
WSF 3 AND TENSIONS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF GLOBAL ALTERNATIVE THINKING ¹

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The WSF, which began in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2001 is established on the horizon and within the strategies of globally oriented networks and social movements. The two powerful and mobilising slogans of the Forum — “Against Monolithic Thinking!” (of neoliberalism) and “Another World is Possible!” — express the orientation of this other globalisation whose force is the ethical and utopian conviction that alternatives *can* be constructed by democratic, global and emancipatory forces. For this, there is no existing recipe or a specific agent, only multiple social actors contributing their forms of resistance and constructing democracy with social justice and equity.

The WSF Charter of Principles approved at the end of 2001 (see this volume) provides the principle of cohesion for numerous attitudes and strategies accompanying the development of the Forum. Specifying this as a space for social movements that act within civil society, the Charter positions the Forum as a space of plurality and autonomy, non-confessional, non-governmental and non-partisan. It explicitly highlights the necessity for respect and positive affirmation of differences among movements and forces of change. It clarifies that the Forum is more a space and a process that is being progressively constructed and expanded, with contributions and strategies from this plurality, and not so much an event. It does not reach conclusions or produce formal public declarations, as this would undermine the variety of different networks, organisations and movements taking part, and who would feel bound, in some way, to accept a single position. The Charter of Principles establishes the rules of the game in this global space.

The WSF is a space for the affirmation, amplification and construction of rights in the global arena. It is a space for widening democratic, subjective and symbolic horizons — for the recovery of a utopian perspective and for thinking about a different possible world. Everyone experiencing this interactive process is affected by it — by new questions, new presences, and the possibility provided for generating new democratic political cultures, which in turn feed our democratic imagination. This is the most important legacy of the WSF.

The process of globalisation of the Forum initiated in 2002 — seeking to extend the global space of interaction — has had consequences. It is incorporating new subjects, actors, movements and topics (the Pan-Amazonian, the Argentinean, Palestinian and Colombian Forums).² It is now also manifesting itself in different contexts (the European, Asian, African and the Hemispherical Forum of the Americas). And, it has moved geographically — WSF 4 will be held in India in 2004. From 2005 it will move back, every two years to Porto Alegre, its symbolical and original base.

With the Forum's success and expansion, have come difficulties and misunderstandings. This is inevitable : the construction of a space-process of such scale and importance is unimaginable — except by idealising it — without tensions, struggles for understanding, confusions, and power dynamics. There are issues of growth and evolution, with ambivalence between old and new subjectivities; difficulties of generating new forms of political debate and of proposing new contents and forms for democratic political cultures. There is a challenge to create spaces for thinking globally, in pluralistic and radical-democratic terms, about current dilemmas. As Julieta Kirkwood says, in her case for the feminist movement, in order to confront new challenges it is necessary to be open to a certain ambiguity.³

In this context, dynamics, initiatives, connections or disconnections multiply, expressing the enormous diversity of the movements for an alternative globalisation as opposed to just a 'Forum'. The WSF is also setting new trends — by publicly accounting its income and expenses, reporting its decisions, and opening the meetings of its International Committee (IC) to observers. These steps are also messages, warnings, to the wider world within which it is taking shape.

The Forum means different things to different people. For some, it is an 'agora' where ideas, experiences, movements, networks come together, for exchange and dialogue, and self-reflection.⁴ For others it is a 'market' for the exchange of goods and knowledge; a 'movement of movements'; an official, reformist space (the Organising Committee and the International Committee); and an alternative or revolutionary space (the networks and movements).

Without doubt, the idea of space, an agora, a public square, is the one that best expresses the intention and dynamics of the Forum. One of the most heated debates, well expressed by Chico Whitaker, highlights the dilemma between Forum-as-space and Forum-as-movement.⁵

To be a Forum-as-space implies that the Forum must be, as its Charter reveals, an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a planetary society centred on the human being. The WSF asserts democracy as the avenue to resolving society's problems politically. As a meeting place, it is open to pluralism and to the diversity of activities and ways of engaging of the organisations and movements that decide to participate in it, as well as the diversity of genders, races, ethnicities and cultures.⁶

This said, it is clear that the WSF is therefore not a neutral space. To enter this space implies acceptance of its Charter. For the WSF to be Forum-as-movement — in other words, if the WSF were to be understood, as some suggest, as a movement — this would mean giving it the roles of mobilising and of defining strategies and leadership responsibilities. On the other hand, Forum-as-space implies a ‘movement of ideas’, facilitating the development of many movements, the possibility of interaction, each contributing from its own space of transformation, without excluding themselves from a global vision. The Forum-as-movement denies this horizontal space, prevents it from being ‘a place without an owner’, the collective property of all those interested to so use it.⁷ It converts it into an organic social movement (singular), or a new international coalition (some people call it a new internationalism),⁸ acting in the name of a wide and generic global movement, in which inclusion is not guaranteed (Celiberti 2002).⁹ For the WSF to be Forum-as-movement, the present Charter of Principles is not valid — and also no longer necessary, any more than the diversity.

This is a complicated issue. As Celiberti suggests, neither organisational centralisation nor an agenda of mobilisation can shorten the distance that must be walked to further the dialogue between the diverse priorities that movements have (anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, anti-racist, anti-homophobic, including the various oppositions to neoliberalism). The Forum is a space-dialogue for advancing this process.

And it is a space par excellence. Social movements, networks and coalitions and party activism (represented by individuals and / or as parts of different movements), infect the Forum with their hopes and visions — and also their limitations. All the logics of change, and all the different actors — the transgressors and the radicals, the more or less conciliatory, the more or less democratic, the more or less authoritarian — that are found within different democratic social movements, equally find place and expression within the WSF.

Here, notions of primary and secondary struggles, fed by monolithic understandings of neoliberal globalisation, are unhelpful. Each has to confront their own contradictions, and to commit themselves to the multiple democratisations, forms of justice, ways of constructing freedom — with different faces, ethnicities, sexes, sexual options, capacities, ages. And, without male hegemony. These dynamics, once assumed, also result in the transformation of subjectivities, and lead also to the recognition of the vital roles of diversity.

To have a space to struggle for recognition, it is necessary to politicise difference, “to celebrate...the advancement of the idea of solidarity and the protection of differences as the political capital of democracy”.¹⁰ The WSF is such a space, created by the politicisation of differences in a world shaped by the neoliberal capitalist globalisation process. The idea of solidarity and the protection of differences as the political capital of democracy are to be celebrated. But the effects of economic policies on the most vulnerable sectors of society, including women, are to be lamented.

There are other concerns of space and meaning of the Forum, as understood in the Charter, which have yet to be discussed fully. For example, are there limits to the autonomy of organisers of thematic and regional Forums (or of the WSF itself) ? Can autonomy mean freedom to modify the Charter ? And would such a measure mean the exclusion of certain visions or presences ?¹¹ Does the Forum risk becoming a mega event instead of a mega process (13,000 participants at WSF 1 and 100,000 at WSF 3)?

Proposals to reduce participation in the WSF to delegates of Regional and Thematic Forums, as well as of certain movements, networks or countries, mean confronting the meaning of 'representation'. This is problematic enough at the national level. But what is representation at the global level, which is a space where movements expand and diversify and where there is more interaction between movements? In this space, there are no struggles or homogeneous identities to be 'represented' (such as women or homosexuals), but rather multiple visions, experiences and strategies.¹² National level crises cannot be resolved in a global space.

Other tensions include the desire of Forum-as-movement position holders to convert the WSF into spokesperson for the movements gathered, through declarations and proposals — necessarily monolithic — in the name of the Forum itself. Experience however, shows that other ways are possible. In practice, the Forum did not require a formal public declaration for the global movements to co-ordinate and stimulate the successful world mobilisation against the US war on Iraq on February, 15 2003.

For many at the Forum, the formal presence of political parties would only be possible and fruitful if and when they democratise themselves. However, to open up participation even to democratic parties — which have a clear alliance with social movements (such as *Rifondazione Comunista* in Italy) — would mean opening up to parties that want to be in the Forum, and whose democratic credentials are weak or non-existent. This is a major risk. Even for this reason alone, the space for civil society, autonomous of state-political forces, needs to be preserved, in the interests of democracy.

Finally, what is 'official' and what is 'alternative' at the Forum? Are differences in strategy — towards neoliberalism and the current imperial dynamics of the US — sufficient to de-legitimise one part of the Forum? Any process, born alternative, takes on a particular dynamic of change, fundamental for its own renewal. Do alternatives have limits? What are the limits of alternatives? Can alternatives be plural? In such processes, a degree of both cohesion and flexibility is necessary, to avoid the 'tyranny of structurelessness', and to be dynamic and open.

The most striking characteristic of WSF 3, in relation to previous ones, has been its self-reflection. The well-known imbalances in the Forum are also raw material for the boldest of proposals that can extend our vision — and in so doing, that reverse the fragmentation that neoliberalism brings and encourage deep exploration of the dynamics of change. The problem is not the existence of trends or conflicts — these are natural in a laboratory of democracy — but their existence in parallel and opposite form, without consideration of the 'translation' that Sousa Santos calls for.¹³

We are today constructing civil, democratic society on a global scale. The progress and changes between the three Forums, including its globalisation, proves that this construction is underway. The tensions that the process is experiencing are a part of constructing these global spaces in a democratic way. Far from being a problem, they can infinitely enrich the possibilities of experience and inclusion. Answers on how to avoid the implosion of the Forum require democratic intelligence and collective search.¹⁴

This is the moment of the Forum. The tensions that today face the Forum are part of the difficulty in attempting to capture the democratic imagination of the new millennium.

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NOTES

¹ This is a personal and political view, from an activist commitment to this global space under construction. I have participated in the three Forums as a feminist activist. I have also been a member of the WSF International Council, along with Lilian Celiberti, as a representative of the Montevideo-based Articulación Feminista Marcosur.

² These are not country-specific Forums, but of particular situations that reveal global tensions. In Argentina the Forum addressed structural adjustment policies and neoliberal economic orthodoxy; in Palestine, the Middle East conflict; and in Colombia, the problem of violence and war.

³ Kirkwood 1996.

⁴ Waterman 2003. See this volume.

⁵ Chico Whitaker 2003. See this volume.

⁶ ABONG, ATTAC, CBJP, CIVES, CUT, IBASE, CJG, and MST, April 2001, Clauses 1 and 9. See this volume.

⁷ Whitaker 2003, in this volume.

⁸ Internationalism is one of the historical values of global solidarity that globalisation is recreating and expanding. Nevertheless, no Fifth International can be conceived without recognition of the multiplicity of new-old social actors affecting the global.

⁹ Celiberti 2002.

¹⁰ Rosemberg 2002.

¹¹ Modifying the Charter is a right of the movements. But it is also the right of the movements to prevent this global instrument being defined by or for regional or thematic particularities, or worse, for possibly authoritarian and exclusionary ends.

¹² In the emerging global movement, there is consensus around the fight against neoliberalism and neoliberal globalisation, for reasons of justice and equity. There is no consensus, however, on whether the fight is against capitalism. There are anti-globalisation positions and also alternative-globalisation ones. There are preferences for a democratic capitalism and others that doubt its very possibility. There are socialists of all varieties, trade unionists of all the global tendencies (including those that participate in the World Economic Forum at Davos), etc.

¹³ Santos 2002.

¹⁴ Whitaker 2003, *ibid.* This volume.