

The National, the International and Marielle's Assassination

Por Marina Pinho · 26/03/2018

On the evening of March 14, the second day of the 2018 World Social Forum (WSF) in Salvador, Brazil, 38-year old city councilwoman and human rights activist Marielle Franco was assassinated in Rio de Janeiro

By Ethan Earle, RLS New York

Three days before her assassination, Marielle Franco had named names on Facebook: “We must speak loudly so that everybody knows what is happening in Acari right now. The 41st Military Police Battalion of Rio de Janeiro is terrorizing and violating Acari residents. This week two youths were killed and tossed in a ditch. Today, the police walked the streets threatening residents. This has always happened and with the (military) intervention things have gotten worse.”

_MG_7837

March for Marielle Franco in the World Social Forum 2018

I found out that evening, in a text message exchange with a devastated young activist from Franco's Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL), created in 2004 when its leadership was expelled from then-President Lula da Silva's Workers' Party (PT) after refusing to vote for his pension reforms. Today it boasts over 120,000 active members and six seats in Brazil's lower house of congress. It sits to the PT's left, in a relationship that is by turns productive and tense, and has become a vocal critic

of both state violence and corruption in contemporary Brazil.

By the next morning, the WSF schedule had been cast into doubt, with some PSOL sympathizers calling for a cancellation of all morning panels to instead hold a march calling Franco's murderers to account. Meanwhile, a number of PT partisans called for a previously scheduled rally set to take place that evening—and headlined by former President Dilma Rousseff as well as Lula—to be expanded and turned into a denunciation of the systematic violence of the morally bankrupt and deeply undemocratic Temer administration.

In the end, several hundred attendees hastily arranged a march to demand justice for Franco's assassination, but the WSF marched on much as it otherwise would have. Brilliant minds and brilliant activists from across the world discussed the entire range of issues currently facing the world: climate change, war and state violence, systemic racism and endemic misogyny, socioeconomic inequality, and beyond. When Dilma headlined an event announcing the creation of an international solidarity committee for Lula, who currently faces a highly-politicized prison sentence for alleged corruption, Franco's murder was mentioned but was hardly a point of focus.

Meanwhile, on the sprawling grounds of the Universidade de Bahia campus, artisans sold a variety of vegan sandwiches as well as traditional Quilombola cuisine, handcrafted dream catchers and mass-produced WSF "I was there" tee-shirts, books of Angela Davis and Boaventura de Sousa Santos. Impromptu rallies for the rights of minority populations in countries across the world were held while young lovers danced around them, blowing enormous bubbles through sticks held together by slender pieces of rope.

Through the history of the World Social Forum there has existed a debate about whether the gathering is too dominated by international and largely cosmopolitan

attendees or rather national and sometimes anachronistic political issues. This tension was evident as early as this year's opening march.

At the start, the staging ground was dominated by white faces snapping iPhone shots of a few indigenous groups dancing in traditional dress, but by the time we reached the finish point—a square among the city's steep hills looking out over its sun-drenched port—the march was deeply infused with Samba and Baiana de Acarajé costumes and chants of “Fora Temer.” On that first night, WSF veterans alternately made compelling arguments that this year's edition was either too European or too Brazilian.

This argument was cast into sharp relief by the political assassination of Marielle Franco. Should a panel on the proposed EU-Mercosur trade agreement be cut short in order to march for Marielle? How about a panel on racial relations in the south of Bahia? Or on Palestinian solidarity, or on integrative community therapy? These are not easy questions to answer, and perhaps it is best to acknowledge that different people will answer them in different ways.

Cutting through this debate, most on the left would agree that any vibrant World Social Forum must be truly international to fulfill its purpose. I would hope we can also agree that any meaningful political event must be grounded in realities of space and specificity, lest it become disconnected from working communities and succumb to weightless theories of international revolution. What is the exact right alchemy needed to produce that golden World Social Forum? Again, this is not an easy question, and perhaps it is one that has no exact right answer.

Hidden beneath these questions is a deeper-lying anxiety that the WSF is past its prime and will never return to the glory of its early years. And I would contend that of course it won't: nothing will ever be what it once was before. But it can still exist as an invaluable meeting space for both the breadth and depth of the international

left. This however will depend on how we react to the WSF's evolution, including this tension between its dual and sometimes alternating international/national character.

There is no doubt that this year's Forum has been marked by the Brazilian political context, particularly with Marielle's murder but more broadly against the backdrop of a 21st century-style coup that put an end to one of the world's most prominent social democratic governments—one which, for all its faults, lifted more than twenty million people out of poverty—and replaced it with a deeply-hated cabal of brutal old white men, dead set on rolling back these gains.

Perhaps even more tragically, this is a story that—local particularities withstanding—is right now being repeated throughout much of the world. The neoliberal consensus that dominated from the mid-1980s onward has a gaping wound, and right-wing nationalist-populists with authoritarian tendencies have made the first successful grab at the political space that has been opened.

Or shall I say, in Brazil we can find the world, and across the world we can find far too many Marielle's, murdered for their political conviction that things can be different. Let's draw strength from that shared vulnerability, recognize that we don't always craft the exact conditions for our struggle, and instead busy ourselves with the forces we've assembled and our shared opposition to the Temer's of the world, whom we'll need every ounce of our energy to fight.

I look forward to doing so in the Forum's final two days, and in the months and years to come with the new relationships I've built and the old relationships I've rekindled here in Salvador de Bahia.

Foto: Verena Glass