7 | The future of the World Social Forum: self-democracy and the work of translation

In the WSF the new and the old face each other. 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, counter-hegemonic thinking, both in its Western and its Southern and Eastern versions. The novelty of the WSF is consensually attributed to its absence of leaders and hierarchical organization, its emphasis on cyberspace networks, its ideal of participatory democracy, and its flexibility and readiness to engage in experimentation.

The WSF is unquestionably the first large international progressive movement following the neo-liberal backlash at the beginning of the 1980s. Its future is the future of hope in an alternative to *la pensée unique* (single thinking). This future is completely unknown, and can only be speculated about. It depends both on the movements and organizations that make up the WSF and the metamorphoses of neo-liberal globalization. For instance, the fact that the latter has been acquiring a bellicose component fixated on security will no doubt affect the evolution of the WSF. In light of this, the future of the WSF depends in part on the evaluation of its trajectory up till now and the conclusions drawn from it, with a view to enlarging and deepening its counter-hegemonic efficaciousness.

Evaluation of the WSF is one of the exercises that best discloses the confrontation between the new and the old. From the point of view of the old, the WSF cannot but be assessed negatively. It appears as a vast 'talk show' that hovers over the concrete problems of exclusion and discrimination without tackling them; a cultural movement without deep social roots, therefore tolerated and easily co-opted by the dominant classes; it has no definite agents or agency, because, after all, it doesn't have any definite enemies either; its inclusiveness is the other side of its inefficaciousness; its efficaciousness, besides having an effect on the rhetoric of hegemonic discourse, has been minimal, since it has achieved no changes as far as concrete policies go, nor contributed to ameliorating the ills of exclusion and discrimination.

In this evaluation, the WSF is assessed according to criteria that prevailed in progressive struggles up until the 1980s. Such criteria do

not concern strategies and tactics alone; they also concern the time frames and geopolitical units that are the reference points of their applicability. The time frame is linear time, a time that gives meaning and direction to history; the temporality or duration is that of the state's action, even if the action aims to reform or revolutionize the state. From the standpoint of linear time, the counter-hegemonic experiences and struggles, particularly the most innovative or radical ones, are either unrealistic or residual. They cannot conceptualize the multiple temporalities that constitute these experiences and struggles, from the instant time of mass protests to the *longue durée* of indigenous peoples' struggles for self-rule, not to speak of the infinite temporality of utopia. The same is true of the conventional geopolitical unit of progressive politics. Such a unit is national society, the boundary within which the most decisive progressive struggles of the last 150 years have occurred. On the contrary, as I analysed above, the geopolitical unit of the counter-hegemonic experiences and struggles convened by the WSF is trans-scale: it combines the local, the national and the global.

Let's call the epistemology underlying this evaluation positivist epistemology. It seems obvious that this epistemology is completely different from that I ascribed to the WSF above (Chapter 2). In order to be minimally adequate, the evaluation of the WSF must be carried out according to the epistemology of the WSF itself. Otherwise the assessment will always be negative. In other words, the evaluation must be carried out on the basis of the sociology of absences and the sociology of emergences.

In this light, the evaluation of the WSF cannot but be positive. By affirming and rendering credible the existence of a counter-hegemonic globalization, the WSF has contributed significantly to enlarging social experience. It has turned absent struggles and practices into present struggles and practices, and shown which alternative futures, declared impossible by hegemonic globalization, were after all showing signs of emerging. By enlarging the available and possible social experience, the WSF created a global consciousness for the different movements and NGOs, regardless of the scope of their action. Such a global consciousness was crucial to create a certain symmetry of scale between hegemonic globalization and the movements and NGOs that fought against it. Before the WSF, the movements and NGOs fought against hegemonic globalization without being aware of their own globality.

The decisive importance of this consciousness explains why the WSF, once aware of it, does everything to preserve it. It explains, ultimately,

why the factors of attraction and aggregation prevail over those of repulsion and disaggregation. This consciousness of globality was decisive in making credible among the movements and the NGOs themselves the trans-scale nature of the geopolitical unit wherein they acted. By encompassing all those movements and NGOs, however, the WSF incorporated that same trans-scale nature, and that is why its efficaciousness cannot be assessed exclusively in terms of global changes. It has to be assessed as well in terms of local and national changes. Given all the levels involved, the evaluation of the WSF's efficaciousness is undoubtedly more complex, but for that same reason it does not allow for rash assessments derived from positivist epistemology.

The WSF is today a more realistic utopia than when it first appeared. Increased realism, however, poses considerable challenges to utopia itself. The challenges consist in deepening its political existence without losing its utopian and epistemological integrity. I identify two main challenges, one short-range, the other long-range: self-democracy and the work of translation, respectively.

Self-democracy

The first, short-range challenge I designate as self-democracy. The WSF's utopia concerns emancipatory democracy. In its broadest sense, emancipatory democracy is the whole process of changing power relations into relations of shared authority. Since the power relations that the WSF resists are multiple, the processes of radical democratization in which the WSF is involved are likewise multiple. In brief, the WSF is a large collective process for deepening democracy. Since this is the WSF's utopian distinction, it is no wonder that the issue of internal democracy has become more and more pressing. In fact, the WSF's credibility in its struggle for democracy in society depends on the credibility of its internal democracy.

In spite of all criticisms and shortcomings, the organizing structure of all the meetings of the WSF has been, to my mind, the most appropriate in spite of the deficiencies of application. Admittedly, the criteria of representation and participation could have been better attuned to the diversity of the movements and NGOs. But as I showed in Chapters 4 and 5, the successive meetings of the WSF have tried to respond to the criticisms in the most productive way. If the response has not always been satisfactory, I believe the reason has more to do with administrative incapacity than with politically motivated biases. The fourth WSF, in Mumbai, aside from organizational innovation, represented a breakthrough in dramatically expanding the social base of

participation, while the fifth WSF, in Porto Alegre, was equally a break-through regarding the bottom-up construction of the programme.

Assuming that the WSF may be entering a new phase, the challenge consists in changing the organizing structure according to the demands of the new phase and in respect of the objective of deepening the internal democracy, a most consensual objective in the IC. Two paths for reaching this goal may be identified, a moderate and a radical one. The first consists in expanding the representativeness of the IC and in transferring the WSF's core from discrete global events to a continuous process consisting of national, regional and thematic forums, taking place around the world according to a planned schedule. The idea is that at more circumscribed levels the issues of representation and participatory democracy are easier to solve, while the recurrence and diversity of the events will allow for the application of multiple criteria of representation and participation. The WSF, as a global event, will continue to affirm the globality of counter-hegemonic globalization, but it will lose some of its centrality. The IS or a coordination/facilitation entity will continue to have an executive and coordinating role, while the IC will continue to be charged with defining the broad strategic, thematic and organizing options. The democratizing effort must therefore focus on the IC, urging it to go on reflecting on the multiple diversities that congregate in the WSF. As I show in Chapter 5, this path is close to what the majority of the members of the IC have been proposing. It assumes its continuity with the previous phase. The aim is to introduce changes that represent unequivocal gains in terms of representation and participation without putting at risk the extraordinary successes achieved so far.

This path does not claim to solve the issue of participatory democracy. That is to say, however representative and democratic the organizing structures of the forums may be, the issue of the deliberative participation of the rank-and-file participants will always be there. As I have suggested above, information and communication technologies today offer new possibilities for voting and carrying out referendums during the forums. If it is true in general that cyber-democracy has an individualistic bias in its reducing the citizen's political capacity to merely interacting with a computer terminal, it is no less true that such a bias is neutralized in the meetings of the forum, where the exchange of experiences and points of view is so intense, precisely among the rank and file. Of course, deliberative democracy at the meetings will not solve the problem of the democratic inclusion of movements and organizations eager to participate but unable to do so.

The second, far more radical path would increase the WSF's internal democracy by constructing it from the bottom up. On the basis of the smaller forums or forums of narrower scope, such as local or city forums, representative structures would be created at the different levels in such a way that those in the higher ranks would be elected by the immediately lower ranks. The result would be a pyramidal organization with a forum of delegates at the top.[1] This type of proposal may include measures that aim at correcting a plurality of structural imbalances of representation. It involves, however, a radical break with the organizational model adopted up until now and, even if there is a widespread feeling that the present model needs to be drastically revised, one fears that such a radical break may be throwing away the baby with the bath water. Needless to say, any proposal, especially one so radical, must be debated and ultimately voted on. But by whom? By the current IC, certainly not representative of the whole WSF, let alone democratically elected by its members? By the participants of the forums? Which forums? These questions show that there is no machinery of democratic engineering capable of solving the problem of internal democracy at a single blow. To my mind, such a problem will end up being taken care of through successive partial solutions. Its cumulative effect will be the result of a learning process, which, at each democratization stage, consolidates its force and gathers energy to venture on to a higher stage.

The work of translation

The second challenge is long-range. The challenge of internal democracy concerns the processes of decision-making, rather than the content of the decisions, let alone the practices of struggle that may evolve therefrom. In the long run, evaluation of the WSF will depend on its capacity to transform the immense energy that is gathered within it into new forms of counter-hegemonic agency – more efficacious forms because combining the strength of different social movements and NGOs.

The political theory of Western modernity, whether in its liberal or its Marxist version, constructed the unity of action from the agent's unity. According to it, the coherence and meaning of social change were 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 operationality 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 that may give rise to the ecologies made possible by the sociology of absences.

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 counter-hegemony that occur all over the world. Its strength derives from having corresponded with or given expression to the aspiration of aggregation and association of the different social movements and NGOs, an aspiration that up until then was only latent. 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, even into contradictions that contribute to bringing the movements apart and to fostering rivalries and factionalisms. Therefrom 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/association made possible by the WSF is of low intensity. The goals are limited, very often circumscribed to mutual knowledge or, at the most, to recognizing differences and making them more explicit and better known. Under these circumstances, joint action cannot but be limited.[2]

The challenge that counter-hegemonic globalization faces now may be formulated 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. Cancelling 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.

In the following I provide some illustrations of translation work.

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. For the purposes of translation, however, it is important to distinguish between contact zones in which the interactions depend mainly upon knowledges, and contact zones in which interactions depend mainly upon actions.

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 identify similar concerns or aspirations among them and the different responses they provide to them. For instance, the concern with and the aspiration to human dignity seem to be present, albeit in different ways, in different cultures. In 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 don't 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 don't 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 of 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) (Santos 1995: 327–65; 2002b: 257–301).[3]

In this case, the work of translation will reveal the reciprocal shortcomings or weaknesses of each of these conceptions of human dignity, once viewed from the perspective of any other conception. Thereby, a space is opened 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 imperative, the duty of individuals to find their place in the order of the entire society, and of the entire cosmos.[4] Seen from

the perspective of *dharma* and, indeed, from that of *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 have any duties imposed on it. 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, owing to its strong bias in favour of the harmony of the social and religious status quo, thereby occulting injustices and totally neglecting the value of conflict as a way towards 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 don't suffer, individuals do.

At another conceptual level, the same work of translation can be attempted between the concept of human rights and the concept of *umma* in Islamic culture. The passages in the Koran 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 ethnic, 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 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 in terms of accepting collective rights of social groups or peoples, be they ethnic minorities, women or indigenous peoples. Conversely, from the perspective of individual human rights, *umma* over-emphasizes 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.

In sum, the work of translation in the intercultural contact zone among movements/organizations expounding different conceptions

of human dignity allows us to identify the fundamental weakness of Western culture as consisting in dichotomizing too strictly between the individual and society, thus becoming vulnerable to possessive individualism, narcissism, alienation and anomie. On the other hand, the fundamental weakness of Hindu and Islamic culture lies in the fact that they both fail to recognize that human suffering has an irreducible individual dimension, which can only be adequately addressed in a society not hierarchically organized.

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 achievable only 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 two other exercises of translation strike me as important. I just mention them here without going into details of translation. The first 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*.[5] 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 practices and knowledges to mercantile logic.[6] 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 neighbours 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 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. Through such reciprocal translation the monoculture of capitalist production will be replaced by the ecology of productivities.

The other exercise of translation in the knowledge-based contact zone among NGOs/movements focuses on philosophies of life, on concerns for wisdom and enabling world-views. It may seem strange to speak of philosophy when dealing with the knowledges of grassroots movements fighting for 'another possible world'. After all, in the Western culture at least, philosophy is the utmost expression of elitist knowledge. The fact of the matter is that, however implicitly, philosophical ideas are often the driving force behind grassroots mobilization and it is not uncommon for the leaders of movements and the latter's organic intellectuals to become involved in vivid debates on philosophical ideas to ground both their divergences and their convergences. The work of translation must take place between Western conceptions of philosophy and the African concept of sagacity.[7] The latter underlies the actions of many African movements and organizations.[8] It resides in a critical reflection on the world that has as its protagonists what Odera Oruka calls *sages*, be they poets, traditional healers, storytellers, musicians or traditional authorities. According to Oruka, sage philosophy

> [...] consists of the expressed thoughts of wise men and women in any given community and is a way of thinking and explaining the world that fluctuates between popular wisdom (well known communal maxims, aphorisms and general commonsense truths) and didactic wisdom, an expounded wisdom and a rational thought of some given individuals within a community. While popular wisdom is often conformist, didactic wisdom is at times critical of the communal set-up and the popular wisdom. Thoughts can be expressed in writing or as unwritten sayings and argumentations associated with some individual(s). In traditional Africa, most of what would pass as sage-philosophy remains unwritten for reasons which must now be obvious to everyone. Some of these persons might have been partly influenced by the inevitable moral and technological culture from the West. Nevertheless, their own outlook and cultural well-being remain basically that of traditional rural Africa. Except for a handful of them, the majority of them are 'illiterate' or semi-illiterate. (Oruka 1990: 28)

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 a cultural stance (the idea that all cultures are equally valid and that no judgement can be passed on them from the perspective of another culture). It does imply, however, conceiving 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 mentioned above, the critique of universalism derives from the critique of the possibility of a general theory. The work of translation presupposes, rather, what I designated above as negative universalism, the shared idea of the impossibility of cultural completeness and, concomitantly, the impossibility of a general theory capable of accounting for the whole diversity of the world and its progressive transformation.

Once the exchange of experiences begins -- this has been the most profound accomplishment of the WSF so far -- the idea and feeling of want and incompleteness create motivation for the work of translation among social groups. In order to bear fruit, translation must be the coming together of converging motivations with their origins in different cultures. The Indian sociologist Shiv Vishvanathan formulated eloquently the notion of want and motivation that I here designate as the work of translation. Says Vishvanathan (2000: 12): 'My problem is, how do I take the best of Indian civilization and at the same time keep my modern, democratic imagination alive?' If we could imagine an exercise of translation conducted by Vishvanathan and a European or North American intellectual/activist or social movement, it would be possible to think of the latter's motivation for dialogue formulated thus: 'How can I keep alive in me the best of modern and democratic Western culture, while at the same time recognizing the value of the world that it designated autocratically as non-civilized, ignorant, residual, inferior or unproductive?'

Translation of practices The second type of translation work 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, objectives, styles of action and types of struggle. What distinguishes the two types of translation work is, after all, the emphasis or perspective that informs

138

them. The specificity of the translation work concerning 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 within 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 links or hierarchies among the different social struggles and their conceptions of social transformation, both the objectives of social transformation and the 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 are a necessary condition for agreeing on association and building coalitions. The counter-hegemonic potential of any social movement resides in its capacity to associate with other movements, their forms of organization and objectives. For these associations 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 association 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 subordinate practices carry more counter-hegemonic potential. For instance, in Mexico, in March 2001, the Zapatista indigenous movement was a privileged counter-hegemonic practice inasmuch as it was capable of undertaking the work of translation between its objectives and practices and the objectives and practices of other Mexican social movements, including the civic and labour movements and the feminist movement. One consequence of that work of translation was the fact that the Zapatista leader chosen to address the Mexican Congress was a woman, Comandante Esther. By that choice, the Zapatistas wanted to signify the linkage between the indigenous movement

139

and the women's liberation movement, and thus deepen the counter-hegemonic potential of both.

While showing the diversity of social struggles fighting against neo-liberal globalization all over the world, the WSF calls for a giant work of translation. On the one hand, there are local movements and organizations 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 association, aggregation and coalition among all these different movements and organizations? What do the participatory budgeting practised 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?[9] 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 association 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 work of dialogue and politics. It has an emotional dimension as well, because it presupposes both a nonconformist attitude vis-à-vis the limits of one's knowledge and practice and the readiness to be surprised and learn from 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, as mentioned above – translation is a colonial kind of work, no matter how post-colonial it claims to be. Once such a 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?

WHAT TO TRANSLATE? The crucial concept in answering this question is that concept of *cosmopolitan 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 twentieth 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 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 intercultural contact zones, it is up to each cultural group to decide which aspects must be selected for intercultural confrontation and dialogue. 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 to revision as the work proceeds. If the work of translation progresses, 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 wider society, 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 for 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 provokes 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 made up of various and often conflicting versions of the same culture. For example, when I speak, as I did above, of a possible intercultural dialogue about conceptions of human dignity, we can easily see that in 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 a 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 those that generate more promising contact zones; they are the most adequate to deepen the work of translation.

TO TRANSLATE FROM WHAT INTO WHAT? The choice of knowledges and practices among which the work of translation occurs is always the result of a convergence among movements/NGOs concerning both the identification of a lack or deficiency in one's knowledge or practice, and the refusal to accept it as a fatal flaw and the motivation to overcome it. It may emerge from an evaluation that current performances don't measure up to the group's expectations and from a sense of crisis developing therefrom. As an example, the labour movement, confronted with an unprecedented crisis, has been opening itself to contact zones with other social movements, namely civic, feminist, ecological and migrant workers' movements. In this contact zone, there is an ongoing translation work between labour practices, claims and aspirations, and the objectives of citizenship, protection of the environ-

ment, fighting discrimination against women and ethnic or migrant minorities. Translation has slowly transformed the labour movement and the other social movements, thus rendering possible constellations of struggles that until a few years ago would have been unthinkable.

WHEN TO TRANSLATE? In this case, too, the cosmopolitan contact zone must be the result of a conjugation of times, rhythms and opportunities. If there is no such conjugation, the contact zone becomes imperial and the work of translation a form of cannibalization. In the last two decades, Western modernity discovered the possibilities and virtues of multiculturalism. Accustomed to the routine of its own hegemony, Western modernity presumed that if it were to open itself to dialogue with cultures it had previously oppressed, the latter would *naturally* be ready and available to engage in the dialogue, and indeed only too eager to do so. Such presupposition has resulted in new forms of cultural imperialism, even when it assumes the form of multiculturalism. This I call reactionary multiculturalism. In contrast, the success of the WSF signals the emergence among social movements of a reciprocally experienced, widespread sense that the advancement of counter-hegemonic struggles is premised upon the possibility of sharing practices and knowledges globally and cross-culturally. Upon this shared experience it becomes possible to build the horizontal conjugation of times from which a cosmopolitan contact zone and the emancipatory work of translation may emerge.

WHO TRANSLATES? Knowledges and practices exist only as mobilized by social groups, both movements and NGOs. Hence the work of translation is always carried out among representatives of those social groups. The WSF is a facilitator of cosmopolitan contact zones among NGOs/movements and a meeting ground for their leaders and activists. The workings of the contact zone generate a new kind of citizenship, a cosmopolitan attitude of reflection and self-reflection, reaching beyond familiar territories, be they familiar practices or familiar knowledges. As argumentative work, the work of translation requires argumentative capacity. The partners in the cosmopolitan contact zone must have a profile similar to that of the philosophical sage identified by Odera Oruka in his quest for African sagacity. They must be deeply embedded in the practices and knowledges they represent, having both a profound and a critical understanding. This critical dimension, which Odera Oruka designates as 'didactic sageness', grounds the want, the feeling of incompleteness and the motivation to discover in other knowledges

and practices the answers that are not to be found within the limits of a given knowledge or practice. Translators of cultures must be good cosmopolitan citizens, both individual and collective citizens. They are to be found both among the leaders of social movements and among the rank-and-file activists. In the near future, the decision about who translates is likely to become one of the most crucial democratic deliberations in the construction of counter-hegemonic globalization.

HOW TO TRANSLATE? The work of translation is basically an argumentative work, based on the cosmopolitan emotion of sharing the world with those who do not share our knowledge or experience. The work of translation encounters multiple difficulties. The first difficulty concerns the premises of argumentation. Argumentation is based on postulates, axioms, rules and ideas that are not the object of argumentation because they are taken for granted by all those participating in the same argumentative circle. They constitute what is evident to everyone, the *commonplaces* (*loci communes, topoi*), the basic consensus that makes argumentative dissent possible.[10] The work of translation has no commonplaces at the outset, because the available commonplaces are those appropriate to a given movement, hence not acceptable as evident by another movement. In other words, the commonplaces that each movement brings into the contact zone cease to be premises of argumentation and become arguments. As it progresses, the work of translation constructs the commonplaces adequate to the contact zone and the translating situation. It is a demanding work, with no safety nets and ever on the verge of disaster. The ability to construct commonplaces is one of the most distinctive marks of the quality of the cosmopolitan contact zone.

The second difficulty regards the language used to conduct the argumentation. It is not usual for the movements present in contact zones to have a common language or to master the common language equally well or in the same way. Furthermore, when the cosmopolitan contact zone is multicultural, one of the languages in question is often the language that dominated the colonial or imperial contact zone. The replacement of the latter by a cosmopolitan contact zone may thus be boycotted by virtue of this use of the previously dominant language. The issue is not just that the different participants in the argumentative discourse may master the language unequally. The issue is that this language is responsible for the very unpronounceability of some of the central aspirations of the knowledges and practices that were oppressed in the colonial contact zone.

The third difficulty concerns the silences. Not the things that are unpronounceable, but rather the different rhythms with which the different movements link words with silences and the different eloquence (or meaning) that is ascribed to silence by the different cultures to which the groups belong. To manage and translate silence is one of the most exacting tasks of the work of translation.

WHY TRANSLATE? This last question encompasses all the others. Very succinctly, 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 general theory of progressive social transformation (and none would be welcomed if it existed) 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 join together in 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 whether 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 guarantee 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 and no more than a new step on the past of global capitalism towards 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 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 re-create 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 rather than tomorrow. The possibility of a better future lies therefore not in a distant future, but rather in the reinvention of the present as enlarged by the sociology of absences and by the sociology of emergences, and rendered coherent by the work of translation. 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 the creation of 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 legitimized 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 associate and coalesce be transformed into transformative practices. In the following chapter I present a concrete proposal aimed at expanding, deepening and consolidating the work of translation.

Notes

1 A version of this path was proposed by Michael Albert, of ZNET (2003). Here are the main points of his proposal:

1. Emphasize local forums as the foundation of the worldwide forum process.
2. Have each new level of forums, from towns, cities, countries, to continents and the world, built largely on those below.
3. Have the decision-making leadership of the most local events locally determined.
4. Have the decision-making leadership at each higher level chosen, at least to a large extent, by the local forums within the higher entity. Italy's national forum leadership is chosen by the smaller local forums in Italy. The European forums' leadership is chosen by the national forums within Europe, and similarly elsewhere.
5. Mandate that the decision-making leadership at every level should be at least 50 per cent women.
6. Have the forums from wealthier parts of the world charge delegates and organizations and attendees a tax on their fees to apply to helping finance

the forums in poorer parts of the world and subsidize delegate attendance at the world forum from poorer locales.

7. Set the WSF attendance at 5,000–10,000 people delegated to it from the major regional forums around the world. Have the WSF leadership selected by regional forums. Mandate the WSF to share and compare and propose based on all that is emerging worldwide – not to listen again to the same famous speakers whom everyone hears worldwide all the time anyhow – and have the WSF's results, like those of all other forums, published and made public, and of course reported by delegates back to the regions.
8. Ensure that the WSF as a whole and the forums worldwide do not make the mistake of trying to become an International, a movement of movements, or even just a voice of the world's movements. To be a forum, the WSF and the smaller component forums need to be as broad and diverse as possible. But being that broad and that diverse is simply being too broad and too diverse to be an organization.
9. Mandate that the forums at every level, including the WSF, welcome people from diverse constituencies using the forums and their processes to make contacts and to develop ties that can in turn yield national, regional or even international networks or movements of movements which share their political aspirations sufficiently to work closely together, but which exist alongside one another, rather than reflecting the forum phenomenon.

2 A good example was the first European Social Forum held in Florence in November 2002. The differences, rivalries and factionalisms that divide the various movements and NGOs that organized it are well known and have a history that is impossible to erase. This is why, in their positive response to the WSF's request to organize the ESF, the movements and NGOs that took up the task felt the need to assert that the differences among them were as sharp as ever and that they were coming together only with a very limited objective in mind: to organize the Forum and a Peace March. The Forum was indeed organized in such a way that the differences could be made very explicit.

3 On the concept of *umma*, see, for example, Faruki (1979); An-Na'im (1995, 2000); Hassan (1996); on the Hindu concept of *dharma*, see Gandhi (1929/32); Zaehner (1982).

4 I analyse in greater detail the relationships between human rights and other conceptions of human dignity in Santos (2002a).

5 See Gandhi (1941, 1967). On *swadeshi* see also, among others, Bipinchandra (1954); Nandy (1987); Krishna (1994).

6 These conceptions are so prevalent that I have designated them as the monoculture of production in Chapter 2.

7 Similar conceptions may be found, for instance, among the indigenous peoples.

8 On sage philosophy see Oruka (1990, 1998) and also Oseghare (1992); Presbey (1997).

9 A concrete example of mutual learning in this field can be seen in Santos (2005).

10 On commonplaces and argumentation in general, see Santos (1995: 7–55).