1 | The World Social Forum as critical utopia

Ernst Bloch says that 'utopias have their timetable' (1995: 479). The conceptions of and aspirations to a better life and society, ever present in human history, vary as to form and content according to time and space. They express the tendencies and latencies of a given epoch and a given society. They constitute an anticipatory consciousness that manifests itself by enlarging the signs or traces of emerging realities. It is therefore appropriate to ask: does the WSF have a utopian dimension? And, if so, what is its timetable?

The hegemonic conception of our age is that of a linear time (the idea of progress) that presents itself as a timeless linear space (the idea of globalization). Whatever is currently dominant in social and political terms is infinitely expansive, thereby encompassing all future possibilities. Total control over the current state of affairs is deemed to be possible by means of extremely efficient powers and knowledges. Herein lies the radical denial of alternatives to present-day reality. This is the context underlying the utopian dimension of the WSF, which consists in asserting the existence of alternatives to neo-liberal globalization. By 'utopia' I mean the exploration of new modes of human possibility and styles of will, and the use of the imagination to confront the apparent inevitability of whatever exists with something radically better that is worth fighting for, and to which humankind is fully entitled (Santos 1995: 479).

As Franz Hinkelammert says, we live in a time of conservative utopias whose utopian character resides in their radical denial of alternatives to present-day reality (2002). The possibility of alternatives is discredited precisely for being utopian, idealistic, unrealistic. All conservative utopias are sustained by a political logic based on one sole efficiency criterion that rapidly becomes a supreme ethical criterion. According to this criterion, only what is efficient has value. Any other ethical criterion is devalued as inefficient. Neo-liberalism is one such conservative utopia for which the sole criterion of efficiency is the market or the laws of the market. Its utopian character resides in the promise that its total fulfilment or application cancels out all utopias. According to Hinkelammert, 'this ideology derives from its frantic anti-utopianism,

the utopian promise of a new world. The basic thesis is: whoever destroys utopia, fulfils it' (ibid.: 278). What distinguishes conservative utopias from critical utopias is the fact that they identify themselves with the present-day reality and discover their utopian dimension in the radicalization or complete fulfilment of the present. Moreover, the problems or difficulties of present-day reality are not the consequence of the deficiencies or limits of the efficiency criteria, but result rather from the fact that the application of the efficiency criteria has not been thorough enough. If there is unemployment and social exclusion, if there is starvation and death in the periphery of the world system, that is not the consequence of the deficiencies or limits of the laws of the market; these result rather from the fact that such laws have not yet been fully applied. The horizon of conservative utopias is thus a closed horizon, an end to history.

This is the context in which the utopian dimension of the WSF must be understood. The WSF signifies the re-emergence of a critical utopia, that is to say the radical critique of present-day reality and the aspiration to a better society. This occurs, however, when the anti-utopian utopia of neo-liberalism is dominant. The specificity of the utopian content of this new critical utopia, when compared with that of the critical utopias prevailing at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, thus becomes clear. The anti-utopian utopia of neo-liberalism is grounded in two presuppositions: the illusion of total control over present-day reality by means of extremely efficient powers and knowledges; and the radical rejection of alternatives to the status quo. The WSF questions the totality of control (whether as knowledge or power) only to affirm credibly the possibility of alternatives. Hence the open nature of the alternatives. In a context in which the conservative utopia prevails absolutely, it is more important to affirm the possibility of alternatives than to define them. The utopian dimension of the WSF consists in affirming the possibility of a counter-hegemonic globalization. In other words, the utopia of the WSF asserts itself more as negativity (the definition of what it critiques) than as positivity (the definition of that to which it aspires).

The specificity of the WSF as critical utopia has one more dimension. The WSF is the first critical utopia of the twenty-first century and aims to break with the tradition of the critical utopias of Western modernity, many of which turned into conservative utopias: from claiming utopian alternatives to denying alternatives with the excuse that the fulfilment of utopia was under way. The openness of the utopian dimension of the WSF corresponds to the latter's attempt to escape this perversion. For

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the WSF, the claim of alternatives is plural, both as to the form of the claim and the content of the alternatives. The affirmation of alternatives goes hand in hand with the affirmation that there are alternatives to the alternatives. The other possible world is a utopian aspiration that comprises several possible worlds. The other possible world may be many things, but never a world with no alternative.

The utopia of the WSF is a radically democratic utopia. It is the only realistic utopia after a century of conservative utopias, some of them the result of perverted critical utopias. This utopian design, grounded on the denial of the present rather than the definition of the future, focused on the processes of intercourse among the movements rather than an assessment of the movements' political content, is the major factor of cohesion of the WSF. It helps to maximize what unites and minimize what divides, celebrate intercourse rather than dispute power, be a strong presence rather than an agenda. This utopian design, which is also an ethical design, privileges the ethical discourse, quite evident in the WSF's Charter of Principles, aimed at gathering consensuses beyond the ideological and political cleavages among the movements and organizations that compose it. The movements and organizations parenthesize the cleavages that divide them, as much as is necessary to affirm the possibility of a counter-hegemonic globalization.

The nature of this utopia has been the most adequate for the initial objective of the WSF: to affirm the existence of a counter-hegemonic globalization. This is no vague utopia. It is rather a utopia that contains in itself the concretization that is adequate for this phase of the construction of counter-hegemonic globalization. It remains to be seen whether the nature of this utopia is the most adequate one to guide the next steps, should there be any next steps. Once the counter-hegemonic globalization is consolidated, and hence the idea that another world is possible is made credible, will it be possible to fulfil this idea with the same level of radical democracy that helped formulate it?

To answer this question, the articulation between the WSF's utopian dimension, the new constellations of knowledges it has made visible, and the political activism it has been giving rise to must be brought into the picture.