
THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM : TOWARD A COUNTER-HEGEMONIC GLOBALISATION (PART II)

boaventura de sousa santos

From Realistic Utopias to Alternatives

The WSF symbolises a critical and democratic utopia. This utopia manifests itself as an imbalance between negative expectations (what is rejected) and positive expectations (what is proposed as alternative). The success of the first WSF and the increasing counter-hegemonic globalisation up until September 11, convinced movements and NGOs in charge of the organisation of the WSF, that the movement of movements might be entering a new phase, a politically more consistent one, which would require a higher level of concretisation of alternatives. Once the idea of an *alternative globalisation* to hegemonic globalisation was consolidated, the political strength of the movement of movements would depend on its capacity to formulate credible proposals for the political agendas of nations and multilateral organisations alike.

By the middle of 2001, the WSF's organising committee (OC) was spreading among movements and organisations and the co-ordinators of the four major themes, the recommendation that interventions and debates were to focus on formulating concrete proposals. The *mot d'ordre* was, "We must advance more proposals". Besides formulating more proposals, some participants also engaged in the formulation of general objectives or principles that identified the need for alternatives and justified them ethically. Vandana Shiva, for example, argued for what she termed "the living democracy movement" as an alternative to globalisation in and of itself. For Shiva, by keeping the commitment to democracy alive at all levels of everyday life, we will both create and sustain an alternative world.

Theses were also formulated that had a higher level of concretisation, but which lacked the format as well as the substantive and procedural concreteness that might push them on to a political agenda. I myself presented fifteen theses for deepening democracy, and François Houtart proposed thinking of alternatives on three levels :

1) in terms of “re-building utopias”, not in the sense of impossible things but rather in the sense of mobilising objectives, 2) defining medium-term alternatives, eg. those goals that will take time to achieve because they involve lengthy struggles with the purpose of resisting the capitalist system itself; and 3) defining short-term alternatives, or those goals that are feasible in the foreseeable future and can serve as mobilisers, even though the objectives are partial.

Hundreds of more focussed proposals have been submitted and discussed in the workshops put together at the initiative of the movements and organisations present at the 2002 WSF. Among those focussing on economic and institutional changes were, for instance, the following : a) a proposal by Focus on the Global South for a ‘Pluralistic System of Global Economic Governance’ that would reduce the power of TNC-driven multilateral institutions, while strengthening some others or creating new ones intended to devolve control of the economy to national or local levels, b) a proposal by ATTAC (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens) for restoring control of financial capital to nation-states through national and international fiscal measures, such as the Tobin Tax, c) a proposal by CorpWatch for greater corporate responsibility and accountability, d) a proposal by the Committee for Cancellation of Third World Debt as an alternative to neoliberal adjustment programmes in the South, including endogenous development models and different trading practices, e) a proposal by the Institute for Research and Application of Methods of Development (IRAM) for agrarian reform and land policy based on a new social definition of land rights in terms of use, not ownership, and a new structure of programmes and incentives, f) A series of proposals concerning water, food sovereignty, knowledges and patents, and health under Thematic Area II — ‘Access to Wealth and Sustainability’, for instance, against the privatisation of water and for mechanisms of control based on coalitions of civil society, sustainable water management through territorial control of water sources, international water agreements and so forth and g) The fight against dams, which contemplates a moratorium on new dams until all economic, social, cultural and environmental impacts they have caused are resolved, the promotion of new energy models, and so forth. Besides proposals of global scope, others of regional scope have also been presented. One of the more consensual ones among Latin American social movements is to subject Free Trade Zone of the Americas (ALCA) to a referendum in each one of the Latin American countries.

The great majority of the proposals have their origins in the articulations among movements concerned with the same thematic area. In this way, contrary to what the corporate media reports, the WSF has been ‘a machine of proposals’. The design, complexity, and technical detail of many of them are of higher quality than many of those presented by the institutions of neoliberal globalisation. This entails a long-range challenge because, for these proposals to become part of political agendas, national and transnational political institutions must be changed. And many such institutional changes will occur only on the basis of non-institutional struggles. They will require rebellion, non-violent, but often illegal, direct action.

Self-democracy and the Theory 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 co-exists with the traditions of thought on the Left or, more generally, counter-hegemonic thought, both in its western, southern and eastern versions. The newness of the WSF is consensually attributed to its absence of leaders and hierarchical organisation, 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 after the neoliberal backlash at the beginning of the eighties. 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 organisations that comprise the WSF and the metamorphoses of neoliberal globalisation. 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 enlarge and deepen its counter-hegemonic efficaciousness.

The 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 ameliorate the ills of exclusion and discrimination. In this evaluation, the WSF is assessed according to criteria that prevailed in progressive struggles up until the eighties. Such criteria do not concern strategies and tactics alone; they also concern the time frames and geopolitical units that are the reference 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 revolutionise the State. The geopolitical unit is the national society, the boundary within which the most decisive progressive struggles of the last 200 years have occurred.

It seems obvious that the positivist epistemology underlying this evaluation is completely different from the one I ascribed to the WSF above.¹ 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 be always negative. In other words, the evaluation must be carried out on the basis of the sociology of absences and sociology of emergences. In this case, the geopolitical unit is trans-scale : it combines the local, the national, and the global. Its time is not linear. From the standpoint of linear time,

many of the counter-hegemonic experiences will always be absent or impossible. The temporalities of these experiences are indeed multiple, from the instant time of mass protests to the long-durée time of utopia.

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

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

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 against which the WSF resists are multiple, the processes of radical democratisation 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.

The WSF's initial phase corresponds, as I said, to the three main Forums held in Porto Alegre, together with all the others — local, national, regional, and thematic — also held under the aegis of the WSF. It was a phase of beginnings and consolidation. The organising structure was based on the International Council (IC) and OC. For this phase, the organising structures were, to my mind, the most appropriate. Admittedly, the criteria of representation and participation could have been better tuned up to the diversity of the movements and NGOs. But it should be stressed that the successive editions of the WSF tried to respond to the criticisms advanced. If the response was not always satisfactory, I believe the reason has more to do with administrative incapacity than politically motivated design.

The challenge consists in changing the organising structure according to the demands of the new phase, with a view to deepening the internal democracy of such a structure. Two paths to reach this goal may be identified. One of them consists in transferring the WSF's core from the global event to the national, regional, and thematic Forums. The point here is that at these more circumscribed levels, the issues of representation and participatory democracy are easier to solve. The WSF, as a global event, will continue to affirm the globality of counter-hegemonic globalisation, but it will lose some of its centrality. The OC will continue to have a decisive role, but a role that will tend to be increasingly more executive while the IC will continue to be charged with defining broad thematic options and the organising structure. The democratising effort must therefore focus on the IC, urging it to go on reflecting on the multiple diversity that congregates in the WSF. This path, which seems to be close to what some members of the IC have been proposing, assumes its continuity with the previous phase.

This path does not claim to solve the issue of participatory democracy. That is to say, however representative and democratic the leading and organising structures of the Forums may be, the issue of the participation of the rank-and-file will be always there. Information and communication technologies today offer new possibilities to resort to voting and carrying out referendums during the Forums. If it is true in general that cyberdemocracy has an individualistic bias in reducing the citizen's political capacity to handling the terminal, it is no less true that such a bias is neutralised by the meetings of the Forum where inter-communication is so intense, precisely among the rank-and-file.

The second, far more structured path, aims to increase the WSF's internal democracy constructing it from bottom up. On the basis of the smaller Forums or Forums of narrower scope such as local or city Forums, representative structures are created at different levels in such a way that the structures at higher ranks are elected by the immediately lower ranks. The result envisaged is a pyramidal organisation having at the tip, the WSF turned into a Forum of delegates. The most recent and complete version of this path is the one proposed by Michael Albert, of ZNet (in this volume). Besides recommending the pyramidal construction of the WSF's democracy, Albert's proposal includes measures to correct structural deficiencies of representation, derived for example, from sexual and North / South inequality and difference.

This proposal poses a radical break with the organisational model adopted up until now. Although there is a widespread feeling that the present model is exhausted, one suspects that such a radical break may stir up the fear that one might be throwing away the baby with the bath water. Needless to say, any proposal, especially one so radical, must be debated and ultimately voted. 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, on each democratisation landing, consolidates its force and gathers energy to venture on to an upper landing.

The Theory 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 thereof. In the long run, the evaluation of the WSF will depend on its capacity to transform the immense energy that is congregated in itself into new forms of counter-hegemonic agency — more efficacious forms that combines the strength of different social movements and NGOs.

The political theory of modernity, whether in its liberal or Marxist version, constructed the unity of action from the agent's unity. According to it, the coherence and meaning of social change was 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 cannibalised by false universalisms or false single strategies propounded by any general theory. 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. I cannot pursue this point here. I shall concentrate rather on what derives from it : 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.

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 or given expression to the aspiration of aggregation and articulation of different social movements and NGOs, an aspiration that had been only latent up until then. 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 specialise in certain kinds of practice and discourse that distinguish them from the others. Thus is constituted the identity that separates each movement from all the others. The feminist movement distinguishes itself from the labour movement, both distinguish themselves from the indigenous movement or the ecological movement, and so forth. All these distinctions have actually translated themselves into very practical differences, if not even into contradictions that contribute to bringing the movements apart and

create rivalries and factionalisms. Hence derives the fragmentation and atomisation that are the dark side of diversity and multiplicity.

Movements and NGOs have only lately acknowledged this dark side. The truth is, however, that none of them individually has had the capacity or credibility to confront it. Hence the extraordinary step taken by the WSF. It must be admitted however that the aggregation and articulation made possible by the WSF is low intensity. The goals are limited and circumscribe themselves to recognising differences and wishing for exchange in order to make the differences more explicit and better known. Under these circumstances, joint action cannot but be limited. A good example was the European Social Forum. The differences, rivalries, and factionalisms that divide the various movements and NGOs that organised 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 organise 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 organise the Forum and a Peace March.

The challenge that counter-hegemonic globalisation faces now may be formulated in the following way — the aggregation and articulation made possible by the WSF were enough to achieve the goals of the phase that has now reached its end. However, deepening the WSF's goals 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 idea is to promote counter-hegemonic practices and knowledges that have the collaboration of ecological, pacifist, indigenous, feminist, workers' and other movements, and if the idea is to go about this horizontally 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 enlarge reciprocal intelligibility without destroying the identity of what is translated. 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 make manifest 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 factor of sharing and solidarity.

To describe fully the procedures of the translation work is beyond the limits of this paper. Elsewhere I have proposed translations between the concept of human rights and the Hindu and Islamic concepts of human dignity;² between western strategies of development and Gandhi's *swadeshi*; between western philosophy and African oral sagesse;

between 'modern' democracy and traditional authorities; between the indigenous movement and the ecological movement; between the workers' movement and the feminist movement.³ To be successful, the work of translation depends on demanding conditions. Nonetheless, the effort must be taken up. On it depends the future of counter-hegemonic globalisation.

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NOTES

¹ See, in this volume, the chapter on 'The World Social Forum : Toward a Counter-hegemonic Globalisation (Part I)'. |

² Santos 1995, p 337-346.

³ Santos 1995, 2002a, 2002b.