

BOAVENTURA DE SOUSA SANTOS

# **The rise of the global left**

The World Social Forum and beyond



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## Contents

Tables and figures | viii Preface | ix

Introduction: forty years of solitude and the novelty of the World Social Forum . . . . . 1

1 The World Social Forum as critical utopia . . . . . 10

2 The World Social Forum as epistemology of the South . . . 13

The World Social Forum and the sociology of absences | 15

The World Social Forum and the sociology of emergences | 29

3 The World Social Forum as an insurgent cosmopolitan politics . . . . . 35

The struggles for global social justice must be based on a very broad conception of power and oppression | 36 Counter-hegemonic globalization is built upon the equivalence between the principles of equality and recognition of difference | 37 Rebellion and non-conformity must be privileged to the detriment of the old strategic options (reform or revolution) | 38 The WSF aims at a new internationalism | 38 The WSF process progresses as transversal political terrains of resistance and alternative are identified as an ongoing process | 39 The struggle for radical democracy must be a struggle for demo-diversity | 40 Transcultural criteria must be developed to identify different forms of democracy and to establish hierarchies among them according to the collective quality of life they provide | 40 The WSF process must be conceived as promoting and strengthening counter-hegemonic forms of high-intensity democracy that are already emerging | 41 There is no democracy without conditions of democracy | 43 There is no global social justice without global cognitive justice | 44 The many names for another possible world – social emancipation, socialism, dignity, etc. – are in the end the name of democracy without end | 45

<b>4</b>	<b>Organizing fragmented counter-hegemonic energies . . .</b>	<b>46</b>
	Internal democracy: relations between the Organizing Committee and the International Council   48	
	Transparency and hierarchies in participation   51	
	Parties and movements   55	
	Size and continuity   57	
	The new organizational challenges: the evaluation of the 2003 WSF   58	
	The new organizational models: the Mumbai demonstration and the 2005 WSF   72	
	The 2006 polycentric WSF   80	
<b>5</b>	<b>Representing this world as it fights for another possible world . . . . .</b>	<b>85</b>
	Whom does the WSF represent?   85	
	Who represents the WSF? Composition and functionality of the International Council   100	
<b>6</b>	<b>Making and unmaking cleavages: strategy and political action. . . . .</b>	<b>110</b>
	Reform or revolution   111	
	Socialism or social emancipation   113	
	The state as enemy or potential ally   114	
	National or global struggles   115	
	Direct or institutional action   117	
	The principle of equality or the principle of respect for difference   119	
	The WSF as a space or as a movement   120	
<b>7</b>	<b>The future of the World Social Forum: self-democracy and the work of translation . . . . .</b>	<b>127</b>
	Self-democracy   129	
	The work of translation   131	
<b>8</b>	<b>The World Social Forum and self-learning: the Popular University of the Social Movements . . . . .</b>	<b>148</b>
	A proposal for collective transformative self-learning: the Popular University of the Social Movements   149	
	The PUSM, 2003-06   154	
<b>9</b>	<b>The left after the World Social Forum . . . . .</b>	<b>160</b>
	The phantasmal relation between theory and practice   160	
	The twenty-first-century left: depolarized pluralities   166	
	Conclusion . . . . .	<b>182</b>
	<b>Annexes</b>	
	<b>I Composition of the International Council of the WSF (2005)   188</b>	

<b>II</b>	<b>Comparison between the Charter of Principles, the WSF India policy statement and the Charter of Principles and Values of the African Social Forum   196</b>
<b>III</b>	<b>Manifesto of Porto Alegre   205</b>
<b>IV</b>	<b>Organizations and institutions that have provided financial support to the World Social Forums   208</b>
	<b>Bibliography   210</b>
	<b>Index   216</b>

## Tables and figures

### Tables

4.1	Composition of the WSF Organizing Committee	47
4.2	Members of panels by sex	64
4.3	Members of panels by region	64
5.1	The WSF in numbers	85
5.2	Headquarters of the movements/organizations represented on the IC	104
5.3	IC organizations operating predominantly at the national level	105
5.4	IC NGOs/movements operating at the regional level	105
5.5	The IC by main thematic areas of intervention (2005)	106

### Figures

5.1	Meanings of globalization	92
5.2	Means towards another possible world	93

## Preface

In the course of the last thirty years, conservative thought believed it had gained immortality. In the political and social domain, a certain kind of thought gains the appearance of immortality when it pronounces its rival thoughts dead, and makes this credible for large sectors of the population. The end of history, the death of the state, the end of the left/right cleavage, the obsolescence of revolution and the Third World are some of the obituaries that have allowed conservative thought to flag its immortality. The truth is that, as the Greek philosopher Epicharmus once admonished us, 'mortals should have mortal, not immortal thoughts'. That is perhaps the reason why the last decade has witnessed a kind of revenge of the dead thoughts. Resurging under new forms, many of these thoughts led to the conclusion that several of the deaths had been pronounced prematurely. One of them was the left/right cleavage. As neo-liberal globalization – the avant-garde of conservative thinking – was being confronted all over the world with movements of resistance credible enough to configure the emergence of an alternative, counter-hegemonic globalization, it became clear that the left/right cleavage was emerging in new ways. So new were they that it could actually be said that the cleavage was being reinvented. The emergence seems obvious today, and the major features of the reinvention are as follows: its global scale, comprising local and national struggles; its huge political and cultural diversity, and the celebration of such diversity; a new concept of politicization, not grounded in the polarization of differences, as before, but rather in the depolarization of differences; its call for high-intensity forms of democracy, both in society and the state, and inside movements and organizations. The World Social Forum (WSF), whose first meeting took place in Porto Alegre (Brazil) in January 2001, is today one of the most eloquent manifestations of the emergence of counter-hegemonic globalization, hence of the reinvention of the left/right cleavage.

The aim of this book is twofold. First, I want to make the WSF better known and highlight its newness in the context of the struggles for social emancipation of the last two hundred years, particularly in the last forty years. Second, I want to highlight the role of the WSF in the

renewal or even reinvention of left thinking and practice and in the construction of an emerging global left politics at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The WSF is one of the pillars of the global movement, which, for the last few decades, has been questioning neo-liberal globalization, the apparent expression of the historical triumph of capitalism. By questioning the historical destiny that neo-liberal globalization claimed to symbolize, the movement of protest and formulation of alternatives presented itself from the start as an alternative, counter-hegemonic kind of globalization. This counter-hegemonic globalization is based on the links between local, national and global struggles, conducted by social movements and non-governmental organizations united by the belief that another world is possible. This idea contains in a nutshell the aspiration of a set of highly diversified subsidiary social groups worldwide that pursue a socially, politically and culturally more just society, a society liberated from the forms of exclusion, exploration, oppression, discrimination and environmental destruction that by and large characterize capitalism and which neo-liberal globalization has helped to aggravate. After 2001, the WSF became the organization that most eloquently articulated the emergent counter-hegemonic globalization.

Neo-liberal globalization is not a completely new phenomenon, since historical capitalism was global from the start and, before it, there were many other non-Western (Persian, Chinese and Indian) globalizations. But it does pose new problems as regards strategies of resistance and the formulation of alternatives, not only because those that in the past guided the anti-capitalist struggles failed, but also because, for the first time in modern Western history, capitalism presents itself as a global civilizational model, which submits practically all aspects of social life to the law of value. To confront this model in all its dimensions is a new challenge, not only in organizational and agency terms, but also in terms of scale and types of collective action and political strategy, and even in terms of the forms and processes of knowledge that must guide emancipatory practices. The WSF is the expression of the novelty of this challenge, of its demands as well as of its dimensions.

In the Introduction, I present a brief history of left politics in the last forty years, thereby setting the context within which I will analyse the WSF in all its political and organizational novelty. In Chapter 1, I situate the WSF in the tradition of modern utopian thinking and characterize it as a critical utopia of a new type. In Chapter 2, I argue

that the diversity of knowledges (political and otherwise) that circulate in the WSF announces the emergence of a new epistemology or set of epistemologies that is very distinct from the epistemology that prevailed both in capitalist and in socialist societies throughout the twentieth century. I call this epistemology an epistemology of the South, and analyse its main traits. Chapter 3 is dedicated to identifying in very broad strokes the political orientations that direct the WSF process. I call the set of these orientations a new insurgent cosmopolitan politics. In Chapter 4, I analyse the organizational make-up of the WSF and how it has evolved since the first event in 2001. My main argument in this chapter is that the WSF has proved to have an enormous capacity to reform and to transform itself. In Chapter 5, I focus on the issues of political representation within the framework of the WSF, pondering both the question of who represents the WSF and that of whom the WSF itself represents. Through these questions, both the issue of the real globalness of the WSF and that of its internal and external legitimacy are raised and discussed. In Chapter 6, I identify the main political cleavages inside the WSF process and show how and why such cleavages have not put at risk the main global consensus that keeps the WSF going. In Chapter 7, I analyse the two questions that in my view will decide the future of the WSF as a novelty in the tradition of modern left politics and left thinking: self-democracy and the work of inter-cultural and transpolitical translation. They constitute the alternative to the quest for a supposedly general theory that has led us nowhere except to authoritarianism, factionalism and, in the end, historical defeat. In conjunction with the epistemological challenges discussed in Chapter 2, I analyse in Chapter 8 a proposal presented by myself at the WSF of 2003 concerning the creation of a Popular University of the Social Movements. Finally, in Chapter 9, I reflect upon the impact of the WSF on the future of the politics and thinking of the global left. In my conclusion, I return, from another perspective and in a brief reference, to the questions that will most decisively condition the future of the WSF.

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**Preface**

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