3 | The World Social Forum as an insurgent cosmopolitan politics

The novelty of the WSF is more unequivocal at the utopian and epistemological level than at the political level. Its political novelty does exist, but it exists as a field of tensions and dilemmas, where the new and the old confront each other. The political novelty of the WSF resides in the way in which these confrontations have been handled, avoided and negotiated. This will be made clear in the following chapters as I deal with the issues of organization and representation. In this brief chapter I will lay out the broad political orientations that account for the novelty of the WSF. As I will show later on, they are not understood in the same way by all the movements and organizations involved in the WSF process, and their concrete implementation is often a source of tension. None the less, they constitute the general political framework within which conflicts are fought out and solved or put away.

Before I deal with this topic, I will state more clearly what I mean by the WSF. The broad definition presented in the Introduction is adequate to capture the general outlook of the utopian and epistemological dimensions of the WSF, but it is too general to capture the more specific political processes identified with the WSF. Since the latter are my analytical interest in this chapter, I move to a narrower definition. The WSF is the set of forums – world, thematic, regional, sub-regional, national, municipal and local – that are organized according to the Charter of Principles. The WSF is not confined to the five meetings that took place in Porto Alegre (Brazil) in 2001, 2003 and 2005, in Mumbai (India) in 2004, nor to the three meetings of the 'polycentric' WSF in 2006 (Bamako, Caracas and Karachi).[1] It also includes all the other forums that have been meeting alongside the WSF, such as the Forum of Local Authorities (four editions); the World Parliamentary Forum (four meetings); the World Education Forum (three meetings); the World Forum of Judges (three meetings); the World Trade Unions Forum (two meetings); the World Water Forum (two meetings); the World Youth Forum (three meetings); and the Forum of Sexual Diversity. Second, it includes all the national, regional and thematic forums that have taken place over the past five years. These are too numerous to include in a complete list. Among the regional ones, I would emphasize the Pan-

Amazonic Forum (four meetings), the European Social Forum (three meetings), the Asian Social Forum (two meetings), the Africa Social Forum (four meetings), the Social Forum of the Americas (two editions) and the Mediterranean Social Forum. Among the thematic forums, special mention should be made of the Forum on 'The Crisis of Neo-Liberalism in Argentina and the Challenges for the Global Movement', the first thematic forum, held in Argentina in August 2002, the Palestine Thematic Forum on 'Negotiated Solutions for Conflicts' in Ramallah, in December 2002, and the Forum on 'Democracy, Human Rights, War and Drug Trade', held in Colombia in June 2003. Third, national or international meetings of movements or organizations to prepare the aforementioned forums must be also included in the WSF.[2] Finally, although the Charter of Principles prevents the WSF from organizing, in its own name, collective actions, the regional or global actions carried out by the networks of movements and organizations that are part of the WSF must be considered part of the WSF process, as long as they abide by the Charter of Principles. For instance, and although this is not a consensual understanding, the actions agreed upon by the assembly of the Global Network of Social Movements, which meets alongside the WSF, are, in my view, part of the WSF process. The most visible of such actions so far was the global march against the war and for peace on 15 February 2003, decided upon in the assembly that took place during the third WSF. Even though they are not carried out in the name of the WSF, these collective actions are an integral part of the WSF process.[3]

In my opinion, the WSF will increasingly become less and less an event or set of events, and increasingly a process based on the work of articulation, reflection and combined planning of collective actions carried out by the different organizations and movements that are integrated in the WSF. Given this scope, the WSF is a very important component of counter-hegemonic globalization. As we shall see, some of the political tensions concerning the WSF have as their reference a narrower definition of the WSF, namely the five world meetings in Porto Alegre and Mumbai and the three meetings of the polycentric WSF of 2006. The political novelties of the WSF can be condensed in the following general orientations.

The struggles for global social justice must be based on a very broad conception of power and oppression

Neo-liberal globalization has not limited itself to submitting ever more interactions to the market, nor to raising the workers' exploitation

rate by transforming the labour force into a global resource, and, at the same time, by preventing the emergence of a global labour market. Neo-liberal globalization has shown that exploitation is linked with many other forms of oppression that affect women, ethnic minorities (sometimes majorities), indigenous peoples, peasants, the unemployed, workers in the informal sector, legal and illegal immigrants, ghetto subclasses, gays and lesbians, children and the young. All these forms of power create exclusion. One cannot ascribe to any one of them, in the abstract, nor to the practices that resist them, any priority as to the claim that 'another world is possible'. Political priorities are always situated and context dependent. They depend on the concrete social and political conditions of each country at a given historical moment. To respond to such conditions and their fluctuations, the movements and organizations must give priority to the articulations among them. This ultimately explains the organizational novelty of a WSF with no leaders, its rejection of hierarchies, and its emphasis on networks made possible by the Internet.[4]

Counter-hegemonic globalization is built upon the equivalence between the principles of equality and recognition of difference

We live in societies that are obscenely unequal, and yet equality is lacking as an emancipatory ideal. Equality, understood as the equivalence among the same, ends up excluding what is different. All that is homogeneous at the beginning tends eventually to turn into exclusionary violence. World experience is highly diverse in its struggle for equality, and such diversity refers as much to means as to ends. This much has been claimed again and again by the social movements against sexual, ethnic, racial or religious discrimination. Under conditions of global capitalism there is no real recognition of difference without social redistribution. And vice versa, the struggle for equality will always run the risk of being discriminatory as long as it does not include the struggle for equality among differences. Indeed, we have the right to be equal whenever difference diminishes us; we have the right to be different whenever equality decharacterizes us.

The WSF grants no abstract priority to either principle and purports to be an open space on equal terms for movements that privilege one or the other principle. Concrete political conditions will dictate to each movement which of the principles is to be privileged in a given concrete struggle. Any struggle conceived under the aegis of one of these two principles must be organized so as to open space for the other principle.

Rebellion and non-conformity must be privileged to the detriment of the old strategic options (reform or revolution)

There is no unique theory to guide the movements strategically, because the aim is not so much to seize state power as to confront the many faces of power as they present themselves in the institutions and society at large. Social emancipation does not have a general historical subject. In the struggle comprising the WSF, subjects are all those that refuse to be objects, that is to say to be reduced to the condition of vassals.

The WSF aims at a new internationalism

The internationalism promoted by the WSF represents a stark departure from the old internationalism that dominated anti-capitalist politics throughout the twentieth century. The latter was based on four main premises: a privileged social actor (workers or workers and peasants); a privileged type of organization (trade unions and working-class parties together with their federations and Internationals); a centrally defined strategy (the Internationals' resolutions); a politics originating in the North and formulated according to the political principles prevailing in the anti-capitalist North. The emphasis was on social and political homogeneity as a condition for unity and solidarity and on similar life trajectories and cultures as a condition for the development of strong and lasting ties.

On the contrary, the internationalism aimed at by the WSF celebrates social, cultural and political diversity within the broad limits set out by the Charter of Principles. It encompasses many different types of organizations and sees itself as a meeting ground where organizations and movements can interact freely and as an incubator of new networks generated at the exclusive initiative of those participating in them. It does not subscribe to any specific strategic goal beyond the normative orientation to struggle against neo-liberal globalization, nor to any specific mechanism to carry out such a struggle, except for the refusal of armed struggle. The WSF assumes that it is possible to develop strong ties, coalitions, networks among non-homogeneous groups and organizations and, moreover, that the cultural and political differences are enabling rather than paralysing as sources of political innovation. Finally, the WSF was born in the South, in the Latin American South, drawing on a hybrid political culture growing out of grassroots movements, participatory democracy experiments, liberation theology and struggles against dictatorship, as well as on Western left politics (both old and new).

The WSF process progresses as transversal political terrains of resistance and alternative are identified as an ongoing process

Building a counter-hegemonic globalization demands a broad definition of targets and a pluralistic conception of emancipatory goals. Moreover, the accelerated transformation of political and ideological landscapes requires that such transversality be brought about through constant analytical vigilance and strategic flexibility. This quest for transversality emerges eloquently from a mere enumeration of the focal themes that have framed the debates over the years: the production of wealth and social reproduction; access to wealth and sustainability; civil society and the public arena; political power and ethics in the new society (first and second WSF); democratic sustainable development; principles and values, human rights, diversity and equality; media, culture and counter-hegemony; political power, civil society and democracy; democratic world order, struggle against militarism and for peace (third WSF); democracy, ecological and economic security; discrimination, dignity and rights, media, information and knowledge, militarism, war and peace (fourth WSF); assuring and defending the earth and people's common goods – as an alternative to commodification and transnational control; arts and creation: weaving and building people's resistance culture; communication: counter-hegemonic practices, rights and alternatives; defending diversity, plurality and identities; human rights and dignity for a just and egalitarian world; sovereign economies for and of people – against neo-liberal capitalism; ethics, cosmo-visions and spiritualities – resistances and challenges for a new world; social struggles and democratic alternatives – against neo-liberal domination; peace, demilitarization and struggle against war, free trade and debt; autonomous thought, reappropriation and socialization of knowledge and technologies; movement towards construction of international democratic order and people's integration (fifth WSF).

Contrary to what the corporate media have been suggesting, the concern with concrete alternatives has been central to the WSF.[5] Once the idea of an alternative globalization to hegemonic globalization was consolidated, it became clear that the political strength of the WSF would depend on its capacity to formulate credible proposals and to generate enough political leverage to force them on to the political agendas of national governments and multilateral agencies. Moreover, as the consolidation of the WSF would tend to sharpen the cleavages in strategies and political action, the most fruitful way of discussing and clarifying them would be by focusing on concrete alternatives and proposals.

The design, complexity and technical detail of many of the proposals are of higher quality than many of those presented by the institutions of neo-liberal globalization. The challenge ahead is to force these proposals on to the political agendas of the different states and the international community. It is a long-range challenge because, for these proposals to become part of the political agendas, the national and transnational political institutions must be changed. Many such institutional changes will occur only on the basis of non-institutional struggles. They will require rebellion, non-violent but often illegal direct action.

The struggle for radical democracy must be a struggle for demo-diversity

Just as there is biodiversity, which must be defended, there is also demo-diversity, and it must be defended as well. There is not, therefore, one form of democracy alone, i.e. liberal representative democracy. There are several other forms, such as direct, participatory, deliberative, etc. But outside the Western world and culture there are still other forms of democracy (inter-cultural democracy, consensus democracy), which must be valorized. Take, for example, the autonomous government of the indigenous communities of the Americas, India, Australia and New Zealand, as well as the government of the traditional authorities in Africa or the panchayats in India. The point is not to accept critically any of these forms of democracy but rather to make possible their inclusion in the debates about the deepening and radicalization of democracy.[6]

Transcultural criteria must be developed to identify different forms of democracy and to establish hierarchies among them according to the collective quality of life they provide

Democratic systems of public or private interaction are those that aim to transform power relations into relations of shared authority. This means that the scope of democracy is potentially much broader than what liberal political theory has made us believe. And that there are different degrees of democraticity. The truth is, democracy does not exist, there is only democratization. Democracies must be ranked according to the intensity of the processes of shared authority. The more authority is shared, the more democracy is participatory. According to this criterion, we must distinguish between high-intensity democracies and low-intensity democracies. Representative democracy tends to be low-intensity. This is so for the following reasons: by giving a restrictive

definition of the public space, representative democracy leaves intact many relations of power, which it therefore does not turn into shared authority; by relying on ideas of formal and not real equality, it does not guarantee the conditions that make it possible; by juxtaposing citizenship and identity in the abstract, it acknowledges difference surreptitiously from the standpoint of a dominant difference (class, colonial, ethnic, racial, sexual, religious) that becomes the norm – the dominant identity – on the basis of which the limits are set, and within which the other differences are allowed to be exerted, acknowledged or tolerated.

The low intensity of this democracy consists in the fact that, were the demands of capitalism to impose restrictions on the democratic game, this form of democracy would have few conditions to resist. Its surrender takes several forms: banalization of political differences and personalization of leadership; privatization of the electoral processes through campaign funding; mediatization of politics; distance between representatives and represented; corruption; an increase in abstentionism. In the context of low-intensity democracy, the most important task is to democratize democracy.

In many societies, representative democracy is extremely low-intensity indeed. Democracy is extremely low-intensity when it does not promote any social redistribution. This occurs alongside the dismantling of public policies, the conversion of social policies into compensatory, residual and stigmatizing measures, and the return of philanthropy as a form of solidarity not grounded in rights. When social inequalities and hierarchical differences reach such high levels, the dominant social groups (economic, ethnic, religious, etc.) constitute themselves as de facto political powers and assume the right of veto over the minimal democratic aspirations of the majorities or minorities. In this case, social relations are dominated by such power asymmetries that they configure a situation of social fascism. The societies in which such asymmetries prevail are politically democratic and socially fascist (Santos 2002b: 453).

The WSF process must be conceived as promoting and strengthening counter-hegemonic forms of high-intensity democracy that are already emerging

Through more developed states and multilateral agencies, neo-liberal globalization has been imposing forms of low- or extremely low-intensity democracy on peripheral countries. Such an imposition, however, doesn't occur without resistance. Forms of high-intensity

democracy are emerging. The popular classes and oppressed, marginalized and vulnerable social groups are promoting forms of participatory democracy in many parts of the world, forms of high-intensity democracy based on the active participation of the populations. Through these forms, which are subject to constant renovation, the populations try to resist social inequality, colonialism, sexism, racism and the destruction of the environment.

The potential of democratic forms of high intensity is enormous, but we have to acknowledge their limitations. The most obvious limitation of local high-intensity democracies is precisely the fact that their ambit is local[7] and they cannot, by themselves, contribute to confronting the anti-democratic nature of the political, social and cultural power exerted at the national and global level. These limitations are not ineluctable and must be engaged. Forms of high-intensity democracy must be devised, both at the local and at the national and global levels, and articulations among the different levels must be promoted.

Whenever feasible, participatory democracy must be deepened through complementariness with representative democracy, a complementariness that is necessarily tense but critical as well. Such complementariness will always be the result of a political process whose earlier phases are not of complementariness but rather of confrontation. The articulations may begin at the local level, but they have the potential to reach the national level.

At the national level, the articulation between forms of participatory and representative democracy must be deepened to prevent them from becoming a trap that permits the state to go on managing the business of capitalism in capitalism's interest as if it were the interest of all. Never before has the state been subjected to a massive privatization process, as happens today. Much of the rhetoric concerning the value of civil society is part of a discourse to justify the dismantling of the state. The crucial tasks are, therefore, the democratic reform of the state; and the public control of the state through the creation of non-state public spheres.

In the long run, local participatory democracy does not sustain itself without participatory democracy at the national level, and neither of them is possible without participatory democracy at the global level. Local or even national high-intensity democracy is not sustainable if forms of global democracy are not evolved. It makes no sense today to speak of global civil society because there is no global mechanism to guarantee global civic rights. But if we none the less want to speak of global civil society, then it is necessary to distinguish between liberal global civil society, which feeds on neo-liberal globalization, and emancipatory global civil society, which promotes counter-hegemonic globalization, the globalization of solidarity of which the WSF is an eloquent expression.

A new democratic institution at the world level must be created, a United Nations of the Peoples capable of refounding the organization of the United Nations as we know it today. The institutions that are responsible today for blocking global or even national democracy, such as the World Bank or the IMF, must be abolished, or else radically changed. In all its scales or dimensions, but particularly at the global scale or dimension, democracy is a comprehensive exigency that is not confined to the political system and does not exist without social redistribution. Global collective actions must be organized, and global institutions must be created to allow for immediate, if minimal, global social redistribution, such as, for instance, debt cancellation for peripheral countries and the Tobin tax.

There is no democracy without conditions of democracy

It is imperative to fight against the perversion of democracy. Democracy, which emerged as government by the people, is today often used as government against the people. That which was the ultimate symbol of popular sovereignty is today the very expression of the loss of sovereignty (as, for instance, when democracy becomes an imposition of the World Bank). In the present context, to speak of conditions of democracy implies speaking of the radicalization of democracy. The democracy that exists in the great majority of countries is false, simply because it is insufficient. Democracy must be taken seriously. To be taken seriously it must be radicalized. There are two ways of radicalizing democracy. First, by deepening authority-sharing and respect for difference in the social domains where the democratic rule is already acknowledged. For example, participatory budgeting is a form of deepening the pre-existing municipal democracy. Second, by spreading democracy to a larger and larger number of domains of social life. Capitalism accepted democracy inasmuch as it reduced democracy to a specific domain of public life, which it designated as political space. All the other areas of social life were left outside democratic control: production, consumer society, community life and international relations. Capitalist societies thus constituted themselves as societies with small islands of democracy in a sea of despotism. To radicalize democracy is to transform it into a principle with the potential to regulate all social relations. In capitalist societies it is not possible to spread this principle

to every relation. We must, therefore, start thinking of a post-capitalist world and engage in action to make it possible. Left to itself, capitalism leads only to more capitalism.

The democratic imagination has today in the WSF an eloquent expression, but one that is only just emerging. Its development also requires conditions. The WSF and the regional, thematic and national forums are evolving into the most developed form of our democratic imagination. As it nurtures this imagination, however, the WSF process must itself mind the conditions of its own enlargement and democratization. Two such conditions seem crucial. First, following September 11, the international (dis)order, of which the USA is the most prominent protagonist, aims to criminalize social movements and social protest under the pretext of the fight against terrorism. Indeed, the aim is to criminalize all the actions of popular organizations and movements. Local, national and global struggles must be launched against such criminalization. It was, therefore, important for the 2002 Forum of Local Authorities to state that the cities therein represented are committed to defending the right to public and peaceful demonstrations against neo-liberal globalization. Second, the network of organizations that convene in the WSF are movements of the most diverse features that fight for a more democratic society. For this struggle to be successful, the organizations themselves must be fully and thoroughly democratic. And their democracy must be twofold: internal, that is to say inside every organization or movement; and in the relations between movements and organizations. Hegemonism, sectarism and factionalism must be fought.

The struggle for high-intensity democracy starts with the social forces that fight for it. The WSF process integrates many non-governmental organizations involved in partnerships with the state. On the other hand, many organizations of the countries of the Global South are financially dependent on the organizations of the countries of the Global North. To avoid leaving high-intensity democracy at the door of the organizations, these relations must be transparent and subjected to the control of the members or target publics. Partnerships and agreements must be constructed democratically, and measures must be taken to prevent financial dependency from becoming a form of anti-democratic submission.

There is no global social justice without global cognitive justice

However democratized social practices may become, they are never democratized enough, if the knowledge guiding them is not

democratized itself. Anti-democratic repression always includes the disqualification of the knowledge and ways of knowing of those repressed. There is no democracy without popular education. There is no democracy of practices without democracy of knowledges – that is, without the ecology of knowledges (see Chapter 2).

The many names for another possible world – social emancipation, socialism, dignity, etc. – are in the end the name of democracy without end

All the preceding orientations are to be discussed, approved, changed and expanded inside and outside the WSF, in workplaces, cities and villages, inside families and organizations. Their aim is to give some coordination to the movement for an alternative globalization on its way to a fairer and less discriminatory society. The struggle against global capitalism has to emerge from ever more places; it must be made up of very diverse struggles guided by a common principle: participatory democracy without end to bring capitalism to an end.

Notes

1 At the Asian Council meeting of December 2005 (Hong Kong) it was decided to organize another event of the polycentric WSF in 2006 in Bangkok, on 21–22 October.

2 Information regarding the activities carried out under the scope of the WSF can be accessed through the WSF official site at <www.forumsocialmundial.org.br>.

3 The inclusion of these actions in the WSF process is not generally accepted. The International Council (IC) integrates organizations whose representatives on the Council reject any organic relation between the WSF and the actions agreed upon by the Global Network of Social Movements or any other network of movements or organizations. According to these representatives – one of the most prominent is Francisco Whitaker, one of the founders of the WSF (Whitaker 2003) – the comprehensiveness and inclusiveness of the WSF can be preserved only if no action in particular is attributed to the WSF as a whole. See Chapter 6.

4 On this subject, see Waterman (2003a, 2003b); Escobar (2004).

5 Among the different overviews of the alternatives proposed see, for instance, Fisher and Ponniah (2003); Blin et al. (2006).

6 On this subject, see Santos (2002b, 2006b).

7 A few examples: municipal management through participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre and many other cities in Brazil, Latin America and Europe; the peace communities in Colombia, in particular that in São José de Apartadó; the forms of decentralized planning in the states of Kerala and West Bengal in India. On these and other examples see Santos (2005).