

The Future of the World Social Forum: The work of translation

BOAVENTURA DE
SOUSA SANTOS

ABSTRACT *Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues that the WSF is the first large international progressive movement following the neo-liberal backlash in the early 1980s. The WSF holds out the hope that another world is possible but while the WSF reveals the diversity of social struggles fighting against neo-liberal globalization all over the world call it calls for a giant work of translation. On the one hand, there are local movements and organizations that are very different in their practices and objectives and embedded in different cultures. On the other, there are transnational organizations, from the South and the North, that differ widely among themselves. He asks how to build articulation, aggregation and coalition among these different movements and organizations? And proposes translation as the alternative to general theory.*

KEYWORDS *counter-hegemony; neo-liberal backlash; social movements; cultures; swadeshi; umma; dharmā*

Introduction

In the World Social Forum (WSF), there is a permanent clash between the old and the new. As utopia and epistemology, the WSF is something new. As a political phenomenon, its novelty coexists with the traditions of left thinking or, more generally, with the traditions of counter-hegemonic thinking, whether in western or non-western versions.

The novelty of the WSF is consensually seen in its inclusiveness and global reach, in the inexistence of leaders and hierarchical organization, in its emphasis on cyberspace networks, its ideal of participatory democracy, and its flexibility and eagerness to engage in experimentation. The WSF is, without question, the first large international progressive movement following the neo-liberal backlash in the early 1980s. Its future is the future of hope that another world is possible as an alternative to single thinking. Such a future remains totally unknown; we can only speculate about it. It depends on the movements and organizations that integrate the WSF, as well as, at the same time, on the metamorphoses of neo-liberal globalization. The fact that for the past few years the latter has acquired a strong bellicose component, focused on neocolonial war and security, will no doubt affect the evolution of the WSF. I believe, however, that the greatest, long-term challenge facing the WSF goes far beyond the strategies and tactics of political action, and is a consequence of the very novelty of the WSF. It can be formulated

Development 48(2): Thematic Section

thus: in the absence of a general principle or criterion capable of providing unity and structure to the immense variety of political organizations, struggles and cultures that gather together in the WSF, what is the capacity of the WSF to transform the huge energy generated therein into new counter-hegemonic collective actions?

From general theory to the work of translation

The political theory of western modernity, whether in its liberal or Marxist version, constructed the unity of action from the agent's unity. According to it, the coherence and meaning of social change was always based on the capacity of the privileged agent of change, be it the bourgeoisie or the working classes, to represent the totality from which the coherence and meaning derived. From such capacity of representation derived both the need and operations of a general theory of social change.

The utopia and epistemology underlying the WSF place it in the antipodes of such a theory. The extraordinary energy of attraction and aggregation revealed by the WSF resides precisely in refusing the idea of a general theory. The diversity that finds a haven in it is free from the fear of being cannibalized by false universalisms or false single strategies propounded by any general theory. The WSF underwrites the idea that the world is an inexhaustible totality, as it holds many totalities, all of them partial. Accordingly, there is no sense in attempting to grasp the world by any single general theory, because any such theory will always presuppose the monoculture of a given totality and the homogeneity of its parts. The time we live in, whose recent past was dominated by the idea of a general theory, is perhaps a time of transition that may be defined in the following way: we have no need of a general theory, but still need a general theory on the impossibility of a general theory. We need, at any rate, a negative universalism.

What is the alternative to the general theory? To my mind, the alternative to a general theory is the work of translation. Translation is the procedure that allows for mutual intelligibility among the experiences of the world, both available and

possible, as revealed by the sociology of absences and the sociology of emergences, without jeopardizing their identity and autonomy, without, in other words, reducing them to homogeneous entities.

The WSF is witness to the wide multiplicity and variety of social practices of counterhegemony that occur all over the world. Its strength derives from having corresponded or given expression to the aspiration of aggregation and articulation of the different social movements and NGOs, an aspiration that had been only latent up until then. The movements and the NGOs constitute themselves around a number of more or less confined goals, create their own forms and styles of resistance, and specialize in certain kinds of practice and discourse that distinguish them from the others. Their identity is thereby created on the basis of what separates them from all the others. The feminist movement sees itself as very distinct from the labour movement and *vice versa*; both distinguish themselves from the indigenous movement or the ecological movement; and so on and so forth. All these distinctions and separations have actually translated themselves into very practical differences, if not even into contradictions that contribute to bringing the movements apart and to fostering rivalries and factionalisms. Hence from derives the fragmentation and atomization that are the dark side of diversity and multiplicity.

This dark side has lately been pointedly acknowledged by the movements and NGOs. The truth is, however, that none of them individually has had the capacity or credibility to confront it, for, in attempting it, it runs the risk of falling prey to the situation it wishes to remedy. Hence the extraordinary step taken by the WSF. It must be admitted, however, that the aggregation/articulation made possible by the WSF is of low intensity. The goals are limited, very often circumscribed to mutual knowledge or, at the most, to recognize differences and make them more explicit and better known. Under these circumstances, joint action cannot but be limited.

The challenge that counter-hegemonic globalization now faces may be understood in the following way. The forms of aggregation and

articulation made possible by the WSF were sufficient to achieve the goals of the phase that may be now coming to an end. Deepening the WSF's goals in a new phase requires forms of aggregation and articulation of higher intensity. Such a process includes articulating struggles and resistances, as well as promoting ever more comprehensive and consistent alternatives. Such articulations presuppose combinations among the different social movements and NGOs that are bound to question their very identity and autonomy as they have been conceived of so far. If the project is to promote counter-hegemonic practices that combine ecological, pacifist, indigenous, feminist, workers' and other movements, and to do so in a horizontal way and with respect for the identity of every movement, an enormous effort of mutual recognition, dialogue, and debate will be required to carry out the task.

This is the only way to identify more rigorously what divides and unites the movements, so as to base the articulations of practices and knowledges on what unites them, rather than on what divides them. Such a task entails a wide exercise in translation to expand reciprocal intelligibility without destroying the identity of the partners of translation. The point is to create, in every movement or NGO, in every practice or strategy, in every discourse or knowledge, a contact zone that may render it porous and hence permeable to other NGOs, practices, strategies, discourses, and knowledges. The exercise of translation aims to identify and reinforce what is common in the diversity of counter-hegemonic drive. Canceling out what separates is out of the question. The goal is to have host-difference replace fortress-difference. Through translation work, diversity is celebrated, not as a factor of fragmentation and isolationism, but rather as a condition of sharing and solidarity.

The work of translation concerns both knowledges and actions (strategic goals, organization, styles of struggle and agency). Of course, in the practice of the movements, knowledges and actions are inseparable. However, for the purposes of translation, it is important to distinguish between contact zones in which the interactions incide mainly upon knowledges, and contact zones in which interactions incide mainly upon actions.

In the following I provide some illustrations of translation work.

Translation of knowledges

Translation of knowledges consists of interpretation work between two or more cultures – those to which the different movements/organizations in the contact zone see themselves as belonging to – to identify similar concerns or aspirations among them and the different responses they provide for them. For instance, the concern with and the aspiration to human dignity seems to be present, however in different ways, in different cultures. In the western culture, the idea of human dignity is expressed today by the concept of human rights. If we look at the thousands of movements and organizations that gather at the WSF we will observe that many of them do not formulate their concerns in terms of human rights and many may even express a hostile stance against the idea of human rights. Does this mean that these movements do not care for human dignity? Or is it rather the case that they formulate their concerns for human dignity through a different set of concepts? I think that the latter is the case and accordingly I have been proposing a translation on concerns for human dignity between the western concept of human rights, the islamic concept of *umma* (community), and the hindu concept of *dharma* (cosmic harmony involving human and all the other beings).

In this case, the work of translation will reveal the reciprocal shortcomings or weaknesses of each one of these conceptions of human dignity once viewed from the perspective any other conception. Thereby, a space is open in the contact zone for dialogue, mutual knowledge and understanding and for identification, over and above conceptual and terminological differences, of commonalities from which practical combinations for action can emerge. A few examples will clarify what I mean. Seen from the perspective of *dharma*, human rights are incomplete in that they fail to establish the link between the part (the individual) and the whole (cosmic reality), or even more strongly in that they focus on what is merely derivative, on rights, rather than on the primordial

Development 48(2): Thematic Section

imperative, the duty of individuals to find their place in the order of the entire society, and of the entire cosmos.¹ Seen from *dharma* and, indeed from *umma* also, the western conception of human rights is plagued by a very simplistic and mechanistic symmetry between rights and duties. It grants rights only to those from whom it can demand duties. This explains why according to western human rights nature has no rights: because it cannot be imposed any duties. For the same reason, it is impossible to grant rights to future generations: they have no rights because they have no duties.

On the other hand, seen from the perspective of human rights, *dharma* is also incomplete due to its strong bias in favor of the harmony of the social and religious status quo, thereby occulting injustices and totally neglecting the value of conflict as a way toward a richer harmony. Moreover, *dharma* is unconcerned with the principles of democratic order, with individual freedom and autonomy, and it neglects the fact that, without primordial rights, the individual is too fragile an entity to avoid being run over by powerful economic and political institutions. Moreover, *dharma* tends to forget that human suffering has an irreducible individual dimension: societies do not suffer, individuals do.

At another conceptual level, the same work of translation can be attempted between the concept human rights and the concept of *umma* in Islamic culture. The passages in the Qur'an in which the word *umma* occurs are so varied that its meaning cannot be rigidly defined. This much, however, seems to be certain: it always refers to ethnical, linguistic or religious bodies of people who are the objects of the divine plan of salvation. As the prophetic activity of Muhammad progressed, the religious foundations of *umma* became increasingly apparent and consequently the *umma* of the Arabs was transformed into the *umma* of the Muslims. Seen from the perspective of *umma*, the incompleteness of the individual human rights lies in the fact that on their basis alone it is impossible to ground the collective linkages, duties and solidarities without which no society can survive, and much less flourish. Herein lies the difficulty in the western conception of human rights to ac-

cept collective rights of social groups or peoples, be they ethnic minorities, women, or indigenous peoples. Conversely, from the perspective of the individual human rights, *umma* overemphasizes duties to the detriment of rights and, for that reason, is bound to condone otherwise abhorrent inequalities, such as the inequality between men and women and between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The recognition of reciprocal incompleteness and weakness is a *condition-sine-qua-non* of a cross-cultural dialogue. The work of translation builds both on local identification of incompleteness and weakness and on its translocal intelligibility. In the area of human rights and dignity, the mobilization of social support for the emancipatory claims they potentially contain is only achievable if such claims have been appropriated in the local cultural context. Appropriation, in this sense, cannot be obtained through cultural cannibalization. It requires cross-cultural dialogue by means of translation work.

In light of the political and cultural characteristics of the movements/organizations present at the WSF many other exercises of translation are needed. I just mention one of them here without going into details of translation. It focuses on the concern for productive life as it is expressed in the modern capitalist conceptions of development and in Gandhi's conception of *swadeshi*.² The conceptions of productive life deriving from capitalist development have been reproduced by conventional economics and are often implicitly or explicitly accepted by social movements and NGOs particularly in the global North. Such conceptions are based on the idea of infinite growth reached through the increasing subjection of the practices and knowledges to mercantile logic. The *swadeshi*, in turn, is based on the idea of sustainability and reciprocity that Gandhi defined in 1916 in the following way:

swadeshi is that spirit in us which restricts us to the use and service of our immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the more remote. Thus as for religion, in order to satisfy the requirements of the definition I must restrict myself to my ancestral religion... If I find it defective I should serve it by purging it of its defects. In the domain of politics I should make use of

the indigenous institutions and serve them by curing them of their proven defects. In that of economics, I should use only things that are produced by my immediate neighbors and serve those industries by making them efficient and complete where they might be found wanting (Gandhi, 1941: 4–5).

This brief description of *swadeshi* and the weight it carries among NGOs and movements in South Asia, as it could be observed at the WSF in Mumbai, shows how important the work of translation might be to bring about North/South and East/West coalitions among NGOs and movements concerned with development or production.

The work of translation among knowledges starts from the idea that all cultures are incomplete and can, therefore, be enriched by dialogue and confrontation with other cultures. In my view the WSF has granted this idea a new centrality and a higher urgency. To acknowledge the relativity of cultures does not imply the adoption of relativism as cultural stance (the idea that all cultures are equally valid and that no judgment can be passed on them from the perspective of another culture). It does imply, however, to conceive of universalism as a western peculiarity, whose idea of supremacy does not reside in itself, but rather in the supremacy of the interests that sustain it. As I referred to above, the critique of universalism derives from the critique of the possibility of a general theory. The work of translation presupposes, rather, what I designate as negative universalism, the most commonly shared idea of the impossibility of cultural completeness.

Translation of practices

The second type of the work of translation is undertaken among social practices and their agents. All social practices imply knowledge, and as such they are also knowledge practices. When dealing with practices, however, the work of translation focuses specifically on mutual intelligibility among forms of organization and objectives and styles of action types of struggle. What distinguishes the two types of translation work is, after all, the emphasis or perspective that informs them. The specificity of the translation work con-

cerning practices and their agents becomes clearer in situations in which the knowledges that inform different practices are less distinguishable than the practices themselves. This happens particularly when the practices take place inside the same cultural universe. Such would be the case of a work of translation between the forms of organization and the objectives of action of two social movements, say, the feminist movement and the labour movement in a western society.

The relevance of the work of translation as regards practices is due to a double circumstance. On the one hand, the WSF meetings have enlarged considerably the stock of available and possible social struggles against capitalism and neo-liberal globalization. On the other, because there is no single principle of social transformation, as the Charter of Principles emphasizes, it is not possible to determine in abstract the articulations or hierarchies among the different social struggles and their conceptions of social transformation, both of objectives of social transformation and of means to achieve them. Only by building concrete contact zones among concrete struggles is it possible to evaluate them and identify possible alliances among them. Reciprocal knowledge and learning is a necessary condition for agreeing on articulation and building coalitions. The counter-hegemonic potential of any social movement resides in its capacity to articulate with other movements, their forms of organization and objectives. For these articulations to be possible, the movements must be mutually intelligible.

The work of translation aims to clarify what unites and separates the different movements and practices so as to ascertain the possibilities and limits of articulation and aggregation among them. Because there is no single universal social practice or collective subject to confer meaning and direction to history, the work of translation becomes crucial to define, in each concrete and historical moment or context, which constellations of subaltern practices carry more counter-hegemonic potential.

The WSF while showing the diversity of social struggles fighting against neo-liberal globalization all over the world call for a giant work of translation. On the one hand, local movements

Development 48(2): Thematic Section

and organizations that are not only very different in their practices and objectives but also embedded in different cultures. On the other, transnational organizations, some from the South, some from the North, that also differ widely among themselves. How to build articulation, aggregation and coalition among all these different movements and organizations? What do the participatory budgeting practiced in many Latin American cities and the participatory democratic planning based on *panchayats* in Kerala and West Bengal in India have in common? What can they learn from each other? In what kinds of counter-hegemonic global activities can they cooperate? The same questions can be asked about the pacifist and the anarchist movements, or the indigenous and gay movements, the Zapatista movement, the ATTAC, the Landless Movement in Brazil, and the Narmada river movement in India, and so on and so forth. These are the questions that the work of translation aims to answer. It is a complex work, not only because the movements and organizations involved are many and diverse but also because they are embedded in diverse cultures and knowledges.

Conditions and procedures of translation

The work of translation aims to create intelligibility, coherence, and articulation in a world that sees itself enriched by multiplicity and diversity. Translation is not a mere technique. Even its obvious technical components and the way in which they are applied in the course of the translation process must be the object of democratic deliberation. Translation is a dialogical and political work. It has an emotional dimension as well, because it presupposes both a non-conformist attitude *vis-à-vis* the limits of one's knowledge and practice and the readiness to be surprised and learn with the other's knowledge and practice.

The work of translation is based on the premise that for cultural, social and political reasons specific to our time it is possible to reach a broad consensus around the idea that there is no general, all-encompassing theory of social transformation. Without this consensus – the only kind of legitimate (negative) universalism – translation is a co-

lonial kind of work no matter how postcolonial it claims to be. Once such postulate is guaranteed, the conditions and procedures of the work of translation can be elucidated on the basis of the following questions: What to translate? From what and into what to translate? Who translates? When should translation take place? Why translate? A brief reference to the first question.

What to translate?

The crucial concept in answering this question is the concept of contact zone. Building coalitions to further counter-hegemonic globalization presupposes the existence of contact zones conceived of as social fields in which different movements/organizations meet and interact to reciprocally evaluate their normative aspirations, their practices and knowledges. In view of the history of progressive politics in the 20th century, it is probably unavoidable that unequal relations of power are present in the first steps of the construction of contact zones. The work of translation will be possible to the extent that the unequal power relations yield to relations of shared authority. Only then will the cosmopolitan contact zone be constituted. The cosmopolitan contact zone starts from the assumption that it is up to each knowledge or practice to decide what is put in contact with whom. Contact zones are always selective because the movement's or NGO's knowledges and practices exceed what of them they are willing to put in contact. Indeed, what is put in contact is not necessarily what is most relevant or central. As the work of translation advances it becomes possible to bring into the contact zone the aspects of knowledge or practice that each NGO or social movement considers more central and relevant.

In multicultural contact zones, it is up to each cultural group to decide which aspects must be selected for multicultural confrontation. In every culture, there are features deemed too central to be exposed and rendered vulnerable by the confrontation in the contact zone, or aspects deemed inherently untranslatable into another culture. These decisions are part and parcel of the work of translation itself and are susceptible of revision as the work proceeds. If the work of translation pro-

gresses, it is to be expected that more features will be brought to the contact zone, which in turn will contribute to further translation progress. In many countries of Latin America, particularly in those in which multicultural constitutionalism has been adopted, the indigenous peoples have been fighting for the right to control what in their knowledges and practices should or should not be the object of translation *vis-à-vis* the *sociedad mayor*. Once involved in the WSF process, the indigenous movements conduct a similar struggle *vis-à-vis* all the non-indigenous movements.

The issue of what is translatable is not restricted to the selection criterion adopted by each group in the contact zone. Beyond active selectivity, there is what we might call passive selectivity. It consists of what in a given culture has become unpronounceable because of the extreme oppression to which it was subjected during long periods. These are deep absences, made of an emptiness impossible to fill; the silences they produce are too unfathomable to become the object of translation work.

What to translate stirs one other question that is particularly important in contact zones between groups from different cultural universes. Cultures are monolithic only when seen from the outside or from afar. When looked at from the inside or at close range, it is easy to see that they are comprised of various and often conflicting versions of the same culture. For example, when I speak, as I did above, of a possible multicultural dialogue about conceptions of human dignity, we can easily see that in the western culture there is not just one conception of human rights. Two at least can be identified: a liberal conception that privileges political and civic rights to the detriment of social and economic rights; and a radical or socialist conception that stresses social and economic rights as condition of all the others. By the same token, in Islam it is possible to identify several conceptions of *umma*; some, more inclusive, going back to the time when the Prophet lived in Mecca; others, less inclusive, which evolved after the construction of the Islamic state in Medina. Likewise, there are many conceptions of *dharma* in Hinduism. They vary, for instance from caste to caste.

The most inclusive versions, which hold a wider circle of reciprocity, are the ones that generate more promising contact zones; they are the most adequate to deepen the work of translation.

Conclusion

The work of translation enables the social movements and organizations to develop a cosmopolitan reason based on the core idea that global social justice is not possible without global cognitive justice.

The work of translation is the procedure we are left with to give coherence and generate coalitions among the enormous diversity of struggles against neo-liberal globalization when there is no (and would not be desired if existed) general theory of progressive social transformation to be brought about by a privileged historical subject according to centrally established strategies and tactics. When social transformation has no automatic meaning and neither history nor society or nature can be centrally planned, the movements have to create through translation partial collective meanings that enable them to coalesce on courses of action that they consider most adequate to bring about the kind of social transformation they deem most desirable.

It may be asked: if we do not know if a better world is possible, what gives us legitimacy or motivation to act as if we did? The work of translation is a work of epistemological and democratic imagination, aiming to construct new and plural conceptions of social emancipation upon the ruins of the automatic social emancipation of the modernist project. There is no guaranty that a better world may be possible, nor that all those who have not given up struggling for it conceive of it in the same way. The objective of the translation work is to nurture among progressive social movements and organizations the will to create together knowledges and practices strong enough to provide credible alternatives to neo-liberal globalization, which is no less no more than a new step of global capitalism toward subjecting the inexhaustible wealth of the world to the mercantile logic. In the cosmopolitan contact zone the possibility of a better world is imagined from the vantage

Development 48(2): Thematic Section

point of the present. Once the field of experiences is enlarged, it is possible to evaluate better the alternatives that are possible and available today. This diversification of experiences aims to recreate the tension between experiences and expectations, but in such a way that they both happen in the present. The new nonconformity results from the verification that it would be possible to live in a much better world today and not tomorrow. To affirm the credibility and sustainability of this possibility is, in my view, the most profound contribution of the WSF to the counter-hegemonic struggles.

The work of translation permits to create meanings and directions that are precarious but concrete, short-range but radical in their objectives,

uncertain but shared. The aim of translation between knowledges is to create cognitive justice from the standpoint of the epistemological imagination. The aim of translation between practices and their agents is to create the conditions for global social justice from the standpoint of the democratic imagination.

The work of translation creates the conditions for concrete social emancipations of concrete social groups in a present whose injustice is legitimated on the basis of a massive waste of experience. The kind of social transformation that may be accomplished on the basis of the work of translation requires that the reciprocal learning and the will to articulate and coalesce be transformed into transformative practices.

Notes

- 1 I analyse in greater detail the relationships between human rights and other conceptions of human dignity in Santos (2002).
- 2 See Gandhi (1941, 1967). On swadeshi see also, among other (Bipinchandra, 1954; Nandy, 1987; Krishna, 1994).

References

- Bipinchandra, Pal (1954) *Swadeshi & Swaraj (The Rise of New Patriotism)*, Calcutta: Yugayatri Prakashak.
- Gandhi, Mahatma (1941) *The Economics of Khadi*, Ahmedabad: Navajiva.
- Gandhi, Mahatma (1967) *The Gospel of Swadeshi*, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.
- Krishna, Daya (1994) *Swadeshi View of Globalisation*, New Delhi: Swadeshi Jagaran Manch.
- Nandy, A. (1987) *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Santos, Boaventura de Sousa (2002) 'Toward a Multicultural Conception of Human Rights', in B. Truyol (ed.) *Moral Imperialism: A critical anthology*, New York: New York University Press.