

## **When Davos Meets Porto Alegre: A Memoir**

by Walden Bello

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"Hemingway said that the rich are different from you and me. How can anyone expect the people in Davos to understand the crisis that globalization has visited on the lives of people like those of us here in Porto Alegre?" That was going to be my opening line.

When I arrived at the university studio for the televised trans-Atlantic debate with George Soros, the financier, and other representatives of the global elite gathered in Davos, Switzerland, a visibly shaken Florian Rochat of the Swiss delegation was waiting for me. Swiss are known for being impassive, but Florian was visibly shaken. "They are arresting protestors in Davos and other places in Switzerland," he told me. "They're killing democracy in our country. Our friends there are asking you to support them in calling for the shutting down of the World Economic Forum."

That request drove out any lingering desire to be "nice" in the coming exchange, which had been billed by its producers as a "Dialogue between Davos and Porto Alegre." The ambitious, one-million dollar plus production involving four satellite hookups, aimed to explore if there was a common ground between the annual elite gathering in Davos and the newly launched World Social Forum (WSF) in this southern Brazilian city. Millions of people globally were waiting for the transmission.

Since I had been in Davos last year, the producers requested that I make the opening statement for the Porto Alegre side. I obliged with the following: "We would like to begin by condemning the arrests of peaceful demonstrators to shield the global elite at Davos from protests. We would also like to register our consternation that while we in Porto Alegre have painstakingly come up with a diverse panel of speakers, you in Davos have come up with four white males to face us. But perhaps you are trying to make a political statement.

"I was in Davos last year, and believe me, Davos is not worth a second visit. I am here in Porto Alegre this year, and let me say that Porto Alegre is the future while Davos is the past. Hemingway wrote that the rich are different from you and me, and indeed, we live on two different planets: Davos, the planet of the superrich, Porto Alegre, the planet of the poor, the marginalized, the concerned. Here in Porto Alegre, we are discussing how to save the planet. There in Davos, the global elite is discussing how to maintain its hegemony over the rest of us. In fact, the best gift that the 2000 corporate executives at Davos can give to the world is for them to board a spaceship and blast off for outer space. The rest of us will definitely be much better off without them."

The press termed the next 1-1/2 hours not as a debate but as an emotional exchange that, as the *Financial Times* put it, "sometimes degenerated into personal insults." But I and the other panelists-among them, Oded Grajew of Brazil's Instituto Ethos, Bernard Cassen of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Diane Matte of Women's Global March, Njoki Njehu of 50 Years Is Enough, Rafael Alegria of Via Campesina, Aminata Traore, former Minister of Culture of Mali, Fred Azcarate of Jobs with Justice, Trevor Ngbane of South Africa, Francois Houtart of Belgium, and Hebe de Bonafini of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo -- were simply reflecting the non-conciliatory mood towards the Davos crowd of most of the 12,000 people who flocked to Porto Alegre.

For this constituency, a significant number of whom watched the debate at a huge auditorium at the Catholic University, globalization was a deadly business, and many undoubtedly shared the feelings of Hebe de Bonafini when she screamed at Soros across the Atlantic divide, "Mr. Soros, you are a hypocrite. How many children's deaths have you been responsible for?" That Soros in the course of the debate made some utterances regarding the need to control the negative impacts of globalization hardly endeared him to this crowd, who saw him mainly as a finance speculator who had made billions of dollars at the expense of third world economies.

The holding of the week-long World Social Forum was nothing short of a miracle. Proposed by the Workers' Party of Brazil (PT) and a coalition of Brazilian civil society organizations, supported with significant funding by donors such as Novib, the Dutch agency, and provided with strong international support by the French monthly *Le Monde Diplomatique* and Attac, the European anti-globalization alliance, the event was put together in less than eight months' time. The idea of holding an alternative to the annual retreat of the global corporate elite in Davos simply took off. While there were some glitches here and there, the event was resoundingly successful, despite the massive challenge of coordinating 16 plenary sessions, over 400 workshops, and numerous side events.

A major reason for the WSF's success is that it had the organizational support of the government of the city of Porto Alegre and the government of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, both of which are controlled by the PT. Porto Alegre has, in fact, achieved the reputation of being a city that is run both efficiently and with sensitivity to social and environmental considerations. The city is said to be at the top of the quality of life index for Brazil.

The sharing in Porto Alegre focused not only on drawing up strategies of resistance to globalization but also on elaborating alternative paradigms of economic, ecological, and social development. Militant action was not absent, with Jose Bove, the celebrated French anti-McDonalds' activist, and the Brazilian MST (Movement of the Landless), leading the destruction of two hectares of land planted with transgenic soybean crops by the biotechnological firm Monsanto.

Porto Alegre achieved its goal of being a counterpoint to Davos. The combination of celebration, hard discussion, and militant solidarity that flowed from it contrasted with the negative images coming out of Davos. The Swiss town was the center of Switzerland's biggest security operation since the Second World War. The Swiss police pulled out all the stops to prevent protesters from reaching the Alpine resort, and fired water cannons and tear

gas on demonstrators in Zurich, arresting many of them. Even conservative Swiss newspapers condemned the police operation as a threat to political liberties in Switzerland.

Perhaps the outcome of the duel between Davos and Porto Alegre was best summed up by George Soros: "The excessive precautions were a victory for those who wanted to disrupt Davos. It was an overreaction. It helped to radicalize the situation."

On his performance in the televised debate with Porto Alegre, Soros commented: "It showed it is not easy to dialogue . . . I don't particularly like to be abused. My masochism has its limits." Observed the *Financial Times*: "Such uncomfortable experiences seem temporarily to have scrambled his ability to deliver pithy soundbites."

But Soros was not alone in flubbing his lines. Soon after my opening statement, Bernard Cassen of *Le Monde Diplomatique* leaned over and told me: "Walden, it wasn't Hemingway who said the rich are different from you and me. It was Scott Fitzgerald."

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