BOAVENTURA DE SOUSA SANTOS

The rise of the global left
The World Social Forum and beyond

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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 global-
ization.

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 prac-
tically 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, ponder-
ing 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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