Many argued in this January's meeting that the WSF needs to evolve a political stance and become a more action-oriented organization and only then it can effectively resist the onslaught of capital-led globalization.

But the problem is that the charter of principles of the World Social Forum forbids it from taking such decisions. So, 19 high-profile activists, most of whom being founders of the WSF and members of its international committee (IC), presented at the forum a document which called for making it a political force rather than just a political arena. Portuguese Nobel literature laureate Josi Saramago suggested for turning the WSF into "an instrument for action" by adopting concrete proposals and ideas with

broad support, rather than let it continue to be a 'Mecca' for an annual pilgrimage by the leftists who are seen engaged in discussions and debates on "utopias".

The document, described by them as the Porte Alegre manifesto, also gave specific solutions to the issues created by the globalization crisis. "It's not possible to continue to speak of 'another world is possible' if we do not make some proposals about how to reach this 'other world'," says the document.

The solutions include debt cancellation, promotion of equitable forms of trade, a country's right to produce affordable food for its citizens and protect its food supply, implementation of anti-discrimination policies against minorities and females, democratization of international bodies such as the United Nations.

Among the signatories to the document were Argentine writer and Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Perez Esquivel, Pakistani writer Tariq Ali, Egyptian economist Samir Amin, editor of French magazine *Le Monde Diplomatique* Bernard Cassen, and US sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein.

Other participants came up with even more radical proposals such as dissolution of the WTO, World Bank and IMF. They thought that globalization and neoliberalism could not be 'defeated' if these organizations continued to function for it is they which gave strength to these trends.

Critics of the proposal for making the WSF a partisan movement argued that if the Forum took a political position, it could become vulnerable to attacks from within. Their arguments centred round the 'sanctity' of space. In its present shape, they said, the participant organizations and groups are free to take positions, formulate strategies,

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and propose solutions but they do not give a political complexion to the WSF collectively.

The organizers were of the view that the very fact that the strength of those attending the WSF, in terms of numbers, was growing each year, and the WSF discussions and programmes were getting prominence in the mainstream media showed that the forum was making progress.

With estimated participation of 120,000 people in Porte Alegre this year, about nine million dollars were spent on various activities and arrangements. Over five thousand organizations participated in the forum while, roughly speaking, about two thousand seminars and workshops on topics such as public health, environment, education, poverty, militarization of societies, free trade, and foreign debts were held.

The WSF, now five-year old, has grown exponentially. It was born a year after what has now come to be known as the 'battle of Seattle' in which the activists had succeeded in disrupting and bringing to an end the ministerial meeting of the WTO. Since then the IMF, World Bank and the WTO and all other capitalist world's leading bodies have been holding their meetings behind security barricades and away from the protesters. In 2000, the protesters could not get close to the meeting venue of the World Economic Forum in Davos because of stiff security arrangements. The protest leaders later decided to hold a counter-forum at Porte Alegre to intensify their anti-capitalist battle.

So, from 2001 onward, the World Social Forum meets on dates that coincide with those of the World Economic Forum which holds its meeting in Davos. The political activists vociferously oppose the

neoliberal agenda and support fair trade and cancellation of debt.

Although capitalism versus socialism debate seems to have been institutionalized as the WEF and WSF pursue their agenda each year, this year the two forums took up identical main issues for discussion. These were poverty and education, the difference in ideological treatment being quite immense. The WSF launched a global campaign to 'Make Poverty History' called GCAP (Global Call for Action against Poverty) launched by Brazilian President Inacio Lula. The call was reiterated in the closing ceremony by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.

At the Davos summit, the world leaders were urged by the protesters to prioritize their 'key issues' and the former came out with poverty, equitable globalization, climate change and education as their choice.

The activists called this change in WEF's priorities as a minor victory for the WSF, claiming their struggle has made an advance and influenced the thinking of the industrial powers. The WEF drew around 2,500 participants. Now the next showdown the activists are bracing for is the G-8 Summit in Scotland in July.

The heated debate on the future of the WSF which marked this year's meeting will continue to echo in next year's assembly and may ultimately lead to a change in the complexion of the forum.

In fact, a final decision on the matter has become crucial as otherwise the prevailing confused situation can lead to cracks in the ranks of the forum as one could already see hardened positions being adopted by some groups in favour or against making the WSF a political body. ■