

9 | The left after the World Social Forum

The majority of movements and organizations that have energized the WSF consider themselves to be on the left, even though, as I said at the beginning, they disagree to a large extent on what it means to be on the left these days. As I have indicated throughout this book, these disagreements are reflected in the debates carried out at the Forum, whether concerning organizational issues or issues of political theory and action. In this chapter, I engage in an inverse kind of enquiry: into the Forum's impact on left thinking and practice. Given the short period of the Forum's maturation, this enquiry cannot but be somewhat speculative. It is, none the less, possible to identify some of the problems of the left highlighted by the WSF, as well as some of the solutions made possible or more credible in the light of its experience. By its very nature, the WSF does not have an official line on its own impact on the left's future, and I suspect that many of the movements and organizations involved in it are not concerned about it. What I present next is a personal reflection drawn from my own experience of the WSF.

The phantasmal relation between theory and practice

The WSF has shown that the gap between left practices and classical theories of the left is broader today than ever. Of course, the WSF is not alone in this – as witness the political experiences in the region where the WSF emerged, Latin America. From the EZLN in Chiapas to Lula's election in Brazil, from the Argentinean *piqueteros* to the MST, from the indigenous movement in Bolivia and Ecuador to Uruguay's Frente Amplia, and to the successive victories of Hugo Chavez as well as, more recently, the election of Evo Morales, from the continental struggle against ALCA¹ to the alternative project of regional integration led by Hugo Chavez, we are faced with political practices that are in general recognized as leftist, but which were not foreseen by the major leftist theoretical traditions, or which even contradict them. As an international event and meeting point of so many resistance practices and projects of alternative society, the WSF has given a new dimension to this mutual blindness – of the practice vis-à-vis the theory and of the theory vis-à-vis the practice – and created the conditions for an

amplified and deeper reflection on this problem. This is what I propose to engage in here.

The blindness of the theory results in the invisibility of the practice, hence its sub-theorization, whereas the blindness of the practice results in the irrelevance of the theory. The blindness of the theory can be seen in the way the conventional left parties and the intellectuals at their service have stubbornly not paid any attention to the WSF, or have minimized its meaning. The blindness of the practice, in turn, is glaringly present in the contempt shown by the great majority of the activists of the WSF for the rich leftist theoretical tradition, and their militant disregard for its renewal. This mutual misencounter yields, on the practice side, an extreme oscillation between revolutionary spontaneity and innocuous, self-censored possibilism, and, on the theory side, an equally extreme oscillation between *post-factum* reconstructive zeal and arrogant indifference to what is not included in such a reconstruction.

In such conditions, the relation between theory and practice assumes strange characteristics. On the one hand, the theory is no longer at the service of the future practices it potentially contains, and rather serves to legitimize (or not) the past practices that have emerged in spite of itself. Thus, avant-garde thought tends to tag along in the rearguard of practice. It stops being orientation to become ratification of the successes obtained by default or confirmation of pre-announced failures. On the other hand, the practice justifies itself by resorting to a theoretical *bricolage* focused on the needs of the moment, made up of heterogeneous concepts and languages which, from the point of view of the theory, are no more than opportunistic rationalizations or rhetorical exercises. From the point of view of the theory, theoretical *bricolage* never qualifies as theory. From the point of view of the practice, a posteriori theorization is mere parasitism.

This phantasmal relation between theory and practice yields three political facts, all of them made evident by the WSF, that are decisive for our understanding of the present situation of the left. The first is that the discrepancy between short-term certainties and medium- and long-term uncertainties has never been so wide. A certain insistence on tactics prevails, therefore, which can either be revolutionary or reformist, or can even go beyond such dichotomy. This insistence on tactics has been conditioned by the metamorphoses of the enemy of the left. For the last three decades, neo-liberal capitalism has been subjecting social relations to the law of the market to an extreme until recently unthinkable: it includes the commodification of culture, leisure, solidarity

and even self-esteem, along with the reduction or elimination of the non-marketable interactions on the basis of which the modern social state was built (education, health, welfare). The brutal worsening of exploitation and exclusion – hence of social inequalities – brought about by the dismantling of the juridical and political mechanisms of regulation, which until very recently seemed irreversible, confers to the resistance struggles an urgency that allows for ample convergences regarding short-term goals (from the struggles against savage privatizations to the blockage of the World Trade Organization or the FTAA). What remains unclear is whether the struggle is aimed at capitalism in general on behalf of socialism or some other post-capitalist future, or, on the contrary, against *this* capitalism on behalf of a capitalism with a more human face.

This lack of clarity is not a new problem. On the contrary, it remained with the left throughout the twentieth century. But it now gains a new urgency. The impetus of neo-liberal capitalism is so overwhelming that what actually ends up conniving with it can be seen as struggling against it. By the same token, the uncertainty regarding the long term now has a new dimension: and that concerns whether there is indeed a long term at all. That is to say, the long term has become so uncertain that conflicts about it cease to be important or mobilizing. As a consequence, the short term lengthens, and the concrete political polarizations occur in the light of the short-term certainties and urgencies. If, on the one hand, discrediting the long term favours tactics, on the other it prevents the polarizations about the long term from interfering with the short-term polarizations. It permits a total opening up to the future on which consensuses are easy. If until recently dissent concerning the long term was strong, energies of convergence being concentrated on the short term, today, once the long term has been discredited, strong dissent has moved to the short term, where there are certainties. Now certainties, because they are different for different groups, are at the root of strong dissent.

The increasing uncertainty and open-endedness of the long term has a long trajectory in leftist thought. It is expressed in the transition from the certainty of the socialist future as the scientific result of the development of the productive forces, in Marx, to the dichotomy of socialism or barbarism, formulated by Rosa Luxemburg, to the various conceptions of socialism after the schism in the workers' movement at the beginning of the First World War, and, after many intermediate transitions, to the idea that 'another world is possible', which dominates the WSF.

The long term has always been the clear horizon of the left. In the past, the greater the difference in that horizon from the landscapes of present-day capitalism, the more radical the means necessary to reach it. Hence the cleavage between revolution and reform. Nowadays, this cleavage is suffering an erosion similar to that of the long term. It is still there, but it no longer has its former consistency and consequences. It has become a relatively loose signifier, prone to contradictory appropriations. There are reformist processes that seem revolutionary (Hugo Chavez in Venezuela), revolutionary processes that seem reformist (Zapatistas in Mexico) and reformist processes that don't even seem reformist (the PT government in Brazil 2002–06).

The second fact that derives from the phantasmal relation between theory and practice is the impossibility of a consensual account regarding the performance of the left. If, for some, the left has undergone an ebbing of the class struggle since the 1970s, for others this was a period teeming with innovation and creativity, in which the left renovated itself through new struggles, new forms of collective action, new political goals. According to the latter position there was certainly an ebbing, but it involved rather the classical forms of political organization and action, and it was thanks to this ebbing that new forms of political organization and action emerged. For those who sustain the idea of the general ebbing, the balance is negative and the supposed novelties result from the struggles' deviation from primary objectives (class struggle in the domain of production) to secondary objectives (identity, culture – in a word objectives in the domain of social reproduction). This was no more than a yielding to the enemy, no matter how radical the discourses of rupture. For those who support the idea of innovation and creativity, the balance is positive, because the blocking dogmatisms have been shattered, the forms of collective action and the social bases supporting them have been enlarged, and, above all, because the struggles, by their forms and range, have managed to reveal new vulnerabilities in the enemy. Among the participants in the WSF, the latter position prevails, even though the former, arguing the idea of the general ebbing, is quite visible in the participation of some organizations (mainly trade unions). Theirs is, however, a participation that verges on despair, with an unhappy awareness of the minimal dreams that history allowed to be fulfilled. In this argument about the assessment of the last thirty years, both positions resort to the fallacy of hypothetical pasts, be it to show that, if the class struggle had prevailed, the results would have been better, be it to show, on the contrary, that without the new struggles the results would have been much worse.

The third fact derived from the phantasmal relation between theory and practice concerns the new theoretical extremism. It concerns polarizations that are simultaneously much larger and much more inconsequential than those that characterized the theoretical arguments of thirty years ago. Unlike the latter, the current polarizations are not directly linked to concrete, political organizations and strategic forms. Compared with the more recent ones, the extreme positions of the past seem less removed from each other. And yet choosing among them yielded far more concrete consequences in the lives of the organizations, militants and societies than is apparent today. There are three main dimensions of present-day theoretical extremism.

As regards the *subjects of social transformation*, the polarization is between a well-defined historical subjectivity, the working class and its allies, on the one hand, and, on the other, indeterminate and unlimited subjectivities, be they all the oppressed, 'common people therefore rebels' (Sub-comandante Marcos),² or the *multitude* (Hardt and Negri 2000).³ Until thirty years ago, the polarization occurred 'only' in the delimitation of the working class (the industrial avant-garde versus retrograde sectors), in the identification of the allies, whether the peasants or the petite bourgeoisie, in the move from 'class in itself' to 'class for itself', and so on and so forth.

Concerning the *goals of the social struggle*, the polarization is between the seizure of power and the total rejection of the concept of power, that is to say between the statism that has always prevailed in the left, one way or the other, and the most radical anti-statism, as in John Holloway's belief that it is possible to change the world without seizing power (Holloway 2002). Until thirty years ago, the polarization occurred around the means of seizing power (armed struggle or direct peaceful action versus institutional struggle) and the nature and goals of the exercise of power once seized (popular democracy/dictatorship of the proletariat versus participatory/representative democracy).

Concerning *organization*, the polarization is between the centralized organization in the party and the total absence of centralism and even organization, beyond that which emerges spontaneously in the course of the collective action, by the initiative of the actors themselves as a whole. Until thirty years ago, the polarization occurred between communist and socialist parties, between one single party and a multi-party system; it addressed the relation between the party and the masses or the forms of organization of the workers' party (democratic centralism versus decentralization and right of tendency).

We are facing, therefore, polarizations of a different kind, between

new and more demarcated positions. It doesn't mean that the previous ones have disappeared; they have just lost their exclusivity and centrality. The new polarizations do have consequences for the left; but they are certainly more diffuse than those of previous polarizations. The reason is twofold. On the one hand, the aforementioned phantasmal relation between theory and practice contributes to rendering the latter relatively immune to theoretical polarizations or to encouraging it to use them selectively and instrumentally. On the other, actors in extreme positions do not dispute the same social bases, do not mobilize for the same objectives of struggle, do not militate in the same organizations, nor even in rival organizations. The contours of the left, therefore, look rather like the parallel lives of the left. Such disjunctions, however, have an important consequence: they make the acceptance of plurality and diversity difficult, and their conversion into motors of new forms of struggle, of new coalitions and associations impossible. This is an important consequence, particularly if we bear in mind that the extreme positions in the new polarizations go beyond the universe of the culture of the left as we know it. We face very distinct cultural, symbolic and linguistic universes and, without a translation procedure among them, it will not be possible to reach a mutual intelligibility. If, on one side, the talk is about class struggle, power relations, society, modern rationality, the state, reform, revolution, on the other the talk is about love, dignity, solidarity, community, rebellion, spirituality, emotions and sentiments, transformation of subjectivity, 'a world to encompass all the worlds'. There is, therefore, a cultural, as well as an epistemological fracture.⁴ These fractures have a sociological basis in the emergence of collective actors from subordinate, indigenous, feminist, Asian, African and African-American cultures, which were ignored, if not antagonized, by the classical left throughout the twentieth century.

Considering this last aspect of the phantasmal relation between theory and practice (theoretical extremism), the following question is quite legitimate: how was the WSF possible? To my mind, this virulent, if inconsequential, theoretical extremism gradually lost contact with the practical aspirations and options of the activists engaged in concrete political action. Between concrete political action and theoretical extremism, a vacuum, a *terra nullius*, was formed, wherein gathered a diffuse will to join forces against the avalanche of neo-liberalism and to admit that this would be possible without having to sort out all the pending political debates. The urgency of the action turned against the purity of the theory, as it were. The WSF is the result of this Zeitgeist of the left, or rather of the lefts, at the end of the twentieth century.

The twenty-first-century left: depolarized pluralities

Does the WSF mean that a synthesis of the new and old extremisms of the left is possible? Certainly not. As I said above, such a synthesis is not only not possible but also undesirable. The search for a synthesis requires the idea of a totality that brings diversity back to unity. Now, the WSF shows eloquently that no totality can contain the inexhaustible diversity of the theories and practices of the world left today. Rather than a synthesis, the WSF suggests a call for *depolarized pluralities*. The aim is to reverse a tradition with deep roots in the left, based on the idea that to politicize differences is to polarize them. On the contrary, the WSF allows for politicization to occur by means of depolarization. It consists of giving priority to constructing coalitions and associations for concrete collective *practices* and discussing the theoretical differences exclusively in the ambit of such construction. The goal is to turn the acknowledgement of differences into a factor of cohesion and inclusion, by robbing differences of the possibility of thwarting collective actions, thus creating a context of political strife in which acknowledgement of differences goes hand in hand with the celebration and use of similarities. In other words, the point is to create contexts for debate, in which the drive for union and similarity may have the same intensity as the drive for separation and difference. Collective actions ruled by depolarized pluralities stir up a new conception of 'unity in action', to the extent that unity stops being the expression of a monolithic will to become the more or less vast and lasting meeting point of a plurality of wills.

The conception of depolarized pluralities counters all the automatisms of political strife inside the left. Hence it will not be easy to apply. Two important facts recommend its application, however. The first is the current predominance, mentioned above, of the short term over the long term, with the result that the long term has never conditioned the short term so little as it does today. In the past, when the long term was the great factor of political polarization inside the left, the short term – whenever it was conceived with some autonomy vis-à-vis the long term – played a depolarizing role (the old distinction between tactics and strategy). In view of this, the tacticism that results from the current predominance of the short term may facilitate an agreement to give priority to the concrete collective actions, in order to discuss plurality and diversity, but only in the context of the said collective actions. In the short term, every revolutionary action is potentially reformist, and every reformist action may eventually escape reformist control. Concentration on short-term certainties and urgencies, therefore, does not only imply neglecting the long term; it implies as well that the

long term be conceived of as being open enough to include diffuse consensuses and complicities. That the long term remains indefinite may well encourage depolarization.

The other factor favourable to the construction of depolarized pluralities is the recognition, obvious today after the Zapatista uprising and after the WSF, that the left is multicultural. What this means is that the differences that divide the left escape the political terms that formulated them in the past. Underlying them are the cultural differences that an emergent global left cannot but acknowledge, since it would make no sense to fight for the recognition and respect of cultural differences 'outside', in society, and not to recognize or respect them 'at home', within the organizations and movements. A context is thereby created to act under the assumption that differences cannot be erased by means of political resolutions. Better to live with them and turn them into a factor of collective strength and enrichment.

The next step will be to analyse in some detail the fields and procedures behind the construction of depolarized pluralities. The goal is to highlight new paradigms of transformative and progressive action guided by the operative principle of depolarized pluralities. The construction of depolarized pluralities is carried out by collective subjects involved, or willing to become involved, in collective actions. The priority conferred on participation in collective actions, by means of association or coalition, allows for the suspension of the question of the subject in the abstract. In this sense, if only concrete actions are in progress, only concrete subjects are in progress as well. The presence of concrete subjects does not annul the issue of the abstract subject, be it the working class, the party, the people, humanity or common people, but it prevents this issue from interfering decisively in the conception or unfolding of the collective action. Indeed, the latter can never be the result of abstract subjects. Giving priority to participation in concrete collective actions means the following:

1. Theoretical disputes must take place in the context of concrete collective actions.
2. Each participant (movement, organization, campaign, etc.) stops claiming that the only important or correct collective actions are those exclusively conceived or organized by it. In a context in which the mechanisms of exploitation, exclusion and oppression multiply and intensify, it is particularly important not to squander any social experience of resistance on the part of the exploited, excluded or oppressed, and their allies.

3. Whenever a given collective subject has to put in question its participation in a collective action, withdrawal must proceed in such a way as to weaken as little as possible the position of the subjects still involved in the action.
4. Since resistance never takes place in the abstract, transformative collective actions begin by occurring on the ground and in terms of the conflicts established by the oppressors. The success of the collective actions is measured by the ability of collective action to change the ground and terms of the conflict during the struggle. Success, in turn, assesses the correctness of the theoretical positions assumed. The pragmatic conception of theoretical correctness creates willingness towards the depolarization of the pluralities while the action is taking place.

There are three major dimensions of the construction of depolarized pluralities within transformative collective actions: depolarization through intensification of mutual communication and intelligibility; depolarization through searching for inclusive organizational forms; depolarization through concentration on productive issues. To the first two I refer here only briefly, since the previous chapters have already suggested how depolarization may be undertaken. I will analyse in more detail depolarization achieved through concentration on productive issues.

Depolarization through intensification of mutual intelligibility This form of depolarization is that in which the contribution of the WSF is most consistent. The WSF has been a meeting point of movements and organizations from all over the world. In many cases, the relations therein established last way beyond the events, and are reflected in ever more consistent linkages in global transformative action. The progress made in the past few years is particularly remarkable in some areas: the struggle against external debt and predatory free trade; transcontinental feminist agendas; peasant movements, namely through the Via Campesina; and indigenous movements, mainly in the Americas. As I said above, the diversity of the associations, of the sociological, political and cultural profile of the movements and organizations, as well as of the traditions of resistance, renders impossible, and if possible undesirable, a general theory capable of giving global coherence to the wealth of meetings and initiatives. Inspired by the experience of the WSF, I proposed in Chapter 7 that the search for a general theory be replaced by the consequent elaboration of processes of translation

aimed at deepening mutual intelligibility without putting in question the autonomy of current movements and organizations. The translation procedure, while safeguarding and even deepening diversity, contributes to turning it into a factor of inter-group proximity and enrichment of collective action.

Depolarization by searching for inclusive organizational forms In this domain, the role of the WSF has been to show that the will to collective action made manifest in dozens of forums for the past few years can be concretized only through new forms of political organization and association. The forms traditionally available to the left – national generalist parties and sectoral local movements – are insufficient in themselves, but are above all deficient vis-à-vis the exclusive and exclusionary policies they generated. As I have mentioned before, in many countries the collaboration between parties and social movements has been blocked by two opposed and symmetrical fundamentalisms, each with deep roots: the anti-movement fundamentalism on the part of the parties and the anti-party fundamentalism on the part of the social movements. Furthermore, all these organizational forms were designed in terms of their specific objectives and contexts, whether national or local, or general or thematic. It is not easy on the basis of these, and particularly on the basis of the political culture of which they are the product, to create new exigencies and new activisms, inter-thematic (among feminists, workers, peasants, ecologists, indigenous people, gays and lesbians, pacifists, activists for human rights, etc., etc.) and multi-scalar associations (local, national, regional and global).

The very organization of the WSF and of the different forums to which it has given rise is in itself a remarkable innovation, and their limits and difficulties, which I have pointed out in the previous chapters, have more to do with its success than its failure. What is at stake is the design and the actual carrying out of collective actions made possible and urgent by the action of the WSF, for which new organizational forms are necessary: forms that maximize internal democracy, guarantee efficacy at the level of the different scales of intervention, respect diversity and sustainability, and allow for the accumulation of anti-capitalist energy and collective memory. Such organizational forms must be different according to the goals in question: from mere exchange of information and experience to planning and carrying out global collective actions, involving different movements and organizations in different continents, operating in very distinct political and cultural contexts from quite unequal milieux. How to combine autonomy with working together? How

to guarantee equality and respect for difference when the resources available to the different participants are so different? How to link particular agendas, contextualized locally and legitimized by well-defined social bases, with new transnational or translocal initiatives, formulated in different languages, whose connection with the particular agendas is neither obvious nor transparent to all members of the organization? How to assume and measure the risks of innovation, organization and action in such often difficult contexts, holding such precarious internal equilibriums? How to decide whether what is gained by the new activism makes up for the losses of the old one? What is the impact of the change of scale or thematic objective on the transparency and accountability of the organization vis-à-vis its members and target audience?

The major achievement of the WSF so far has been to put this issue on the agenda of the social forces interested in the emancipatory transformation of the societies and the world, and interested as well in the concretization of collective actions conceived within the WSF but to be carried out beyond it. I strongly believe that the relationships among parties, social movements and NGOs must change radically to prevent the expectations created by the WSF process from being frustrated.⁵

Depolarization by concentration on productive issues I consider productive issues those whose discussion has direct consequences for the conception and unfolding of collective action and for the conditions under which it takes place. All the others are unproductive issues. Without being necessarily neglected, they must be left to a level of indecision or state of suspension allowing for different responses. Many of the issues that incensed the left in the past and led to the best-known polarizations do not pass this test today, and must therefore be considered unproductive. The experience of the WSF, namely as regards the political cleavages inside the Forum analysed in Chapter 6, permits one to identify some productive and some unproductive issues. Among the latter, I highlight the following.

Unproductive issues

THE ISSUE OF SOCIALISM. That is to say, the kind of society model that will succeed socialism. This issue suffered a tremendous impact with the fall of the Berlin Wall. If it could be considered productive before, to the extent that the socialist future was on the political agenda, at least in some countries, and could, therefore, have practical consequences at the level of collective action, the same is not true today, with the exception of Cuba. As an unproductive issue, it must be left in a

state of indecision, whose most eloquent formulation is the idea that 'another world is possible'. This formulation permits one to separate the current radical critique and the struggle for a post- or anti-capitalist horizon – one and the other constitutive of the collective actions – from the commitment to a specific model of future society.

REFORMISM OR REVOLUTION. This issue stirs up various productive issues that will be mentioned below, but in itself it is unproductive, since the conditions under which the option between reform and revolution turned into a decisive political battlefield are no longer in place. As I argue in Chapter 6, the issue was one of a principled option between legal and illegal means of seizing power, hence between a gradual and peaceful and an abrupt and potentially violent seizure. In either case, the seizure of power aimed at constructing the socialist society, and was in fact its precondition. Actually, neither strategy succeeded, and as a result the opposition between them became complicity. Whenever power was actually seized, it was either to govern capitalism or to build societies that only with the utmost complacency could be deemed socialist. Another form of complicity between the two principles is that historically they have always existed in reciprocal complementarity. On the one hand, revolution has always been the founding act of a new cycle of reformism, since the first revolutionary acts – as witness the Bolsheviks – were to stop new revolutions, legislating reformism as the only future option after them. On the other hand, reformism had credibility only while the revolutionary alternative existed. This is why the fall of the Berlin Wall brought about both the end of revolution and the end of reformism, at least in the forms available to us throughout the twentieth century. Moreover, in view of this, and in view of the changes implemented by capitalism in the last thirty years, the two terms of the dichotomy suffered such a drastic semantic evolution that they have become scarcely trustworthy as guiding principles of social struggle. Lately, reformism has been the object of a brutal attack on the part of the political forces at the service of global capitalism. This attack started out by being illegal (as when Salvador Allende was toppled in Chile in 1973). With the neo-liberal turn in the 1980s, it began resorting to the 'legal' means of structural adjustment, external debt, privatization, deregulation, and liberalization of trade. Reformism is, therefore, reduced today to a miniature caricature of what it used to be, as illustrated by the cases of Tony Blair's England, Thabo Mbeki's South Africa and Lula's Brazil. In its turn, revolution, which started out by symbolizing a maximalist seizure of power, ended

up evolving semantically towards conceptions of rejection of seizure of power, if not indeed of radical rejection of the idea of power, as illustrated by John Holloway's highly polemical interpretation of the Zapatistas (2002). Throughout the twentieth century, between the two extremes of seizure of power and total erasure of power, there were many intermediate views concerned with the idea of a change of power, such as, very early on, the Austro-Marxists' non-Leninist conceptions of revolution.⁶

For all these reasons, it does not seem productive to debate between reform and revolution. By virtue of its past, the discussion is polarizing. By virtue of its present and near future, it is inconsequential. In the absence of other terms, I propose to leave this issue in abeyance, which in this case means to recognize that social struggles are never essentially reformist or revolutionary. They may eventually assume either one or the other characteristic in view of their consequences (some of them intentional, some not), in tandem with other social struggles and according to the resistance of the forces that oppose them. In other words, abeyance entails here changing reform and revolution from guiding principles of future actions into evaluating principles of past actions. As I suggest in Chapter 6, the WSF points to the advantages of this state of suspension.

THE STATE: PRIVILEGED OR IRRELEVANT OBJECTIVE. Linked with the previous issue, there is another that I also consider unproductive. It consists in arguing whether the state is relevant or irrelevant to a leftist politics and, consequently, whether the state should be the object of social struggles, or not. The option is between social struggles aiming at the power of the state in its many forms and levels, and social struggles aiming exclusively at the powers that circulate in civil society and which determine the inequalities, exclusions and oppressions. Whether the state should be defended or attacked is not the question; rather it is to decide whether the social struggles should have goals other than to defend or attack the state. This issue can also unfold into a few productive issues, as I will show below, but in itself it is an unproductive issue. Related to it is the issue, broached above, of whether power must be seized or extinguished, as well as the issue, approached in Chapter 6, of whether the state is an ally or an enemy of the emancipatory social movements (one of the cleavages of the WSF).

That the issue of the relevance or irrelevance of the state is unproductive has to do with the fact that the modern capitalist state exists only in relation with civil society. The two of them, far from being external

to each other, are the two faces of the *grundnorm*, that is to say of the fundamental political relation in capitalist societies. From another perspective, the three pillars of modern social regulation are the state, the market and the community (Santos 1995: 1-5; 2002b: 1-4), and it is not possible to conceive of either one outside their relations with one another. Finally, since the state is a social, hence historical, relation, its relevancy or irrelevancy cannot be established regardless of the result of the social struggles that in the past had it as their object. To neutralize its potential for polarization I suggest the following level of indecision or state of suspension: the social struggles may have the power of the state or the powers that constitute civil society as their privileged objective, but, in either case, the powers not privileged are always present, affect the results of the struggles and are affected by the struggles.

Productive issues Likewise, in light of the experience of the WSF, I will next give some examples of productive issues, that is to say issues which, once discussed, may yield the depolarization of the pluralities that today constitute the thought and action of the left.

THE STATE AS AN ALLY OR AS AN ENEMY. Unlike the unproductive issue of the state's relevance or irrelevance, this issue is productive precisely because it does not take the state's relevance in the abstract. It confers to it a specific political meaning. The transformations undergone by the state throughout the entire twentieth century, both in core countries and in countries liberated from colonialism, and the contradictory role it played in the processes of social transformation, give historical and practical consistency to this issue. The experiences of social struggle, of parties and social movements in the different countries, are in this respect widely diversified and very rich, and cannot be reduced to a general principle or recipe.

The WSF, convening movements and associations with the most diverse experiences of relations with the state, is today an eloquent manifestation of this wealth of social struggles. The possibility of constructing in this domain a depolarized plurality resides precisely in the fact that, as I say in Chapter 6, the majority of movements and associations refuse to take a rigid, principled stance in their relations with the state. The experiences of struggle show that the state, being often the enemy, can also be, particularly in peripheral and semi-peripheral countries, a precious ally – for instance, in the struggle against transnational impositions. If in some situations confrontation with the state is justified, in others collaboration is advisable. In others still it is

appropriate to combine the two – witness the strategy of the MST in Brazil, a strategy that can be described as autonomous and confrontational cooperation. The choice of a given kind of interrelation with the state depends on a multiplicity of factors: history and dimension of the movement or organization; kind of political regime; structure of opportunities for direct or institutional action; national or local traditions of social struggle; level of complexity of the claims gauged by the kind and number of dimensions involved (social, political, cultural, ethnic, religious); kind and orientation of public opinion; international context. The most important factor is perhaps the structure of the opportunities: political opportunities (the larger or smaller fractures in the social and political basis of the state's action; the greater or lesser permeability to social contestation and political opposition; the level of social and political exclusion of the social groups engaged in the struggle); institutional opportunities (greater or lesser penetration and functionality of public administration, more or less availability, independence and efficacy of the judicial system, legalism or discretionary power in the way the repressive police and military forces take action); and ideological opportunities (receptivity of public opinion, relation between politics and ethics or religion, criteria to define the limits of tolerance and of what is negotiable).

The conception of the state as a contradictory social relation creates the possibility of contextualized discussions on what position to take vis-à-vis the state on the part of a certain political party, organization or movement, in a given social field, in a concrete country and historical moment. It also permits evaluation of comparatively different positions assumed by different parties, organizations or movements in different areas of intervention or in different countries or historical moments. Hence the possibility of the recognition of the existence of different strategies, all of them contextual and not free of risk, and, above all, none of them susceptible to becoming a general principle. This is what depolarized plurality consists of.

LOCAL, NATIONAL AND GLOBAL STRUGGLES. The issue of the relative priority of local, national or global collective actions is today amply debated, and in this case, too, the diversity of leftist practices is enormous. As I say in Chapter 6, this issue is present in the political options of the majority of the organizations and movements that participate in the WSF. To be sure, the theoretical tradition of the left was moulded on the national scale. The local struggles were traditionally considered minor, or else the germ of national struggles, to the detriment of the

internationalist goals. The vicissitudes of internationalism, in turn, were evidence of the priority of national struggles and interests. The national scale presided over the formation of leftist parties and unions, and continues to structure their activism to this day.

In the second half of the twentieth century, particularly after the 1970s, as a result of the emergence of the new social movements, the local scale of social struggles assumed an unprecedented relevance. The organizational tradition of the left prevented the emancipatory potential of the association between local and national struggles to be explored to the utmost. The building processes of the African National Congress, in South Africa, and of the PT in Brazil were perhaps the most successful. From the 1990s on, particularly with the Zapatista uprising, the rallies in Seattle in 1999 and the WSF in 2001, the possibility of coalitions of local, national and global struggles gained unprecedented credibility. On the other hand, the field of concrete experiences of struggles on different scales broadens considerably, thus making possible contextualized debates on the different scales of collective action, their relative advantages, organizational demands and possibilities of association. Such a debate is ongoing these days in the WSF, and is one of the most productive, mainly regarding the specific instruments of association among different scales of action.

As has been made clear in the preceding chapters, the WSF gathers together social movements and organizations with different views of the relative priority of the different scales of action. While the WSF itself is a collective action on the global scale, many of the movements and organizations that participate in it have had experiences only of local and national struggles until recently. Even though they all view the WSF as the chance to enlarge their scales of action, they ascribe, as we have seen, very different priorities to the different scales of action. If, for some, the global scale of struggle will become more and more important as the struggle against globalization intensifies, for others the WSF is only a meeting point or a cultural event, no doubt useful, but in no way changing the basic principle that the 'real struggles', those really important for the welfare of populations, continue to be fought at the local and national level. There are still other movements and organizations that systematically link in their practices the local, national and global scales (the MST, for example, and, outside the WSF, the Zapatistas). As I said, however, for the vast majority of the movements, even if each concrete political practice is organized according to a given scale, all the others must be involved as a condition of success. The productive issues in this domain concern the way in which this involvement must take place.

The wealth of experiences of social struggle in this regard is thus huge, and allows for contextualized, hence productive, debates. The possibility that depolarized pluralities may emerge in this domain derives from the fact that, in light of recent experience, it makes increasingly less sense to give absolute or abstract priority to any of the scales of action. The space is thus opened to valorize the coexistence of social struggles on different scales and the variable geometry of links among them. The decision that determines the scale to be privileged is a political decision that must be taken according to concrete political conditions.

INSTITUTIONAL ACTION, DIRECT ACTION, CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE. Unlike the issue of choice between reform and revolution, the issue concerning the option between institutional action and direct action or resorting to civil disobedience is a productive issue in that it can be discussed in practical contexts of collective action. The question concerns what is to be privileged in the concrete conditions in which a given collective struggle or action is carried out: the use of legal means, – i.e. political or juridical work inside the institutions and dialogue with those in power – or, in contrast, illegality and confrontation with the state institutions. In the case of direct action, a distinction must be made between violent and non-violent action, and, in the case of violent action, between violence against human and non-human (property) targets.⁷ In the case of institutional action, a distinction must be made between institutional action in the ambit of the power of the state (whether national or local) and institutional action in the ambit of parallel powers, namely by creating parallel institutionalities that avoid direct confrontation with the state or take place in regions not penetrated by the state. Parallel institutionality is a hybrid type of collective action in which elements of direct action and elements of institutional action are combined. The institutions of autonomous local power created by the Zapatists in Chiapas (*caracoles*, *juntas de buen gobierno*) and the forms of government in the *assentamentos* of the MST are forms of parallel institutionality.⁸ Both courses of action (direct and institutional) have costs and benefits that can only be assessed in concrete contexts, demanding, of course, different kinds of organization and mobilization. What in general may be said of any other kind of collective action is not enough to make decisions upon contextualized discussions about them. The context is not limited to the immediate conditions of action, it also involves surrounding conditions – indeed, the same factors that condition relations with the state, mentioned above. The institutional

action tends to take better advantage of the power contradictions and the fissures among the elites, but it is liable to the cooptation and emasculation of its conquests. It has difficulty as well in maintaining high levels of mobilization, because of the disjunction between the pace of the collectivization of claims and protests, on the one hand, and the judicial or legislative pace, on the other. Direct action tends to be better at exploring the inefficiencies of the power system and the fragilities of its social legitimization, but has difficulty formulating credible alternatives and is liable to repression. If excessive, repression may actually compromise mobilization and even organization. While institutional action tends to call for association with the political parties, whenever they exist, direct action tends to be hostile to such associations.

Civil disobedience (whether individual or collective) is a form of non-violent direct action with a long history (Thoreau, Tolstoy, Gandhi, Einstein, Bertrand Russell, Martin Luther King, etc.). It is being widely discussed again in the wake of the WSF.⁹ One of the movements with some presence in Europe is the *tute bianche*, which after 2001 came to be designated as the Movement of the Disobedient (*Disubbedienti*). The ‘new’ civil disobedience combines various traditions of direct action: anarchism, grassroots Christianity, communitarianism, the Paris Commune and utopian socialism. But it also exemplifies some new features, such as its performativity, recourse to the media, and manipulation of symbols. Civil disobedience has stirred up a lively debate, deriving mainly from two factors, which I consider very productive. On the one hand, the transition from revolution to rebellion, mentioned in Chapter 3, meant the substitution of the idea of partial ruptures, exactly those derived from actions of civil disobedience, for the idea of total rupture with the existing society.¹⁰ On the other, the movements and organizations that participate in the WSF act in countries with different political regimes and cultures, differences that decisively condition the debates on the legitimacy, opportunity and efficacy of civil disobedience. For example, one of the debates concerns whether in liberal democratic societies, where legal resistance is allowed, collective civil disobedience is legitimate. Such a debate has led to another concerning the quality and limits of democracy. On the one hand, there are political regimes that are formally democratic but have so many limitations to the expression and organization of the opposition that, in practice, the democratic conflict and lawful resistance are banned. Such are the low-intensity democracies to which I allude in Chapter 3. On the other, even in more credible democracies, under the excuse of the fight against terrorism some legislation has been promulgated restricting the fundamental

liberties to such an extent that some scholars speak of the emergence of a new state of exception.¹¹ In this framework, the possibilities of legal resistance become more and more limited, which in turn leads to a reassessment of the role and legitimacy of illegal resistance.

The possibility of depolarization in terms of the option for either the legality or the illegality of the actions of resistance, when the world, in all its political and cultural diversity (including different conceptions of legality and violence), is taken as the unit of analysis, is once again grounded in the wealth of the leftist struggles of the past thirty years. This wealth is today condensed most eloquently in the WSF. The Charter of Principles contains, however, an important limitation: it excludes movements and organizations that advocate armed struggle as a form of political action. Violent direct action against people is, therefore, excluded. As I say in Chapters 4 and 5, the WSF brings together movements and organizations with very distinct experiences in this regard. If many privilege institutional actions, as many privilege direct actions. But what is most significant, in terms of depolarizing potential, is the experience of many movements and organizations which, in different struggles or different moments of the same struggle, resort to both kinds of action. Again, a good example is the MST: direct action against property (land occupation) and institutional action (legalization of the *assentamentos* and financial participation of the state in their government). Even though it is not physically present in the WSF, the EZLN opened up a horizon of convergent possibilities in this regard and exerts nowadays a strong influence, even if not too well known, in the movements, especially in Latin America. In the struggles of the EZLN there are clearly moments of violent direct action (the uprising of 1994), non-violent direct action (the march from Chiapas to Mexico City in 2001), institutional action (the Santo Andrés Accords, lobbying in the Mexican congress), and parallel institutional action (*caracoles*, *juntas de buen gobierno*). Once conditions for systematic evaluation are created, this vast experience will yield every condition to give credibility to the formation of depolarized pluralities.

STRUGGLES FOR EQUALITY AND STRUGGLES FOR RESPECT OF DIFFERENCE. The issue concerning the relative priority of the struggles for equality and struggles for respect of difference has been part of leftist struggles since the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. It started with the first wave of feminism and gained a new impetus in the 1950s and 1960s with the civil rights movement of African-Americans in the USA. But it could be said that

up to the 1970s and 1980s it was a marginal issue in leftist debates. Since then, however, it has acquired some centrality, mainly because of the impact of the new feminist, indigenous and LGBT movements, as well as the movements of Afro-descendants in the Americas and Europe. Organized on the basis of discriminated identities, these movements came to contest the conception of equality that presided over the social struggles of the previous periods, a conception focused on class (workers and peasants), based on the economy and hostile to the recognition of politically significant differences among the working classes. Identity movements, without contesting the importance of class inequalities, argue for the political importance of inequalities based on race, ethnicity, sex and sexual orientation. According to them, the principle of equality tends to homogenize differences and thus to conceal the hierarchies established in their midst. Such hierarchies are translated into discriminations that irreversibly affect the opportunities for personal and social fulfilment of the discriminated. On the basis of the principle of equality alone, they achieve no more than a subordinate, decharacterizing social inclusion. To avoid this, alongside equality the acknowledgement of difference must be considered a principle of social emancipation as well.

Linking the principles of equality and recognition of difference is no easy task. But also in this regard the diversity of the social struggles for the past thirty years makes possible the formation of depolarized pluralities. There are, to be sure, extreme positions that reject the validity of one of the principles or, recognizing the validity of both, give total priority in the abstract to one or the other. The majority of the movements, however, try to find concrete forms of linkage between the two principles, even if giving priority to one of them. This is quite apparent in the labour movement, certainly founded on the principle of equality, but increasingly sensitive to the recognition of the importance of ethnic and sexual discriminations and favourable to associations with identity movements in concrete struggles. It is likewise apparent in the identity movements, particularly in the feminist movement, in view of the increasing acknowledgement and politicization of class difference inside the movement.

In this domain, as well, the conditions are created for the formation of depolarized pluralities. Once again, the WSF offers a wide space where opportunities may be generated to construct associations and coalitions among movements with different conceptions of social emancipation. Inter-knowledge is a necessary condition of mutual recognition. Progress in this regard is allowing for the discussion concerning the two

principles of emancipation not to occur in the abstract and between radical positions; rather it should occur between concrete options in the configuration of concrete struggles capable of engaging the movements without forcing on them fundamental changes in their basic cultural, philosophical or political conceptions.

Notes

- 1 In English, Free Trade Area of the Americas – FTAA.
- 2 '*Somos mujeres y hombres, niños y ancianos bastante comunes, es decir, rebeldes, inconformes, incómodos, soñadores*' (Sub-comandante Marcos, La Jornada, 4 August 1999).
- 3 'We are all communists,' proclaimed Michael Hardt in his intervention in the 2005 WSF.
- 4 Referring to the Zapatistas, Ana Esther Ceceña speaks precisely of a 'new libertarian epistemology' (2004: 11). Similarly, in Chapter 2, I speak of the emergence of 'an epistemology of the South'.
- 5 Wainright (2003: 196–200) calls our attention to recent experiences of mutually enriching relations between parties and movements and to the emergence of new hybrid movement/party organizations. On this issue and, in general, on the challenges facing the left as we enter the twenty-first century, see Harnecker (2006: 289ff); Rodríguez-Garavito et al. (2004).
- 6 See Adler (1922); and Bauer (1924). In general, on the contributions of the Austro-Marxists, see Bottomore and Goode (1978).
- 7 The topic of violence was absent from leftist debates in the developed capitalist world during the second half of the twentieth century. It returned in the first decade of the twenty-first as a result of the brutal attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City on 11 September 2001, and the reactions thereby emerging. The concept, kinds, degrees, legitimacy, efficacy and opportunity of violence are now discussed. When there is mention of the violence of the movements' direct action, what is usually meant is a restrictive concept of violence: physical violence. Whereas the violence against which the movements fight may be physical, symbolic, structural, psychological, etc. Recourse to violence in a given direct action may derive from the original plan of action or emerge as a response to the state's violent repression by means of police or military forces.
- 8 In revolutionary or pre-revolutionary contexts, the forms of parallel or dual power assume specific characteristics. This was the case in Russia between February and October 1917, when the provisional government and the Soviets existed side by side (Lenin 1978: 17ff; Trotsky 1950: 251ff). The cases of Germany (Broué 1971: 161ff), Spain (Broué and Témime 1961: 103ff), Latin America (Mercado 1974), and Portugal (Santos 1990: 29ff) have also been analysed. The current most salient case is Venezuela, where the government of Hugo Chavez, faced with the inertia or blockage of public administration, created the *misiones* to make basic public services (subsidized education, health and food) available to the working classes.
- 9 A good summary of the debate can be found in Buey (2005: 211–64).

10 This does not mean that the movements that resort to civil disobedience accept the global legitimacy of the established order. It just means that resistance against the established order is not conceived of as global, illegal resistance.

11 On this subject, see Agamben (2004).