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Global Civic-Driven Democratization as Political Agency

The globalization protest movements that emerged in the eyes of the global media with the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in late 1999 have opened a window for contestations about the future of humanity. In these contestations, various groups, usually lumped together as 'global civil society', have increased their visibility and agenda-setting capacity. With all their limitations they have brought the question of civic-driven democratic change into the agenda of world politics in a new manner, even if transnational social movement alliances have existed already for decades and, in some cases, centuries. One of the novel features is a more explicit global scope of their aims, in many cases intertwined with local and communal practices. The focus on the global also implies a search for less state-centred conceptions of political agency. Another concern for some of the contemporary movements is how to democratize their own modes of action while aiming at democratization of the world. This concern was by no means absent from various earlier civic-driven initiatives, but the globalization of civic alliances through initiatives such as the World Social Forum (WSF) gives it new challenges. I use the WSF as a key example in this essay because it crystallizes various thorny questions of articulation between different kinds of civic organizations.

As compared to previous transnational alliances seeking radical change of the world system, such as the early trade union-based movements or communist party-based internationals, many of today's globalization protest movements seem to take more seriously the idea that democratic change needs to be generated through democratic forms of action. This is reflected, for example, in the emphasis on horizontal networks rather than hierarchic organizations. One of its manifestations is the idea of an 'open space' that has become a catchword of the social forums organized in different parts of the world since 2001. The open-space idea has many democratic implications. One of them is that no particular movement should be able to claim that its aims have intrinsic strategic priority over others. The class contradictions that your movement is facing should have no priority over the gender contradictions we confront. My sexual identity is no less important than your ethnicity. This democratic co-existence in the open spaces created by the movements has been refreshing and empowering. At the same time, its relativistic undertones can become frustrating for the task of devising effective strategies to change the world.

Prefigurative and Strategic Dimensions of Civic-Driven Change

Among today's activists, especially but not only within movements considered autonomist or anarchist, Mahatma Gandhi's claim that 'we must be the change we want to see in the world' has gained renewed importance. Prefigurative politics, trying to act today according to the principles one wants to establish in tomorrow's world, has challenged such visions of social change that emphasize the need to establish strategic leadership through a party or state machinery. In the World Social Forum process, these contending visions have been expressed as differences about the articulations that the forum should seek with Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez or other 'traditional political' leaders. Some of the activists have become frustrated with the civil society-centeredness of the WSF open space. They argue that in order to become more effective, the forum needs to become more political and therefore include progressive parties and state leaders or at least consider them strategic allies. Others claim that this would lead to destroying the civic virtues of the process and create new hegemonic attempts to subordinate the civil-society movements. In other words, it would be back to politics as usual.

One of my arguments in this essay is that in order to generate significant social change, civic action needs to be both prefigurative and strategic. Even if it may sound

commonsensical, especially as regards the transnational and global common spaces of social movements, there are many dilemmas to be confronted. Some of them derive from the insufficient vocabulary we have for discussing global civic-driven political agency. In a state-centric mode of transformative action it used to be relatively easy to refer to the political parties as the key organizational form that could become – for better or for worse – the instrument to create overall change beyond the specific aims of 'single-issue' movements. In the global context, we often refer to global civil society or transnational corporations as significant actors but have more difficulties talking about global civic-driven *political* agency.

With some friends and colleagues we have started discussing the concept of 'global political parties'.[1] Some have the tendency to advocate the need for establishing sooner rather than later such parties, or perhaps a 'fifth international' as promoted by Samir Amin. Others, including myself, place more emphasis on reflecting on the possibility of global parties as a way to rethink the dichotomy between depoliticized conceptions of civil society and traditional forms of political action expressed by parties. The world as a whole is not merely an enlarged copy of territorial states. To change that world beyond the territorial limits of states, we need to develop new ways of thinking politically about transformative agency. On the one hand, there is no world state to conquer, and therefore state-oriented political parties cannot be the (only) solution to change the world. On the other hand, if civic-driven global initiatives shy away from tackling political and strategic questions, the changes they may desire are unlikely to take place.

For the vocabulary of political agency, one country-specific example that can offer some lessons is the way Bolivian indigenous movements, coca growers associations, trade unions and other civic actors created an alliance, 'Movement Toward Socialism' (MAS), that they called a 'political instrument' instead of a political party. Even if the Bolivian context is different from that of transnational movements, both the vocabulary and the praxis of this process offer insights to a new kind of relationship between social movements and political action. Now that the leader of the movement, Evo Morales, has been president of the republic for almost three years, there are signs of the novel movement of movements increasingly resembling a relatively traditional party. When MAS was an oppositional force, it was easier to remain committed to the bottom-up mode of democratic organizing in which the movements challenged the state through coordinated communal action. Once it conquered the government, various forms of hierarchic practice have become more evident. It remains, however, important to learn from this process that constitutes one of the most fascinating examples of social movements creating a political instrument, even if it is still quite state-centred. At the very least, it can help us to discuss political instruments and agency without falling back to all the conceptual baggage of traditional political parties. The experience of MAS also shows us how difficult it is to create radical social change inside one country, and thereby points to the need to search for more transnational transformative processes.

In order to understand the nature and future possibilities of civic-driven global change, we need to focus on the political implications of these new contestations and take seriously the question of constructing political instruments. Debates on the globalization protest movements (also sometimes called anti- or alter-globalization or global justice movements) have all too often relied on a dichotomous separation between depoliticized civic movements and state-centred understandings of the political. My aim in this essay is to reflect on these movements as political actors without assuming that politics is necessarily tied to conquering the state. Using the World Social Forum as an example, I will argue that, first of all, we need to consider the current civic-driven struggles as political contestations, not only in the sense of wanting to transform the unjust structures of the world but also in the sense of having various contradictions and political articulations between the organizations that constitute the globalization protest movement of movements.

The World Social Forum and Global Democratization

The WSF had its first global meeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in January 2001. Thereafter it has been expanding through various mechanisms, including holding its main meetings in other continents, mushrooming into hundreds of local, national, regional and thematic forums around the world and increasing the diversity of the groups that participate in the process. It by no means includes all the movements and networks that aim at democratic transformations. Its composition has various geographical, sectoral, ideological and civilizational limitations. The emergence of the WSF was, however, a key moment in the gradual shift of emphasis in the aims of many of these movements. The reactive protest dimension was partially replaced by a more proactive democratization dimension. A somewhat simplistic but illustrative way to locate this shift is to call the wave of activism that made one of its major public appearances during the World Trade Organization meeting in 1999 in Seattle 'globalization protest movements' and to use the term 'global democratization movements' to characterize the activism of the new millennium symbolized by the WSF. In other words, the WSF provided a channel through which many of the globalization protest movements of the 1990s have become global democratization movements of the 21st century.

What are these thousands of civic movements? As for their formal status, the WSF Charter of Principles states that the WSF 'brings together and interlinks only organizations and movements of civil society from all the countries in the world'. The standard definition of civil society offered by the Charter states that it is 'a plural, diversified, non-confessional, non-governmental and non-party context'. Despite the often repeated lip service to the WSF as

an 'open' civil society space, it is not open to all kinds of social movements and non-governmental organizations. According to the relatively wide ideological orientation of the WSF Charter of Principles, the organizations that can participate in the Forum are defined as

> '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 directed towards fruitful relationships among humankind and between it and the Earth.' [2]

There is no strict ideological litmus test to screen the participants. Rather than strict boundaries, the ideological orientation that the participants are supposed to have constitutes frontier zones in which many such organizations that may not be committed to all the elements spelled out in the Charter can in practice take part in the process. One of the differences between the movements is to what extent the desired change means building a 'social' counterpart to balance the 'economic' emphasis of the dominant institutions of the world such as the initial symbolic adversary, the World Economic Forum. Even if the participating movements are at least in principle committed to the intrinsically political aim of structural and institutional changes of the world order, some have more limited 'social' aims, such as making the voice of their constituencies heard or alleviating the suffering of marginalized communities. While these differences sometimes create tensions and suspicions about the level of radicalism of one and another, the WSF has been relatively successful in accommodating groups that in many other contexts have tended to accuse each other for being excessively reformist or revolutionary. The overall WSF slogan, 'another world is possible', has been sufficiently vague to allow for such co-existence.

The Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire once stated that in order to change the world we must first know that it is indeed possible to change it.[3] This helps understand one dimension of why, during its first years, the WSF experienced a spectacular growth and provided so much inspiration for social movements and other actors engaged in processes of democratic transformation. The apparently simple WSF slogan, 'another world is possible', caused enthusiasm because it helped undermine the demobilizing influence of another simple slogan, generally attributed to Margaret Thatcher, according to which 'there is no alternative' to the existing capitalist order.

After repeating forum after forum that another world is possible, many WSF participants became eager to know what that other world may look like and how we are supposed to get there. One of the main problems haunting the WSF is its perceived incapacity to provide adequate answers to these questions. Many of its participants and observers have become increasingly frustrated with the limitations of the open-space method that prevents the WSF from having the attributes of a traditionally understood movement or movement of movements. Over the

years the question of politicizing the WSF has become an increasingly controversial issue. One of the dimensions of this question is how to be politically meaningful without being traditionally political. Traditional politics in this sense is generally understood as what parties and governments are engaged with.

The road from politicizing protests to transformative proposals is fraught with various kinds of dilemmas. The dilemmas become particularly thorny when the aim is to articulate proposals of many movements into collective projects to create a radically different world. Here I will first of all assume, based on the WSF Charter of Principles, that the other world that these movements seek is radically more democratic than the current one.

When speaking about 'globalization of solidarity' as a new stage in world history, the Charter says it will rest on 'democratic international systems and institutions'. It also tells us that the WSF upholds respect for the practices of 'real democracy' and 'participatory democracy'. Various other parts of the Charter can also be regarded as expressions of a radically democratic spirit. Even if democracy is not formally defined in the Charter, my interpretation is that it refers to a world in which people have increased their possibilities to participate in the decisions about the conditions of their lives, which can happen through both participatory and representative mechanisms.

Various formulations of the Charter, moreover, express the prefigurative idea that democratic changes must be achieved through democratic means. In particular, it defines the WSF as an open meeting place for 'democratic debate of ideas'. Especially during the first years of the process, relatively little attention was paid to how democratic the space was, or should be, organized. Even if the World Social Forum asserts that 'another world is possible', it is embedded in the existing one and many of its inequalities have been reproduced in the internal mode of organization of the WSF.

Confronting Economism Outside and Inside the Forum

For the reproduction of the capitalist world-system one of the ideological defense mechanisms has been the depoliticization of power relations, especially, but not only those, located in the socially constructed sphere of the 'economic'. The expansion of capitalism in the past decades has expanded the boundaries of the economic institutions through privatization processes, the strengthening of economic ministries and central banks vis-à-vis other state organs and other mechanisms such as the increased importance of credit-rating agencies. Among the most visible global vehicles of this expansion have been the World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund and World Bank. One of the ideological contradictions of the contemporary global expansion of capitalism is that when the 'economic' institutions become more powerful, their political nature becomes, at least potentially, more evident. In this sense, the successful expansion of capitalism

has created possibilities for such responses that challenge one of the ideological foundations of capitalism: the idea that economic institutions are nonpolitical and therefore not subject to democratic claims.

The political nature of the economic institutions does not automatically become evident. The contradictions of capitalism create conditions for critical responses, but these responses are not generated without active social forces. The new transnational activism that emerged in the globalization protests of the 1990s has made more visible that 'economy' is a political and historical construction. To the extent that the movements can convincingly demonstrate that apparently economic institutions are in reality important sites of power, it becomes more difficult for the latter to be legitimately based on inherently non-democratic principles such as 'one dollar, one vote'. The logic bears many similarities with the way feminist movements have politicized patriarchal power by claiming that the 'personal is political'. Their insistence that the patriarchal family is not a neutral space but consists of political relationships that need to be brought under democratic control has been an important factor in creating legal and informal norms to regulate issues that range from childcare to domestic violence. Global civic-driven democratization projects should continue to learn from the politicizing spirit of the feminists to legitimate the validity of democratic claims upon global institutions.

During the first years of the new millennium, these claims have become increasingly vocal. It would now be difficult to ignore the social movements, non-governmental organizations, critical think-tanks and other actors that are challenging the financial and cultural hegemony of transnational capitalism. Even if it is misleading to claim, as the *New York Times* did after the anti-war protests of February 2003, that they have become the world's 'second superpower', they form part of any comprehensive picture of new world politics. But what is this new politics?

The WSF process embodies the idea that there exists a new conception of the political that transgresses traditional definitions, especially, though not only, vis-à-vis territorial states and political parties. As has been stated by Cândido Grzybowski, the WSF participants 'must be radically political' and engage in a 'new way of doing politics'.[4] A key Brazilian organizer of the WSF, Grzybowski concludes insightfully that 'we engage in a fully political act, but it seems that we fear its consequences'. Also many academic observers like Arturo Escobar have seen a 'new theoretical and political logic on the rise' in the WSF, even if its contours are 'still barely discernible'.[5] The politicization practised by the globalization protest movements opens new democratic possibilities, but both within the movements and inside academia there is still much need to rethink how the political in these movements should be understood.

The lack of attention to the political nature of the articulations among the globalization protest movements is reflected in the ways they have been considered members of an emerging 'global civil society'. In much of the academic and activist literature, attributes such as 'horizontal' tend to characterize the spaces of civil society, and relations of power and hierarchies among the actors of these spaces are often simply assumed away. The tendency to project desired qualities in the analysed phenomena has been strong in much of this literature. According to David Chandler, who has critically analysed this tendency, 'the idea of global civil society as a distinct 'space' is central to the theoretical assertions regarding its moral distinctiveness'.[6]

The globalization protest movements that participate in the WSF are involved in various kinds of innovative democratic practices. In order to understand the potential of these practices, we need to start from a realist analysis of their limitations and dilemmas. To confuse statements of aims (such as explicit commitments to avoiding power hierarchies) with descriptions of current realities (such as claims that a particular space created by the movements would in fact be power-free) is unhelpful for either understanding or changing the world. The movements must face depoliticization not only 'out there'. They also have to tackle the dilemmas that depoliticization presents in their own internal organizational efforts.

The doctrine of economic neutrality is most obvious in institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, but it also manifests itself in the WSF process. Especially during the first years of the process, questions of funding, labour relations and provision of services within the WSF were considered mainly technical issues, handled through a depoliticized 'administration of things'. The fact that the WSF is organized inside a capitalist world is also evident in the disadvantaged structural position of participants from relatively poor organizations and countries.

To claim that the WSF is an 'open space' may sound like a joke in bad taste for those who do not have the material means to enter the space. In simple terms, to send representatives to far-away WSF events, an organization needs to have money or friends with money. There are examples of compensating the lack of material resources with enthusiasm, such as the case of the dozens of young Peruvian activists who traveled for days in harsh conditions– including being held at gunpoint by robbers – with inexpensively organized bus caravans to the WSF events where they held dance parties to collect money for the return trip. In general terms, however, the question of what organizations get to be represented by delegates in the WSF has been heavily conditioned by unequally distributed material resources. Furthermore, even if the organizers of the WSF have increasingly tried to apply principles of a non-capitalist 'solidarity economy' in the forum itself, the apparently mundane issue of the logistics of accommodation has been heavily conditioned by the profit-making logic of the local hotel industry that has heavily raised prices to take advantage of the increased demand during the annual WSF.

One example of the dilemmas structural inequalities cause for the attempt to practice democracy inside the forum became evident in 2005. During the previous years

there had been a debate on whether the organizing committees should single out certain key events in the program. Various kinds of criticism had been made of the undemocratic dimension of the organizers creating a hierarchy of events, based ultimately on political considerations. As a result, when the fifth WSF was held in Porto Alegre in 2005, the printed programme was for the first time horizontal in the sense that it did not designate any key panels. With this apparently democratic co-existence of events, the market mechanism became an important factor in defining the relative importance of the panels. Organizations with more resources to produce colorful posters and leaflets or distribute T-shirts and other paraphernalia became the visible ones. The vacuum created by the absence of a hierarchy politically defined by the organizers was partially filled with the rule of the wallet. After the experience, some panels have generally been given more centrality in the programme in order to aim at an equitable visibility of disadvantaged groups.

More generally, over the years, there has been a learning process and increasing attention is now being paid to the ways structural inequalities affect the process. Solidarity funds have been strengthened to help organizations from poor countries (and sometimes poor organizations from rich countries such as the Poor People's Human Rights Campaign from the United States) to participate in the decision-making organs of the WSF. The choice of the venue has become an object of debates about its ownership structure and labour conditions. The question of funding the process has also become more politicized, especially after various controversies related to the role of Ford Foundation in the preparations for the WSF held in Mumbai in 2004.

Enlightened Tyranny of Structurelessness

There are various depoliticizing elements of the WSF Charter of Principles and other guidelines that have problematic consequences for democratic practice within the WSF. The dilemma is that these elements help avoid conflicts within the WSF and have therefore contributed to its success, but at the same time they make the WSF governance bodies vulnerable to accusations of reproducing undemocratic practices. The widely held idea that in order to be an 'open space', the WSF cannot be considered an 'organization' or 'institution' also contributes to its internal depoliticization. To use an expression derived from the feminist movements of the early 1970s, the unwillingness to politically consider the WSF an organization with rules and regulations contributes to a 'tyranny of structurelessness'.

In civic-driven contexts that are based on principles of horizontality and lack of elite leaders, there exists the danger that dominant cliques emerge without procedures to deal with their power. Jo Freeman, who coined the concept of tyranny of structurelessness, analysed the proliferation of groups that claimed to be leaderless and structureless among the feminist movements of the late 1960s

and early 1970s. The attempted structurelessness was, however, impossible. For Freeman, to strive for a structureless group was 'as useful and as deceptive, as to aim at an 'objective' news story, 'value-free' social science or a 'free' economy'.[7] In the WSF, the analogy with the illusions about 'free economy' is evident in such accounts that explicitly or implicitly consider the WSF an unregulated 'market place of ideas', an example which I described above regarding the dilemmas of designating key panels in the programme.

For many feminists of the early 1970s, the attempts at structurelessness were a reaction against the society and particular political institutions and organizations that were perceived as over-structured. In the World Social Forum, the attempts to avoid a structured organizational form have various explicit and implicit references to the kinds of organizations that need to be avoided or excluded. The WSF was conceived as something that is not a political party, not a nongovernmental organization, and not even a social movement. One of the most important concepts that the initiators of the WSF process have used to describe it is 'open space'. Especially at the beginning, the openness was regarded as near-synonymous with structurelessness, with similar dilemmas for the democratic process.

When analysing the WSF space, one needs to distinguish the WSF events as gathering places from the governance organs that make decisions about organizing the events. While the former have more attributes of an 'open space', in the case of the latter the open-space discourse is more misleading. In the WSF governing organs, practices based on depoliticized understandings of open space have had paradoxical consequences. On the one hand, it is sometimes argued that because the WSF is an open space, its organs should have few explicit rules or procedures. On the other hand, when no procedures for including new members exist in its governing bodies, such as the International Council, they become closed spaces because there is no agreement on how inclusion takes place. Over a period of two years, in 2002-4, the International Council was unable to process membership applications because there were no rules on how they should be processed. The illusion of structurelessness contributed to the strengthening of structures that prevented the inclusion of new members.

According to the WSF Charter of Principles, the forum 'does not constitute a locus of power to be disputed by the participants'. As an empirical description, this part of the Charter is obviously erroneous, because various kinds of disputes of power have always existed within the WSF. As a statement of wish, it can also be considered problematic because it obstructs the possibilities to create procedures through which the disputes could be channeled in a transparent and democratic manner.

Some of the disputes inside the WSF in general and the IC in particular are more traditionally ideological, such as the perennial intra-left ones between 'social democrats', 'communists' and 'Trotskyites', reflecting the fact that

even if the WSF is a non-party civic space, a number of participants have political affiliations. Many, and perhaps most, disputes are difficult to classify along traditional divides of the historical left. The difference between the advocates of conquering state power, either through elections or other means, and those who emphasize more autonomist strategies is one of the main cleavages in the WSF as a whole.

According to Boaventura de Sousa Santos, the multiple cleavages are one of the main strengths of the WSF. 'If a given movement opposes another in one cleavage, it may well be on the same side in another cleavage'. For him, the aggregating power of the WSF lies in the fact that the cleavages end up 'neutralizing or disempowering each other out'.[8] For example, many of the radical activists of the WSF Youth Camp may agree with Francisco Whitaker, one of the original 'founding fathers' of the WSF, on the importance of keeping the WSF as horizontal as possible, even if they may disagree with him on various substantial issues about the future of the world. While I find the general point of Santos correct, it would be an illusion to assume that the neutralization caused by overlapping cleavages is or could ever be so total that it results in an overall harmony. Political disputes have existed, will exist and should exist in the organizational structure of the WSF. They sometimes take place in the plenary debates of the International Council or the organizing committees, but often they are waged in the corridors or through private e-mail exchanges hidden from the public eye of the other WSF participants and observers.

As long as there are no clear procedures for resolving disputes within the governance bodies of the WSF, the workings of power will continue to take place mostly through mechanisms that have not been collectively agreed on. It is sometimes explicitly or implicitly argued that this in itself is not a problem as long as the WSF process produces 'results' (enthusiasm, mobilizations, or plans to democratize the world) that legitimate the way it functions. In other words, even if the WSF has elements of a tyranny of structurelessness in the sense described above, it should not matter as long as the tyranny is enlightened. This pragmatic argument, even if seldom stated in such explicit or crude terms, has been reproduced from the beginning of the WSF organizational process. The depoliticized structurelessness was undoubtedly an important element in the initial enthusiasm about the novelty of the WSF. The WSF, however, needs to take the political more seriously if it is to become an increasingly important platform for democratic transformations. Not to be necessarily associated with party politics or conquering the state, this politicization means recognizing relations of power in order to democratize them.

Since the WSF has emerged gradually as a process among certain concrete actors, there was never a 'democratic founding moment' which would have given it a clear democratic mandate. This paradox of democracy is common to most real-world processes in which a relatively democratic order has been established. Even if many national constitutions establish that the 'people have the power', the people were often absent at the moment of establishing the first constitution.[9] It is similarly logically impossible for a civic space like the WSF to ever construct a totally democratic basis for its governance, but this paradox should not prevent it from constantly attempting to democratize its internal governance. In this issue, as in many others, there has certainly been a learning process and questions of internal democracy are now taken more seriously than before.

Can an Open Space Generate Action?

Apart from the depoliticization that hinders democratic practices within the WSF, there exists another kind of depoliticization: that which consists of such rules and practices that reproduce the idea that the WSF is an open space, an arena that should have no attributes of a movement or a political actor.[10] The WSF provides a space for actors that may construct projects of democratic transformation in different contexts, both local and global. The WSF itself, however, has avoided issuing declarations of support for any particular political process and mobilization. As stated by Cândido Grzybowski, 'political action is the responsibility of each individual and the coalitions they form, not an attribute of the forum'.[11]

Relying on a more pronounced dichotomy between the forum as a space and the forum as a movement, Francisco Whitaker has criticized the 'self-nominated social movements' that 'seek to put the forum inside their own mobilizing dynamics, to serve their own objectives'.[12] Within the International Council, Whitaker has been the staunchest defender of maintaining the WSF as a space or as a 'square without an owner'.[13] For him, there exists no possibility to combine the conceptions of space and movement: the WSF 'cannot pretend to be 90% space and 10% movement'.

Among the WSF activists, one of the challenges to the open-space method defended by Whitaker has been formulated by Walden Bello, who in the International Council represents Focus on the Global South, a Bangkok-based radical think-tank. Like many others who have criticized the limitations of the open-space method, Bello cites approvingly the Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez who, in his speech to the WSF 2006 in Caracas, demanded that 'we, the social movements and political movements, must be able to move into spaces of power at the local, national, and regional level'. Pointing to the difficulties the open space-oriented WSF has had in 'developing a strategy of counter-power or counter-hegemony', Bello asks whether

'the WSF [is] still the most appropriate vehicle for the new stage in the struggle of the global justice and peace movement? Or, having fulfilled its historic function of aggregating and linking the diverse counter-movements spawned by global capitalism, is it time for the WSF to fold up its tent and give way to new modes of global organization of resistance and transformation?' [14]

The pressures for more explicit political will-formation are also expressed by and through the media. The press has tended to look at the WSF as a (potential) political actor in itself, while many of the organizers have wanted to downplay this role and argue that they simply provide a space for different groups to interact. These different conceptions of the event have clashed, for example, when the press has asked for final declarations and considered the lack of any such document a proof of weakness in the organization. After the WSF 2004 in Mumbai, Reuters reported that 'all the sound and fury from the forum delegates did not produce any declaration or action plan after a six-day meeting that discussed an alphabet soup of issues from AIDS to WTO'.[15] These comments often fail to consider that the intention of most organizers has never been to produce any official final document that would pretend to represent the views of the thousands of organizations that participated in the meetings.[16]

The problem is sometimes expressed by arguing that the WSF 'talks the talk' but does not 'walk the walk'. The example of the anti-war demonstrations of February 2003, however, reveals that it is at least partially misleading to call the WSF a mere talking shop, even if it never made an official declaration against the US-led war in Iraq. Of course, the transnational anti-war demonstration of 15 February 2003 did not stop the war, but it was the largest civic-driven single-day mobilization in the history of humankind. And it was to a significant extent generated from within the social forum process, especially the first European Social Forum that took place in Florence in October 2002 and the Assemblies of Social Movements that gather during WSF events without claiming to represent the WSF process as a whole.

The way the WSF related to the anti-war demonstrations of 2003 turns the argument about its being a mere talking shop on its head. Was it not rather that the WSF did not talk the talk (i.e., pronounce anti-war statements with a unified voice through its governing bodies) but focused on walking the walk (i.e., helping to facilitate and organize the demonstrations and integrating the war theme visibly in its programme)? This example does not in itself invalidate the more general criticism about the WSF being of too little use for projects and movements of social transformation, but it shows that the real issue is not between 'talking' and 'doing'. It is between different conceptions of the WSF as a political process.

In the debates on the political usefulness of the WSF, there has been a tendency, on the one hand, to call for more traditional forms of political agency such as creating an explicit movement of movements or making strategic alliances with progressive states and parties. On the other hand, those who have defended the open-space orientation of the process have had difficulties in showing that the process has already been politically useful and has indeed generated various kinds of action. One of the problems for the latter is the difficulty to establish connections between what happens inside the forums and what happens outside. For example, we can speculate on the

impact of the social forum process on the turn to the left in most South American elections since the first WSF was held in 2001. To what extent has the enthusiasm and articulations generated by the WSF played a role in these concrete results? Some of the founding fathers of the WSF may emphasize its role in private conversations after a couple of drinks, but tend to avoid making such declarations publicly in order to avoid sounding arrogant or eager to assume ownership of peoples' campaigns. From an academic perspective, it is difficult, though not impossible, to show causal connections on this issue. The most concrete outcomes of the WSF consist of the dialogues, articulations and learning processes that take place in the workshops, panels, seminars, festivities and corridors of the events. I would argue that these encounters have helped generate political action, of which the above-mentioned anti-war demonstrations are one example that is relatively easy to establish.

New empirical research is needed to establish other connections. For example, to me it is obvious that the constantly intensifying articulations of the Andean indigenous movements both between them across national boundaries and vis-à-vis other movements have benefited from the social forums. The members of the different movements have been able to use the WSF space to plan common action and to find various kinds of allies in other movements. They have also been able to strengthen their presence in the local and national politics of their own regions, both through participation in victorious electoral campaigns, as in the case of Ecuador and Bolivia, or through assuming an increasingly important role in protests against governments and corporate power, as in Peru. Some participant observers of the process, such as Immanuel Wallerstein and Vijay Pratap, have also claimed that organizing the WSF in India in 2004 played a significant role in the national elections later that year in which the United Progressive Alliance defeated the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. Be that as it may, the more general point here is that the civic-driven WSF initiative has been able to generate politically relevant agency without relying on traditionally political forms of organizing.

What about changing the whole world? The WSF has been useful for articulating campaigns around world trade, as evidenced by the coordination of action around the WTO negotiations. The transnational peasant alliance *Via Campesina* has been an important actor in these campaigns, and also in the WSF process even if in recent years it has often raised criticism of the limitations of the open-space method. Other concrete examples could be mentioned, but toward the end of this essay I would like to take up the role of the WSF in facilitating a debate and learning process on the institutional features of the possible futures of the world.

Toward Possible Worlds

The emergence of the globalization protest movements since the mid-1990s may imply a world-historical possi-

bility for civic-driven democratic change. Whereas in the early 1990s the belief in the nonpolitical nature of the global economic institutions was still relatively strong, today more people are likely to laugh at the claim that the World Bank would be a purely technical and nonpolitical institution. Apart from the politicizing efforts of the movements, several self-defeating actions – such as the scandals related to the nomination and sacking of Paul Wolfowitz as the president of the World Bank – have certainly contributed to this situation. As regards transnational corporations, the appearance of the corporate social responsibility talk is one of the defensive mechanisms that the rulers of these institutions resort to when their political nature becomes more evident.

In this context, the civic-driven global democratization movements are facing an important window of opportunity. The doctrine of economic neutrality has been a key mechanism of defending the undemocratic governance of global economic institutions. According to the mainstream tradition of western political thought – which many of the leaders of these institutions claim to honor – democracy is a valid norm within the realm of politics. By showing that the actions of these institutions are by no means beyond the realm of politics, the movements can at last in principle open up the spaces constituted by their praxis for democratic demands. To the extent the collective critique is taken seriously, it should become clear that those who control global economic institutions have not really honoured the principles they have paid lip service to.

This would leave the rulers of the undemocratic institutions with a dilemma. Either they would have to admit that they in fact prefer authoritarian political rule over democracy, or, more ideally, they would have to participate in the democratization of their institutions. The latter possibility is hard to envision, but I think it is possible to at least partially achieve the former one. By focusing on the inherently political nature of the transnational and global 'economic' spaces and by insisting on the thereby legitimized need to democratize them, the ideologically empowering banner of democracy may be taken out of their hands. It is, of course, open to debate to what extent this shift of emphasis has happened in the global media, but the problems related to the undemocratic governance of these institutions are mentioned more often than before. Also empirical findings, such as the European Social Survey of 2002/2003, have confirmed that the concerns expressed by the globalization protest movements 'are shared by a large majority of the national public opinions', at least in Europe.[17] One of the often heard counterclaims is that globalization protest movements themselves are organized in a not-too-democratic fashion, which is one of the reasons why the question of internal democracy should be taken more seriously in spaces like the World Social Forum. Another counterclaim is that beyond repeating that 'another world is possible', the movements cannot offer any concrete alternatives for future institutional arrangements.

The political usefulness of formulating models of transnational, cosmopolitan, or global democratic institutions of the future is not only that they can provide inspiration for those who might struggle for their realization. Such models are also important for the task of undermining the existing networks of power, because the legitimacy of the latter has been largely based on the there-is-no-alternative discourse. As analysed above, the movements participating in the World Social Forum have played a part in undermining the hegemony of this discourse. Among the events of the WSF, there have also been many debates on alternative institutional orders of the world.

One of the internal tensions of the WSF has been that those who organize panels on global democratic orders are often perceived as disconnected from concrete grassroots struggles. One reason for this is the tendency of many analysts of alternative world orders to extrapolate the institutions of the existing territorial states to the global level. Especially, though not only, within the world federalist tradition, it is common to argue that we need to create a world parliament and the corresponding executive government and judiciary, just like in existing democratic states but on a larger scale, in order to democratize the world. One of the perceived problems in these kinds of global utopias is that they often seem to assume that the current institutional order of the 'liberal-democratic' states is a sufficiently democratic model for future world orders. For those sectors of the movements that have radical critiques of the existing states, this assumption does not hold. Apart from the desirability of this kind of world governance, it is also questionable to what extent it is feasible.

Even if another world is possible, not everything is. For example, it is not realistic to imagine that the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund could be significantly democratized. As stated above, it may still be useful to demand their democratization in order to delegitimize, sink or shrink them, but we should not have unwarranted illusions. The World Trade Organization, even now ultimately based on the possibility of using the one country, one vote mechanism in its decision-making, is more ambiguous. Somewhat similar ambiguity exists in the United Nations, with its (somewhat democratic) General Assembly and (highly undemocratic) Security Council.[18]

One of the difficult questions is that while the principle of one country, one vote mechanism is in principle the main decision-making principle of these institutions, it is often overruled by other mechanisms (more common in the UN) or not practised at all (as mostly happens in the WTO). The limited but real formal equality is not translated into democratic practice. Thus, it is tempting to conclude that formal equality does not matter in global matters and that therefore global civic-driven projects should discard attempts to democratize global institutions. It is, however, important to understand why the moderately democratic international decision-making models such as the UN General Assembly are in such a bad shape. One of the main factors here is that both the

institutions themselves and their member states are often subject to disciplinary mechanisms, especially related to their financial dependency.

It is not that formal equality would be unimportant. It is rather that the civic movements should pay particular attention to the various forms of conditionality and dependency that make the practice of democracy so difficult in international contexts. In other words, campaigns for global democratic institutions cannot have much hope unless there are successful campaigns to tackle issue such as foreign debt and other forms of financial or commercial dependency that the members of these institutions face.

Civic-driven democratization movements, like all others, should have a realistic analysis of what is possible and what is not, and then make strategic prioritizations based on that analysis. This does not mean falling back to the 'old-left ideals' of focusing almost exclusively on some particular contradiction of the world, defined by a central committee, and leaving everything else to be resolved after the great transformation. Neither does it mean that the internal organization of the process needs to be entirely politicized all the time. At certain moments, such as the creation of the WSF, an avoidance of explicitly political questions may be useful for establishing civic spaces of learning and articulation. Nevertheless, when these kinds of civic spaces expand across continents and civilizations, it becomes increasingly difficult to avoid explicitly political questions.

Notes

[1] See, for example, Patomäki and Teivainen (2007).

[2] Charter of Principles of the World Social Forum, available at http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id_menu=4&cd_language=2 (18.9.2008).

[3] Freire (2000).

[4] Grzybowski (2004).

[5] Escobar (2004: 207-30).

[6] Chandler (2007) offers various insightful and critical reflections on the 'spaces' of global civil society literature.

[7] Freeman (1972).

[8] Santos (2005).

[9] See e.g. Doucet (2005: 137-55).

[10] See Whitaker (2002a, 2002b).

[11] Grzybowski (2003).

[12] See also Whitaker (2003).

[13] Personal interview with Francisco Whitaker, 16.06.2004, São Paulo.

[14] Bello (2007).

[15] 'Another World', *Mother Jones* 22.1.2004, available at http://motherjones.org/news/dailymojo/2004/01/01_574.html (5.11.2005).

[16] See e.g. interview of Roberto Bissio in *Cadernos do Terceiro Mundo* 239, 2002.

[17] Della Porta (2007: 232-51).

[18] Patomäki and Teivainen (2004).

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