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The World Social Forum and the Global Left

Introduction

Enough has been said about the crisis of the left, and part of what has been said has worked as self-fulfilling prophecy. The mortal fatigue of history is the mortal fatigue of the women and men that make history in their daily lives. On the other hand, when the habit of thinking that history is with us is put in question, we are inclined to think that history is irremediably against us. History does not know any better than we do where it is headed, nor does it use women and men to fulfil its ends. Which is to say that we cannot trust history more than we can trust ourselves. To be sure, trusting ourselves is not a subjective act, decontextualized from the world. For the past few decades, the political and cultural hegemony of neoliberalism gave rise to a conception of the world that shows it as being either too well made to allow for the introduction of any consequent novelty, or too fragmentary to allow for whatever we do to have consequences capable of making up for the risks taken in trying to change the *status quo*.

The last thirty or forty years of the last century may be considered years of degenerative crisis of the global left thinking and practice (Santos, 2006a). To be sure, there were crises before, but not only were they not global — restricted as they were to the Eurocentric world, what nowadays we call the Global North, and compensated for, from the 1950s on, by the successful struggles for the liberation of the colonies; they were mainly experienced as casualties in a history whose trajectory and rationality suggested that the victory of the left (revolution, socialism, communism) was certain. This is how the division of the workers' movement at the beginning of World War I was experienced, as well

as the defeat of the German revolution (1918-1923), and then nazism, fascism, *franquismo* (1939-1975) and *salazarismo* (1926-1974), the Moscow processes (1936-1938), the civil war in Greece (1944-1949), and even the invasion of Hungary (1956). This kind of crisis is well characterized in the works of Trotsky in exile. Trotsky was very early on aware of the seriousness of Stalin's deviations from the revolution, to the point of refusing to protagonize an opposition, as proposed to him by Zinoviev and Kamenev in 1926. But he never for one moment doubted that history went along with the revolution just as the true revolutionaries went along with history. The author that, to my mind, most brilliantly portrays the increasingly Sisyphean effort to safeguard the historical meaning of the revolution before the morasses of the Moscow processes is Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Humanisme et terreur* (1947).

The crises of left thinking and practice of the last thirty or forty years are of a different kind. On the one hand, they are global, even though they occur in different countries for specific reasons: the assassination of Lumumba (1961); the failure of the Che in Bolivia and his assassination (1966); the May 1968 student movement in Europe and the Americas and its neutralization; the invasion of Czechoslovakia (1968); the response of American imperialism to the Cuban revolution; the assassination of Allende (1973) and the military dictatorships in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s; Suharto's brutal repression of the left in Indonesia (1965-1967); the degradation or liquidation of the nationalist, developmentist, and socialist regimes of sub-Saharan Africa that came out of the independences (1980s); the emergence of a new/old militant and expansionist right, with Ronald Reagan in the US and Margaret Thatcher in UK (1980s); the globalization of the most anti-social form of capitalism, neoliberalism, imposed by the Washington Consensus (1989); the plot against Nicaragua (1980s); the crisis of the Congress Party India and the rise of political Hinduism (communalism) (1990s); the collapse of the regimes of central and eastern Europe, symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989); the conversion of Chinese communism into the most savage kind of capitalism, market Stalinism (starting with Deng Xiaoping in early 1980s); and finally, in the 1990s, the parallel rise of political Islam and political Christianism, both fundamentalist and confrontational.

Furthermore, the crisis of left thinking and practice of the last thirty or forty years appears to be degenerative: the failures seem to be the result of history's mortal exhaustion, whether because history no longer has meaning or rationality, or because the meaning and rationality of history finally opted for the permanent consolidation of capitalism, the latter turned into the literal translation of immutable human nature. Revolution, socialism, communism, and even reformism seem to be hidden away in the top drawers of history's closet, where only collectors of misfortunes reach. The world is well made, the neoliberal argument goes; the future finally has arrived in the present to stay. This agreement on ends is the uncontested fund of liberalism, on whose basis it is possible to respect the diversity of opinions about means. Since means are political only when they are at the service of different ends, the differences concerning social change are now technical or juridical and, therefore, can and must be discussed regardless of the cleavage between left and right.

In the mid-1990s, however, the story of this hegemony started to change. The other side of this hegemony were the hegemonic practices that for the past decades have intensified exclusion, oppression, destruction of the means of subsistence and sustainability of large populations of the world, leading them to extreme situations where inaction or conformism would mean death. Such situations convert the contingency of history in the necessity to change it. These are the moments in which the victims don't just cry, they fight back. The actions of resistance into which these situations were translated, together with the revolution in information and communication technologies that took place meanwhile, permitted to make alliances in distant places of the world and articulate struggles through local/global linkages.

The 1994 Zapatista uprising is an important moment of this construction, precisely because it targets a tool of neoliberal globalization, the North American Free Trade Agreement, and because it aims to articulate different scales of struggle, from local to national to global, from the Chiapas mountains to Mexico City to the solidary world, resorting to new discursive and political strategies, and to the new information and communication technologies available. In November 1999, the protesters in Seattle managed to paralyze the World Trade Organization (WTO) ministerial meeting, and later many other meetings of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), WTO, and G-8

were affected by the protests of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and social movements intent on denouncing the hypocrisy and destructiveness of the new world dis-order. In January 2001, the World Social Forum (WSF) met for the first time in Porto Alegre (Brazil), and many other meetings followed: global, regional, thematic, national, subnational, local forums.

Thus an alternative globalization was gradually constructed, alternative to neoliberal globalization, a counter-hegemonic globalization, a globalization from below. The WSF may be said to represent today, in organizational terms, the most consistent manifestation of counter-hegemonic globalization. As such, the WSF provides the most favourable context to inquire to what extent a new left is emerging through these initiatives — a truly global left, with the capacity to overcome the degenerative crisis that has been beleaguering the left for the past forty years.

The WSF is the set of initiatives of transnational exchange among social movements, NGOs and their practices and knowledges of local, national or global social struggles carried out in compliance with the Porto Alegre Charter of Principles against the forms of exclusion and inclusion, discrimination and equality, universalism and particularism, cultural imposition and relativism, brought about or made possible by the current phase of capitalism known as neoliberal globalization.

The WSF is a new social and political phenomenon. The fact that it does have antecedents does not diminish its newness, quite the opposite. The WSF is not an event. Nor is it a mere succession of events, although it does try to dramatize the formal meetings it promotes. It is not a scholarly conference, although the contributions of many scholars converge in it. It is not a party or an international of parties, although militants and activists of many parties all over the world take part in it. It is not an NGO or a confederation of NGOs, even though its conception and organization owes a great deal to NGOs. It is not a social movement, even though it often designates itself as the movement of movements. Although it presents itself as an agent of social change, the WSF rejects the concept of an historical subject and confers no priority on any specific social actor in this process of social change. It holds no clearly defined ideology, either in defining what it rejects or what it asserts. Given that the WSF conceives of itself as a struggle against neoliberal globalization, is it a struggle

against a given form of capitalism or against capitalism in general? Given that it sees itself as a struggle against discrimination, exclusion and oppression, does the success of its struggle presuppose a postcapitalist, socialist, anarchist horizon, or, on the contrary, does it presuppose that no horizon be clearly defined at all? Given that the vast majority of people taking part in the WSF identify themselves as favouring a politics of the left, how many definitions of "the left" fit the WSF? And what about those who refuse to be defined because they believe that the left-right dichotomy is a northcentric or westcentric particularism, and look for alternative political definitions? The social struggles that find expression in the WSF do not adequately fit either of the ways of social change sanctioned by western modernity: reform and revolution. Aside from the consensus on non-violence, its modes of struggle are extremely diverse and appear spread out in a continuum between the poles of institutionality and insurgency. Even the concept of non-violence is open to widely disparate interpretations. Finally, the WSF is not structured according to any of the models of modern political organization, be they democratic centralism, representative democracy, or participatory democracy. Nobody represents it or is allowed to speak in its name, let alone make decisions, even though it sees itself as a forum that facilitates the decisions of the movements and organizations that take part in it.[1]

These features are arguably not new, as some of them, at least, are associated with what is conventionally called "new social movements". The truth is, however, that these movements, be they local, national, or global, are thematic. Themes, while fields of concrete political confrontation, compel definition – hence polarization – whether regarding strategies or tactics, organizational forms or forms of struggle. Themes work, therefore, both as attraction and repulsion. Now, what is new about the WSF is the fact that it is inclusive, both as concerns its scale and its thematics. What is new is the whole it constitutes, not its constitutive parts. The WSF is global in its harbouring local, national and global movements, and in its being inter-thematic and even trans-thematic. That is to say, since the conventional factors of attraction and repulsion do not work as far as the WSF is concerned, either it develops other

[1] For a better understanding of the political character and goals of the World Social Forum, see the Charter of Principles, available at http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br.

strong factors of attraction and repulsion or does without them, and may even derive its strength from their non-existence. In other words, if the WSF is arguably the "movement of movements," it is not one more movement. It is a different kind of movement.

The problem with new social movements is that, in order to do them justice, a new social theory and new analytical concepts are called for. Since neither the one nor the others emerge easily from the inertia of the disciplines, the risk that they may be undertheorized and undervalued is considerable.[2] This risk is all the more serious as the WSF, given its scope and internal diversity, not only challenges dominant political theories and the various disciplines of the conventional social sciences, but challenges as well scientific knowledge as sole producer of social and political rationality. To put it another way, the WSF raises not only analytical and theoretical questions, but also epistemological questions. This much is expressed in the idea, widely shared by WSF participants, that there will be no global social justice without global cognitive justice. But the challenge posed by the WSF has one more dimension still. Beyond the theoretical, analytical and epistemological questions, it raises a new political issue: it aims to fulfil utopia in a world devoid of utopias. This utopian will is expressed in the slogan: "another world is possible." At stake is less a utopian world than a world that allows for utopia.

In this paper, I will start by analysing the reasons for the success of the WSF, contrasting them with the failures of the conventional left in recent decades. I will then try to ask the question of whether this success is sustainable. Finally, I will identify the challenges that the WSF process poses to both critical theory and left political activism.

Strong questions and weak answers

Contrary to Habermas (1990), for whom Western modernity is still an incomplete project, I have been arguing that our time is witnessing the final

[2] One of the most paradigmatic examples is the poverty - conceptual hubris coupled with bloodless narrow positivism - of the mainstream US sociology of social movements (McAdam, McCarthy, Zald, 1996; McAdam, Tarrow, Tilly, 2001).

crisis of the hegemony of the socio-cultural paradigm of Western modernity and that, therefore, it is a time of paradigmatic transition[3]. It is characteristic of a transitional time to be a time of strong questions and weak answers. Strong questions address not only our options of individual and collective life but also and mainly the roots and foundations that have created the horizon of possibilities among which it is possible to choose. They are, therefore, questions that arouse a particular kind of perplexity. Weak answers are the ones that cannot abate this perplexity and may, in fact, increase it. Questions and answers vary according to culture and world region. However, the discrepancy between the strength of the questions and the weakness of the answers seems to be common. It derives from the current variety of contact zones involving cultures, religions, economies, social and political systems, and different ways of life, as a result of what we ordinarily call globalization. The power asymmetries in these contact zones are as large today, if not larger, as in the colonial period, and they are more numerous and widespread. The contact experience is always an experience of limits and borders. In today's conditions, it is the contact experience that gives rise to the discrepancy between strong questions and weak answers.

In my view, one of the reasons for the success of the WSF lies in the disjuncture between strong questions and weak answers. But before elaborating on this, a conceptual precision is in order. There are two types of weak answers. The first type is what I call the weak-strong answer. Paraphrasing Lucien Goldmann (1966, 1970), such answer represents the maximum of possible consciousness of a given epoch. It transforms the perplexity caused by the strong question into a positive energy and value. Rather than pretending that the perplexity is pointless or that it can be eliminated by a simple answer, it transforms the perplexity into a symptom of underlying complexity. Accordingly, the perplexity becomes the social experience of a new open field of contradictions in which an unfinished and unregulated competition among different possibilities exists. The outcomes of such competition being most uncertain, there is plenty of room for social and political innovation, once perplexity is transformed into a capacity to travel

[3] See Santos, 1995.

without reliable maps. The other type of weak answer is the weak-weak answer. It represents the minimum possible consciousness of a given epoch. It discards and stigmatizes the perplexity as the symptom of a failure to understand that the real coincides with the possible and to value the fact that hegemonic solutions are a "natural" outcome of the survival of the fittest. Perplexity amounts to an irrational refusal to travel according to historically tested maps. But since perplexity derives in the first place from questioning such maps, the weak-weak response is an invitation to immobilism. On the contrary, the weak-strong answer is an invitation to move at high risk.

The success of the WSF lies in that it is a weak-strong answer to two strong questions of our time. I formulate the first one in the following way: if humanity is one alone, why are there so many different principles concerning human dignity and just society, all of them presumably unique, yet often contradictory among themselves? At the root of this question is the verification, today more unequivocal than ever, that the understanding of the world largely exceeds the Western understanding of the world. One of the most widespread of the weak-weak answers to this question is the conventional understanding of human rights. It banalizes the perplexity by postulating the abstract universality of the conception of human dignity that underlies human rights. The fact that such conception is Western based is considered irrelevant, as the historicity of human rights does not interfere with its ontological status. It is equally irrelevant that many social movements fighting against injustice and oppression do not formulate their struggles in human rights terms, and indeed often formulate them in terms that contradict human rights principles. The arrow of time is there to assure us that this is a provisional or transitional deficiency of such movements.

This weak-weak answer has been fully embraced by the conventional left, particularly in the global North. It has therefore blinded itself to new realities taking place in the countries of the Global South. Movements of resistance have been emerging and flourishing, both violent and non-violent, against oppression, marginalization, and exclusion, whose ideological bases have nothing to do with the ones that were the references of the left during the twentieth century (Marxism, socialism, developmentalism, anti-imperialist

nationalism). They are rather grounded on multisecular cultural and historical identities, and/or religious militancy. It is not surprising, therefore, that such struggles cannot be defined according to the cleavage between left and right. What is actually surprising is that the hegemonic left as a whole does not have theoretical and analytical tools to position itself in relation to them, and that it does not think it a priority to do so. It applies the same abstract recipe of human rights across the board, hoping that thereby the nature of alternative ideologies or symbolic universes will be reduced to local specificities with no impact on the universal canon of human rights. Without trying to be exhaustive, I mention three such movements, of very distinct political meanings: the indigenous movements, particularly in Latin America; the "new" rise of traditionalism in Africa; and the Islamic insurgency. In spite of the huge differences among them, these movements have in common the fact that they all start out from cultural and political references that are non-western, even if constituted by the resistance to western domination. The difficulties of political evaluation experienced by the left derive, on the one hand, from the failure to envision a future society as alternative to the capitalist liberal society and, on the other, from the northcentric or eurocentric cultural and epistemological universe that has presided over the left.

In my opinion, the WSF is so far the most convincing weak-strong answer to this question. In spite of its limitations and criticisms coming both from inside and outside, the WSF has credibly established itself as a global open space, a meeting ground for the most diverse movements and organizations, coming from the most disparate locations in the planet, involved in the most diverse struggles, speaking a Babel Tower of languages, anchored in western as well as non-western philosophies and knowledges, sponsoring different conceptions of human dignity, calling for a variety of other worlds that should be possible. The WSF does not answer the question of the why of such diversity, nor the questions of what for, under which conditions, and for the benefit of whom. But it has successfully made such diversity more visible and more acceptable by the movements and organizations; it has made them aware of the incomplete or partial character of their struggles, politics and philosophies; it has created a new need for inter-knowledge, inter-recognition and interaction; it has fostered coalitions among movements up until now separated and mutually suspicious of

one another. In sum, it has transformed diversity into a positive value, a potential source of energy for progressive social transformation.

The success of the WSF resides in that it celebrates a diversity that as yet cannot be fully theorized nor converted into the motor of a globally coherent and locally anchored collective action of progressive social transformation. In a sense, the WSF represents the maximum possible consciousness of our time. Dialectically, its weakness (the non-discrimination among diverse solutions) cannot be separated from its strength (the celebration of diversity as value in itself) and vice-versa. The WSF is as transitional as our time and draws attention to the latent possibilities of such transition. Herein lies its success.

The second strong question for which the WSF provides a weak-strong answer can be formulated in this way: Is there any room for utopia in our world? Is there really an alternative to capitalism? After the historical failure of so many attempts at building a non-capitalist society, with such tragic consequences, shouldn't we look at the most for alternatives inside capitalism rather than for alternatives to capitalism? The perplexity caused by this question lies in three factors. First, on the theory of history that underlies it. If all that exists in history is historical, that is, has a beginning and an end, why should it be different with capitalism? Second, the hegemonic thinking that discredits the search for an alternative to capitalism is the same that promotes a certain type of capitalism, neoliberalism, as the only possible type of capitalism. In other words, it also discredits the idea of alternatives inside capitalism. Third, the perplexity stems from some disturbing facts. Is there no alternative to a world in which the 500 richest individuals have as much income as the poorest 40 countries, meaning 416 million people, and where the ecological catastrophe is an increasingly less remote possibility? Is it to be assumed as an unavoidable fact that the problems caused by capitalism can only be solved by more capitalism, that the economy of unselfishness is not a credible alternative to the economy of selfishness, and that nature does not deserve any other rationality than the irrationality with which capitalism deals with it?

The crisis of left politics of the last thirty or forty years derives in part from the weak-weak answers that the conventional left has given to this question. The conception of an alternative society and the struggle for it have been the

back bones of both critical theory and left politics throughout the twentieth century. Such conception, however vague, was consistent enough to serve as evaluation criterion of the life conditions of the working class, excluded social groups, and victims of discrimination. On the basis of this alternative vision and the credible possibility of fulfilling it, it would be possible to consider the present as violent, intolerable, and morally repugnant. The strength of Marxism resides in this unique capacity to articulate the alternative future with the oppositional way of living the present.

In the last decades, however, neoliberal conservatism became so dominant that the left politics, particularly in the Global North, split into two fields, none of them, paradoxically, on the left. On the one hand, there were those who took the eradication of the idea of an alternative society to be such a devastating defeat that there would be space left only for the old centrism dominated by the "more enlightened" right; on the other, there were those who, in the absence of an alternative, saw a victory capable of encouraging a new centrism, this time dominated by the left (the UK labour party's third way and its developments in Latin America). These two fields responded to the perplexity caused by the question by denying any reason for perplexity. Indeed, as it is becoming more and more evident, these two fields were two ways of announcing the death of the left and, in fact, ended up being not easily distinguishable. They both missed some thing: without a conception of an alternative society and without the politically organized struggle to bring it about, the present, however violent and intolerable, would be depoliticized and, as a consequence, would stop being a source of mobilization for revolt and opposition. This fact has certainly not escaped the right. Bearing it in mind, the right has based its government, since the 1980s, not on the consensus of the victims, but on their resignation.

The WSF, in contrast, offers a weak-strong answer to the question. It takes the perplexity seriously and strongly claims that there are alternatives. But it does not define the content of such alternatives and, according to some of its most radical critics, it does not even respond to the question of whether these are alternatives to capitalism or alternatives inside capitalism. It also claims the legitimacy of utopian thinking but of a different kind than the one dominating at

the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Rather than referring to the conceptions that throughout the twentieth century conveyed the idea of an alternative society—socialism, communism, developmentalism, nationalism—it insists that "another world is possible". In abstract, this seems very little, but in the context it emerges it amounts to a utopia of a new type[4].

The hegemonic conception of our age which, as I said, has been accepted by the conventional left, is that capitalism in the form of neoliberal globalization is both the only present that counts and the only possible future. Whatever is currently dominant in social and political terms is infinitely expansive, thereby encompassing all future possibilities. The total control over the current state of affairs is deemed to be possible by means of extremely efficient powers and knowledges. Herein lies the radical denial of alternatives to present-day reality. This is the context underlying the utopian dimension of the WSF, which consists in asserting the existence of alternatives to neoliberal globalisation.

As Franz Hinkelammert says, we live in a time of conservative utopias whose utopian character resides in its radical denial of alternatives to present-day reality (2002). The possibility of alternatives is discredited precisely for being utopian, idealistic, unrealistic. All conservative utopias are sustained by a political logic based on one sole efficiency criterion that rapidly becomes a supreme ethical criterion. According to this criterion, only what is efficient has value. Any other ethical criterion is devalued as inefficient. Neoliberalism is one such conservative utopia for which the sole criterion of efficiency is the market or the laws of the market. Its utopian character resides in the promise that its total fulfilment or application cancels out all utopias. According to Hinkelammert, "this ideology derives from its frantic anti-utopianism, the utopian promise of a new world. The basic thesis is: whoever destroys utopia, fulfils it" (2002: 278). What distinguishes conservative utopias from critical utopias is the fact that they identify themselves with the present-day reality and discover their utopian dimension in the radicalization or complete fulfilment of the present. Moreover, the problems or difficulties of present-day reality are not the consequence of the deficiencies or limits of the efficiency criteria, but result rather from the fact that

[4] By 'utopia' I mean the exploration of new modes of human possibility and styles of will, and the use of the imagination to confront the apparent inevitability of whatever exists with something radically better that is worth fighting for, and to which humankind is fully entitled (Santos, 1995: 479).

the application of the efficiency criteria has not been thorough enough. If there is unemployment and social exclusion, if there is starvation and death, that is not the consequence of the deficiencies or limits of the laws of the market; it results rather from the fact that such laws have not yet been fully applied. The horizon of conservative utopias is thus a closed horizon, an end to history.

This is the context in which the utopian dimension of the WSF must be understood. The WSF signifies the re-emergence of a critical utopia, that is to say, the radical critique of present-day reality and the aspiration to a better society. This occurs, however, when the anti-utopian utopia of neoliberalism is dominant. The specificity of the utopian content of this new critical utopia, when compared with that of the critical utopias prevailing at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, thus becomes clear. The WSF puts in question the totality of control claimed by neoliberalism (whether as knowledge or power) only to affirm credibly the possibility of alternatives. Hence the open nature of the alternatives. In a context in which the conservative utopia prevails absolutely, it is more important to affirm the possibility of alternatives than to define them. The utopian dimension of the WSF consists in affirming the possibility of a counter-hegemonic globalization. In other words, the utopia of the WSF asserts itself more as negativity (the definition of what it critiques) than as positivity (the definition of that to which it aspires). Herein lies the mix of weakness and strength of its answer to the strong question about the possibility of alternatives.

The specificity of the WSF as critical utopia has one more dimension. The WSF is the first critical utopia of the twenty-first century and aims to break with the tradition of the critical utopias of western modernity, many of which turned into conservative utopias: from claiming utopian alternatives to denying alternatives under the excuse that the fulfilment of utopia was under way. The openness of the utopian dimension of the WSF corresponds to the latter's attempt to escape this perversion. For the WSF, the claim of alternatives is plural, both as to the form of the claim and the content of the alternatives. The affirmation of alternatives goes hand in hand with the affirmation that there are alternatives to the alternatives. The other possible world is a utopian aspiration that comprises several possible worlds. The other possible world may be many things, but never a world with no alternative.

The utopia of the WSF is a radically democratic utopia. It is the only realistic utopia after a century of conservative utopias, some of them the result of perverted critical utopias. This utopian design, grounded on the denial of the present rather than the definition of the future, focused on the processes of intercourse among the movements rather than an assessment of the movements' political content, is the major factor of cohesion of the WSF. It helps to maximize what unites and minimize what divides, celebrate intercourse rather than dispute power, be a strong presence rather than a strong agenda. This utopian design, which is also an ethical design, privileges the ethical discourse, quite evident in the WSF's Charter of Principles, aimed at gathering consensuses beyond the ideological and political cleavages among the movements and organizations that compose it. The movements and organizations put between brackets the cleavages that divide them, as much as is necessary to affirm the possibility of a counter-hegemonic globalization.

The nature of this utopia has been the most adequate for the initial objective of the WSF: to affirm the existence of a counter-hegemonic globalization. This is no vague utopia. It is rather a utopia that contains in itself the concretization that is adequate for this phase of the construction of counter-hegemonic globalization. It remains to be seen if the nature of this utopia is the most adequate one to guide the next steps, should there be any next steps. Is the mix of weakness and strength in the WSF's answer sustainable in the long run? Once the counter-hegemonic globalization is consolidated, and hence the idea that another world is possible is made credible, will it be possible to fulfil this idea with the same level of radical democracy that helped formulate it? This is the question that Walden Bello has recently raised and to which I will turn below.

A sense of urgency and a sense of civilizational changes

Another reason for the success of the WSF is the way it has dealt with the paradoxical character of our time, probably another symptom of its transitional nature

Critical thinking and transformative practice are today torn apart by two extreme and contradictory temporalities disputing the time frame of collective

action. On the one hand, there is a sense of urgency, the idea that it is necessary to act now as tomorrow will probably be too late. Global warming and the imminent ecological catastrophe, the conspicuous preparation of a new nuclear war, the vanishing life sustainability of vast populations, the uncontrolled drive for eternal war and the violence and unjust destruction of human life it causes, the depletion of natural resources, the exponential growth of social inequality giving rise to new forms of social despotism, social regimes only regulated by extreme power differences, all these facts seem to impose that absolute priority be given to immediate or short-run action as the long run may not even exist if the trends expressed in those facts are allowed to evolve without control. Most certainly the pressure of urgency lies in different factors in the global North and in the global South, but seems to be present everywhere.

On the other hand, there is a sense that our time calls for deep and long term civilizational changes. The facts mentioned above are symptoms of deep seated structures and agencies which cannot be confronted by short-run interventionism as the latter is as much part of the civilizational paradigm as the state of affairs it fights. The twentieth century proved with immense cruelty that to take power is not enough, that rather than taking power it is necessary to transform power. The most extreme versions of this temporality even call for the transformation of the world without taking power (Holloway, 2002).

The coexistence of these polar temporalities is producing great turbulence in old time distinctions and cleavages such as between tactics and strategy, or reform and revolution. While the sense of urgency calls for tactics and reform, the sense of civilizational paradigmatic change calls for strategy and revolution. But the fact that both senses coexist and are both pressing disfigures the terms of the distinctions and cleavages and makes them more or less meaningless and irrelevant. At best, they become loose signifiers prone to contradictory appropriations. There are reformist processes that seem revolutionary (Hugo Chavez) and revolutionary processes that seem reformist (Neo-zapatism) and reformist projects without reformist practice (Lula). The fall of the Berlin Wall, while striking a mediatic mortal blow on the idea of revolution, struck a silenced but no less deadly blow on the idea of reform. Since then we live in a time that, on the one hand, turns reformism into counter-reformism which, on the other, is either too late to be post-revolutionary or too premature to be pre-revolutionary.

As a result, political polarizations become relatively unregulated and with meanings which have very little to do with the names attached to them.

In my view, the WSF captures very well this unresolved tension between contradictory temporalities. Not just as an event but also as a process, the WSF has fostered the full expression of both senses (of urgency and of civilizational change) juxtaposing campaigns, coalitions of discourses and practices that focus on immediate action and on long term transformation in the same panels,. Calls for Immediate debt cancellation get articulated with long duration campaigns of popular education concerning HIV/Aids; denunciations of the criminalization of social protest by indigenous peoples before the courts go hand in hand with the struggle for the recognition of the cultural identity and ancestral territories of the same peoples; the struggle for the immediate access to sufficient potable water by the people of Soweto, in the wake of the privatization of water supplies, becomes part and parcel of a long strategy to guarantee sustainable access to water throughout the African Continent, as illustrated in the constitution of the Africa Water Network in Nairobi during the WSF-2007.

These different timeframes of struggle coexist peacefully in the WSF for three main reasons. First, they translate themselves into struggles that share the same radicalism, whether it concerns the maximum obtainable now or the maximum obtainable in the long run. And the means of action may also be equally radical. This constitutes a significant departure from the conventional left throughout the twentieth century. For the latter, the struggle for short-range objectives was framed as legal gradualism and therefore was conceived of as a non-radical, institutional action. Second, mutual knowledge of such diverse temporalities among movements and organizations has led to the idea that the differences among them are much wider in theory than in practice. A radical immediate action may be the best way of giving credibility to the need for a civilizational change, if for no other reason because of the unsurpassable obstacles it is bound to run against, as long as the civilizational paradigm remains the same. This explains why some major movements have been able to combine in their overall strategies the immediate and the civilizational. This is the case of the MST (Movement of the landless rural workers in Brazil) which combines illegal land occupation to feed hungry peasants with massive actions

of popular political education aiming at a much broader transformation of the Brazilian state and society. The final reason for the coexistence of contradictory temporalities is that the WSF does not set priorities between them; it just opens the space for discussions and coalition building among the movements and organizations, the outcomes of which can be the most diverse. An overriding sense of a common purpose, however vaguely defined, to build another possible world tends to deemphasize polarizations among the movements and invite the latter to concentrate on building more intense coalitions with the movements with which they have more affinities. Selectivity in coalition building becomes a way of avoiding unnecessary polarization.

A ghostly relationship between critical theory and leftist practices

The third reason for the success of the WSF lies in the way it deals with the gap between left practices and classical theories of the left, which is broader today than ever. This is probably another feature of the transitional nature of our time. 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 ALCA[5] to the alternative project of regional integration led by Hugo Chavez, we are faced with political practices that are in general recognized as left, but which were not foreseen by the major left theoretical traditions, or even contradict them. As a result, there seems to be emerging a mutual blindness between theory and practice — of the practice vis-à-vis the theory and of the theory vis-à-vis the practice.

The reason for this lies in the fact that while critical thinking and left theory was historically developed in the global North, indeed in five or six countries of the global North, the most innovative and effective transformative left practices of recent decades have been occurring in the global South. One might argue that this is not a completely new phenomenon as the anti-colonial struggles and the movement of the non-aligned countries, founded in Bandung in 1955, also

[5] In English, Free Trade Area of the Americas - FTAA.

contributed important new concepts and ideas to the hegemonic north-centric left script. This is true to a certain extent. But contrary to what happened then, the new left practices not only occur in unfamiliar places carried out by strange people, but they also speak very strange non-colonial languages (aymara, quechua, guarani, indi, urdu, Arabic, ki-Zulu, ki-kongo) or less hegemonic colonial languages (such as Spanish and Portuguese) and their cultural and political references are non-western. Moreover, when we translate their discourses into a colonial language there is often no trace of the familiar concepts with which western-based left politics was historically built, such as revolution, socialism, working class, capital, democracy or human rights, etc. Instead, we encounter land, water, territory, racism, dignity, respect, cultural and sexual oppression, pachamama, umbuntu, control of natural resources, poverty and starvation, pandemics, such as HIV/Aids, cultural identity, violence. The left thinking generated in the global North gets provincialized by the emergence of critical understandings and practices of the world that do not fit the western critical understandings and practices of the world. It is therefore not surprising that the North-centric left thinking does not recognize as belonging to the left some of the critical understandings and practices emerging in the global South and that the latter often refuses to include its experiences in the binary left/right, a North-centric binary, according to some of them.

The wild effects of the mirror games between blind theories and invisible practices were brought to its climax in the WSF. The WSF, which is the first internationalist gathering of the twenty-first century, originated in the global South according to cultural and political premises that defied all the hegemonic traditions of the left. Its novelty, which was strengthened as the WSF moved from Porto Alegre to Mumbai and later to Nairobi, lies in that the hegemonic traditions of the left, rather than being discarded, were invited to be present but not in their own terms, that is, as the sole legitimate traditions. They were invited along with many other traditions of critical knowledge, transformative practice and conceptions of a better society. The fact that movements and organizations coming from disparate critical traditions — united by a very broadly defined purpose to fight against neoliberal globalization for an even more broadly defined aspiration to that “other world” that is “possible” —could

interact during several days and plan for collaborative actions had a profound and multifaceted impact on the relationship between theory and practice.

The blindness of the theory results in the invisibility of the practice, hence its subtheorization, 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 left theoretical tradition, and their militant disregard for its renewal. This reciprocal blindness yields, on the practice side, an extreme oscillation between revolutionary spontaneism and innocuous, self-censured possibilism, and, on the theory side, an equally extreme oscillation between the *post-factum* reconstructive zeal and arrogant indifference to what is not included in such 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 legitimate (or not) the past practices that have emerged in spite of itself. Thus, avant-garde thought tends to tag along the rear-guard 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 resorting to a theoretical *bricolage* stuck to 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.

As I mentioned above, the experience of the WSF had a profound and multifaceted impact on the relationship between theory and practice.

First, it has made clear that the discrepancy between the left in books and the left in practice is more of a western problem. In other parts of the world and even in the west among non-western populations (such as indigenous peoples) there are other understandings of collective action for which such discrepancy doesn't make sense. The world at large is full of transformative experiences and

actors that are not educated in the western left. Moreover, scientific knowledge which has always been granted absolute priority in the western left books is in the WSF's open space one form of knowledge among many others. It is more important for certain movements and causes than for others and in many instances it is resorted to in articulation with other knowledges: lay, popular, urban, peasant, indigenous, women's, religious knowledges.

In this way, the WSF posed a new epistemological question: if social practices and collective actors resort to different kinds of knowledge, an adequate evaluation of their worth for social emancipation is premised upon an epistemology, which, contrary to hegemonic epistemologies in the west, does not grant a priori supremacy to scientific knowledge (heavily produced in the North) thus allowing for a more just relationship among different kinds of knowledge. In other words, there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice. Therefore, in order to capture the immense variety of critical discourses and practices and to valorize and maximize their transformative potential, an epistemological reconstruction is needed. This means that we need not so much alternatives as we need an alternative thinking of alternatives.

Such epistemological reconstruction must start from the idea that hegemonic left thinking and the hegemonic critical tradition, in addition of being North-centric, are colonialist, imperialist, racist, and sexist as well. To overcome this epistemological condition and thereby decolonize left thinking and practice it is imperative to go South and learn from the South, but not from the imperial South (which reproduces in the South the logic of the North taken as universal), rather from the anti-imperial South (the metaphor for the systematic and unjust human suffering caused by global capitalism and the resistance against it). Such an epistemology in no way suggests that North-centric critical thinking and left politics must be discarded and thrown into the dustbin of history. Its past is in many respects an honourable past and has significantly contributed to the liberation of the global South. What is imperative, rather, is to start an intercultural dialogue and translation among different critical knowledges and practices: South-centric and North-centric, popular and scientific, religious and secular, female and male, urban and rural, etc., etc. This intercultural translation I call the ecology of knowledges (Santos, 2004, 2006a, 2007).

The second impact of the WSF on the relationship between theory and practice, and probably more decisively for its success, is the way it has valued the diversity of philosophies, discourses, styles of action, political objectives present in its meetings. Two aspects must be emphasized in this regard. On the one hand, the WSF has so far resisted reducing its openness for the sake of efficacy or political coherence. As I mention below, there is an intense debate inside the WSF about this issue, but, in my view, the idea that there is no general theory of social transformation capable of capturing and classifying the immense diversity of oppositional ideas and practices present in the WSF has been one of the most innovative and productive decisions. On the other hand, this potentially unconditional inclusiveness has contributed to create a new political culture that, as I mentioned above, privileges commonalities to the detriment of differences, and fosters common action even in the presence of deep ideological differences once the objectives, no matter how limited in scope, are clear and adopted by consensus.

In the antipodes of the idea of an all encompassing general theory or of a correct line dictated from above, the coalitions and articulations made possible among the social movements are generated from bottom-up, tend to be pragmatic and to last as long as they are considered to further each movement's objectives. In other words, while in the tradition of the conventional left, particularly in the global North, to politicize an issue was equivalent to polarize it, which often led to factionalism, in the WSF another political culture seems to be emerging in which politicization goes hand in hand with depolarization, with the search for common grounds and agreed-upon limits of ideological purity or ideological messiness. In my view, the possibility of global collective action lies in the development of this political culture (more on this below).

Compulsive self-reflexivity and the unfinished task of the WSF

Since its beginning the WSF has been intensely debated both inside, among its participants, and outside, mostly among members of the conventional left that from the WSF's inception have looked at it with a suspicious eye. The themes of debate are numerous: the political nature of the WSF; its relationship

with the national struggles historically conducted by the left; goals, both hidden and explicit; ideological makeup; internal democracy; limits of its globalness; sociological base in light of the profile of participants; exclusions; financial dependency; transparency of decisions by organs with apparently no decision power; relationships between NGOs and social movements; organizational and political autonomy vis-à-vis particular states and left parties; representativeness; efficacy in changing the power structures in the world; the role of intellectuals; etc., etc. Along the way, such debates and the evaluations they gave rise to led to important organizational changes. I have argued elsewhere that, contrary to the opinion of its critics, the WSF has shown a remarkable capacity to reform itself (2006a). The issues of organization and representation have been the main playing field upon which such capacity has been tested. In my view, the limitations of self-reform have lied so far less in the WSF itself than in the global and national structural conditions under which it unfolds.

The debates exploded after the WSF 2005 and were a conspicuous presence in the WSF 2007, in Nairobi. From 2005 onwards the debates started to focus on the future of the WSF. Two different debates can be identified. One debate focus on the profound changes the WSF should undergo in order to keep up with the transformative energies it has unleashed. From an open space to a movement of movements? From talk shop to collective action? Global political party? Deep changes in the Charter of Principles in order to allow for political positions on major global concerns, such as the invasion of Iraq, the reform of the UN, or the Israel/Palestine conflict? From consensus to voting? The other debate focus on whether the WSF has a future at all, whether it has exhausted its potential, whether it should come to an end, opening space for other types of global aggregation of resistance and alternative. This second debate won particular notoriety with a recent paper by Walden Bello, in which he asks (2007):

> *having fulfilled its historic function of aggregating and linking the diverse counter-movements spawned by global capitalism, is it time for the WSF to fold up its tent and give way to new modes of global organization of resistance and transformation?*

Before trying to answer this question, I would like to answer another one, concerning the sociology of the debate: why has the debate been so intense and why the more radically it questions the WSF the least consequences it has for the unfolding of the WSF process? Having followed the evolution of the WSF since the very beginning very closely, I have come to three conclusions.

First, the debate has been very intense since the first edition of the WSF and the issues being discussed fall into two categories. On the one hand, issues that express the resistance to acknowledge the novelty of the WSF vis-à-vis the traditions of the conventional left. These are the issues of efficacy, ideological makeup, political goals, etc. On the other hand, the issues that, recognizing the novelty of the WSF, question certain aspects or features that might compromise such novelty. These are the issues of global reach and representativeness, internal democracy and transparency, relationships with states and financing agencies. In my view, in both instances the intensity of the debate confirms the novelty of the WSF in the global landscape of left politics. On one side, given this novelty, it has been difficult to map the WSF within this landscape and any misfits become deficits whose burden of proof falls on the WSF. On the other side, the novelty calls for a radical departure from past experiences; the frustration caused by the past is such that any "impurity" or underperformance is easily converted into a suspicious vengeance of the past, a signal that such departure has not been radical enough. In both cases, it is the novelty that mobilizes criticism and in a sense it is confirmed by it. Our time, both on the right and on the left, is so soaked in the neoliberal ideology of TINA (there is no alternative) that any institutional and political novelty seems to be forced into compulsive self-reflexivity.

My second conclusion is that the criticisms that started from the premise of the novelty of the WSF led in general to changes and innovations aimed at correcting acknowledged deficiencies. The meetings of the International Council in the last three years are abundant evidence of this. In fact, I cannot think of any other organization of the left in which the capacity for self-reform has been so consistent.

My third conclusion is that the most radical debates, those that call for a radical transformation of the WSF or for its extinction, have very little consequences and rarely leave the rooms or sites in which they take place to

become topics of conversation among the activists that have been joining the WSF process. I experienced this very notably in Nairobi, in January 2007, the meeting in which more panels were organized to discuss the future of the WSF. While in these panels very vehement discussions took place, outside, peasants from Tanzania and Uganda met their comrades from Kenya for the first time, under the auspices of the Via Campesina, and celebrated the "surprising" fact that they shared the same problems caused by the same factors; women from all over the world were busy preparing the second draft of the Manifesto on reproductive and sexual rights, trying to overcome last minute difficulties deriving from differences in the feminist consciousness and culture across continents, in this case most particularly focused on the "sensibility" of African feminists; urban dwellers from different cities of the planet were planning collective actions against forcible evictions and the privatization of water supply; community leaders from all over Africa were setting up the Africa Water Network and, together with NGOs and human rights and health movements and organizations from all over the world, were planning the most comprehensive campaign against HIV/Aids.

There is something in the structure and practice of the WSF that makes it immune to radical questioning. Or better, the WSF is not an entity that fits the capacity for radical questioning to have real consequences. The open space and process put in march by the WSF tends to depolarize differences, to reform itself in light of constructive criticisms and to ignore those that are identified as potentially destructive. This resilience is, in my view, a sign that the WSF has not yet fulfilled its "historical task", has not yet exhausted its potential.

This conclusion takes me to Walden Bello´s article "The Forum at the Crossroads"[6]. After acknowledging all the accomplishments of the WSF, very much in line with my analysis above, Bello argues, however, that one of the criticisms against the WSF has become particularly relevant: "this is the charge that the WSF as an institution is unanchored in actual global political struggles, and this is turning it into an annual festival with limited social impact". He agrees with those for whom the liberal conception of the "open space" defended by

[6] This paper raised some debate in the International Council of the WSF. See, for instance, Whitaker (2007).

many founders of the WSF — that is, the idea that the WSF cannot endorse any political position or particular struggle, though its constituent groups are free to do so — has created the illusion that the WSF can stand above the fray, turning the WSF into some sort of neutral forum, where discussion will increasingly be isolated from action, draining "the energy of civil society networks [which] derives from their being engaged in political struggles". This criticism has been addressed to the WSF since the very beginning and I have myself subscribed to it (Santos, 2006b). But while I see in it just another opportunity for self-reform, Bello considers it as dictating the death sentence of the WSF. The core argument is that the WSF corresponded to a stage of anti-capitalist struggle that is over. Its historical task consisted in bringing together old and new movements and leading them to "the realization that they needed one another in the struggle against global capitalism and that the strength of the fledgling global movement lay in a strategy of decentralized networking that rested not on the doctrinal belief that one class was destined to lead the struggle but on the reality of the common marginalization of practically all subordinate classes, strata, and groups under the reign of global capital." This has now been accomplished and indeed the WSF has been left behind by more advanced struggles.

Implied in the argument is the idea that the continuation of the WSF may even become an obstacle to the success of these struggles. Bello's example of such a struggle is Hugo Chavez and the Bolivarian revolution. According to him, the polycentric WSF of 2006 in Caracas was so "bracing and reinvigorating" because "it inserted some 50,000 delegates into the storm center of an ongoing struggle against empire, where they mingled with militant Venezuelans, mostly the poor, engaged in a process of social transformation, while observing other Venezuelans, mostly the elite and middle class, engaged in bitter opposition." Therefore, "Caracas was an exhilarating reality check", that is, it showed that "the WSF is at a crossroads." To make his argument even more explicit, Bello argues that "Hugo Chavez captured the essence of the conjuncture when he warned delegates in January 2006 about the danger of the WSF becoming simply a forum of ideas with no agenda for action. He told participants that they had no choice but to address the question of power: 'We must have a strategy

of ‘counter-power.’ We, the social movements and political movements, must be able to move into spaces of power at the local, national, and regional level.’” For Bello, the historical accomplishment of the WSF lies in having created the conditions for such struggles to have now better chances of succeeding:

developing a strategy of counter-power or counter-hegemony need not mean lapsing back into the old hierarchical and centralized modes of organizing characteristic of the old left. Such a strategy can, in fact, be best advanced through the multilevel and horizontal networking that the movements and organizations represented in the WSF have excelled in advancing their particular struggles. Articulating their struggles in action will mean forging a common strategy while drawing strength from and respecting diversity.

I fully agree with Bello that Latin America is today in the forefront of the struggle against imperialism and that Hugo Chavez represents the most advanced moment of such struggle, which is also very much in march in Bolivia and Ecuador. Moreover, I think that the WSF, emerging in Latin America, has contributed a great deal to this. Two questions, however, still need to be asked. First, does the continuation of the WSF interfere negatively with the future outcomes of these struggles? Second, are the transformations on left politics brought about by the WSF really so widespread and, if so, are they sustainable?

Concerning the first question, I think that the WSF has never claimed that the correction of the errors of the past would imply the acceptance of a single alternative path. Indeed, the core idea underlying the WSF is the celebration of the diversity of the struggles against exclusion and oppression with the purpose of drawing from such celebration additional energy and strength for the existing struggles and additional creativity to develop new ones. To assume that the WSF may become detrimental to the success of the most advanced struggles presupposes, first, that there is a single and unequivocal criterion to establish what is more and what is less advanced, and, secondly, that the coexistence of struggles of different types, scales and degrees of advancement is detrimental to the overall objective of building another possible world. In my view, none of this presuppositions is borne by reality. The doubts about adopting any such

single criterion, and the frustration with the historical record of some candidates to such a privileged status, are at the core of the success of the WSF. Moreover, even assuming that a general agreement is possible within the global left about what is more or less advanced, it is hardly conceivable that it is possible to progress at the same pace in the different struggles against the different kinds of oppression in the different parts of the world. On the contrary, the uneven and combined development of the different anti-capitalist struggles — probably, more evident now thanks to the WSF — will always mirror the uneven and combined development of global capitalism. In the words of Whitaker in response to Bello, the WSF's crossroads are in fact two parallel paths that can co-exist, as mutual sources of inspiration. Even assuming that the WSF has been outpaced by other conceptions and practices of resistance and alternative, it is important that the WSF continues to provide an anchor for the struggles that still need it, and also reduce the negative impact and the frustration caused by the eventual defeat of the most advanced struggles.

In a recent evaluation of the US Social Forum, Ponniah, even though arguing that the USSF "demonstrated the accuracy of both Bello and Whitaker's arguments, affirming the importance of continuing the Social Forum process but on much more innovative, decisive, political ground", recognizes that, in the last instance, the richness of the idea of the WSF as an open space received a robust confirmation in the USSF. According to him (2007),

The U.S. Social Forum created an open space that allowed different people's movements to come together from around the United States. For the first time diverse activists from around the country were able to collectively interact in a non-hierachical, horizontal manner that emphasized mutual understanding. The Open Space infrastructure facilitated the possibility for a variety of movements to meet. If the space had been dominated by one ideology, for example socialism, or if it had been dominated by one strategy, for example, statism, then it would not have attracted so many movements… The Open Space permitted activists to move away from focusing on the differences between social movements and instead focusing on commonalities.

Even if we think that it was the weakness or backwardness of the US left, combined with its multiculturality, that made the format of the WSF fit the USSF so well, we are thereby confirming the continuing usefulness of the WSF. Particularly if we consider how crucial it is to strengthen the US left in order to put an end to US imperialism.

To answer the second question involves an evaluation of the impact of the WSF. To it I dedicate the next section of this article.

The WSF and the global left

Given the short period of the WSF's maturation, the inquiry into its contribution to transforming critical theory and the global left cannot but be somewhat speculative. It is, nonetheless, possible to identify some of the left problems 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.

In my view, the most salient features of the WSF's contribution are the following, without any criterion of precedence: the passage from a movement politics to an inter-movement politics, that is, to a politics run by the idea that no single issue social movement can succeed in carrying out its agenda without the cooperation of other movements; broad conception of power and oppression; network politics based on horizontal relations and on combining autonomy with aggregation; intercultural nature of the left and of the very concept of what is considered to be "left", as well as, following from this, the idea of cognitive justice functioning as an important political criterion; a new political culture around diversity; different conceptions of democracy (demodiversity) and their evaluation according to transnational and transcultural criteria of radical democracy conceived of as the transformation of unequal

power relations into shared authority relations in all fields of social life; combined struggle for the principle of equality and for the principle of recognition of difference; privileging rebellion, non-conformism and insurgency vis-à-vis reform and revolution; sustained effort not to convert militants into functionaries; pragmatic combination of short-term and long-term agendas; articulation between different scales of struggle, local, national and global, together with an intensified awareness of the need to match global capitalism with global anti-capitalism; focus on transversality both in terms of themes and processes; broad conception of means of struggle with the coexistence of legal and illegal action (barring illegal violence against people), direct and institutional action, action inside and outside the capitalist state; pragmatic conception of differences and commonalities, with emphasis on the latter; refusal of correct lines, general theories and central commands in favour of agreed upon aggregations and depolarized pluralities.

The last contribution is probably the most crucial and needs some elaboration[7]. But before doing that and assuming that these different contributions to the reinvention of the left in the twentieth first century are important, one should realize that the end of the WSF would be fully justified if and when such contributions had been fully internalized by the left throughout the world, and particularly by the left involved in the more advanced struggles. If this is accepted as the criterion to decide whether or not the WSF has a future, I think that it cannot be reasonably argued that the historical task of the WSF has been completed. It would be indeed overly optimistic to think that the transformations on the left under the impact of the WSF are widespread and are fully present in the more advanced struggles. Much less can it be argued that the internalized contributions so far are internalized in a sustainable way. On the contrary, I think that, in light of this criterion, the task of the WSF is far from being completed.

Moreover, I think that the continuation of the WSF (with all the changes that might improve its performance) will become more crucial in the coming years. For two main reasons. First, in recent years, globalization is assuming the form of regionalization. In the Americas, in Africa, in Asia and, of course, in

[7] See next section.

Europe new kinds of regional pacts are emerging and, in some instances, they assume the form of a new kind of nationalism, what I call transnational nationalism. Just like globalization and regionalization may be hegemonic or counter-hegemonic. But in both cases, and for different reasons, it may contribute to isolate the progressive movements and organizations of one region from those of other regions. It may be argued that the other side of this reciprocal isolation will be the strengthening of coalition building inside the same region, which will probably contribute to more advanced struggles at the regional level. I think, however, that, as long as capitalism remains global in its reach, regionalism will be in the end instrumental to deepen its global nature. If so, it would be disastrous for the construction of that other world that is possible if the possibilities for transregional linkages and collective action — such as those offered by the WSF — were diminished. Secondly, I suspect that we are probably heading for more difficult times. The securitarian and bellicistic ideology that is taking hold of both internal and international politics is going to make it more difficult for activists to organize and even more difficult to cross borders. The criminalization of social protest is under way. The global vocation of the WSF will be all the more needed when it becomes crucial to make visible and to denounce the restrictions on organizations and mobilizations being implemented on a global scale.

The sustainability of the impact of the WSF on global left politics is an open question depending on the ways the WSF will reform and reinvent itself as new conditions and new challenges arise. I would like to conclude this article by drawing attention to the most precious contribution of the WSF, the one that most unequivocally calls for the dynamic continuation of the WSF.

Twenty-first century left: depolarized pluralities and intercultural translation

One of the remote sources of the ghostly relationship between theory and action that, as indicated above, became so extreme in the last decades was, to my mind, the virulent, theoretical extremism that dominated the conventional left throughout the twentieth century. As a result, left politics lost gradually 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 neoliberalism 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 and beginning of the twenty-first.

In this context, pragmatism combined with the reconceptualization of diversity as a strength rather than as a liability became a tremendous source of energy and political creativity. The WSF showed eloquently that no totality can contain the inexhaustible diversity of the theories and practices of the world left today. Therefore, diversity rather than an obstacle to unity becomes the condition for unity. In view of the heavy weight of the past, this is no easy task and demands continuous vigilance and reinforcement. It will be based on two pillars: depolarized pluralities and intercultural translation. Given their novelty and counter-factuality they can be easily perverted into their opposites, new polarizations and new monocultural impositions. Though the WSF is no guarantee that this may not occur, without it or without some other entity with a similar profile this is exactly what will most certainly occur.

Depolarized pluralities

As I mentioned above, the WSF has created a political environment in which politicization may occur by means of depolarization. This is particularly crucial in the case of global or transnational collective action, that is, action across national borders and cultures. It consists in giving priority to constructing coalitions and articulations for concrete collective *practices* and discussing the theoretical differences exclusively in the ambit of such constructing. The goal is to turn the acknowledgment of differences into a factor of aggregation and

inclusion, by depriving differences of the conspicuous capacity for thwarting collective actions. In other words, the point is to create contexts for debate, in which the drive for union and similarity may have at least the same intensity as the drive for separation and difference. Collective actions ruled by depolarised 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. It amounts to a new paradigm of transformative and progressive action.

The construction of depolarised pluralities can only take place in the process of deciding about concrete collective actions. The priority conferred to participation in collective actions, by means of articulation or coalition, has a first effect which is precious in light of the factionalist heritage of the left: it allows for the suspension of the question of the political subject in the abstract. In this sense, if there are only concrete actions in progress, there are only concrete subjects 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 with the conception or unfolding of the collective action. Indeed, the latter can never be the result of abstract subjects. In light of my reconstruction of the WSF’s contribution to the left of the twentieth first century, 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 the ones exclusively conceived or organized by itself. 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 the least 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 the terms of the

conflicts established by the oppressors. The success of the collective actions is measured by their ability to change the ground and terms of the conflict during the struggle. That is, by the concrete transformation of unequal power relations into shared authority relations in the specific social field in which the collective action takes place. Success, in turn, is the only credible measure of the correctness of the theoretical positions assumed.

5.There are three major dimensions of the construction of depolarised pluralities inside transformative collective actions: depolarization through intensification of mutual communication and intelligibility; depolarization through searching inclusive organizational forms; depolarization through concentration on productive questions.

To my mind, the struggle for another possible world will be made of a rich and internally diversified constellation of struggles. To the extent that global collective struggles will be part of it, depolarized pluralities will be a necessary condition of possibility of such struggles.

Intercultural translation

The other major contribution of the WSF to the reinvention of the global left in the twenty-first century is indeed a promise, the creation of a need which up until now has not been satisfied. It refers to the methodology to maximize the consistency and the strength of depolarized pluralities. With the WSF it became clear that the global left is multicultural. This means that the differences that divide the left escape the political terms that formulated them in the past. Underlying some of 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,” inside the organizations and movements. A context has thereby been 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.

As I mentioned above, the political theory of western modernity, whether in its liberal or Marxist version, constructed diversity as an obstacle to unity and 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. As I mentioned, the extraordinary energy of attraction and aggregation revealed by the WSF resides precisely in refusing the idea of a general theory. The diversity that finds a haven in it is free from the fear of being cannibalized by false universalisms or false single strategies propounded by any general theory. The WSF underwrites the idea that the world is an inexhaustible totality, as it holds many totalities, all of them partial. Accordingly, there is no sense in attempting to grasp the world by any single general theory, because any such theory will always presuppose the monoculture of a given totality and the homogeneity of its parts. The time we live in, whose recent past was dominated by the idea of a general theory, is perhaps a time of transition that may be defined in the following way: we have no need of a general theory, but still need a general theory on the impossibility of a general theory. In other words, we need a negative universalism: a general agreement on the fact that no individual, no single theory or no single practice has the infallible recipe to conceive of another possible world and to bring it about.

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 without jeopardizing their identity and autonomy, without, in other words, reducing them to homogeneous entities.

The WSF is witness to the wide multiplicity and variety of social practices of counter-hegemony that occur all over the world. Its strength derives from having corresponded or given expression to the aspiration of aggregation and articulation of the different social movements and NGOs, an aspiration that up until then was only latent. The movements and the NGOs constitute themselves around a number of more or less confined goals, create their own forms and styles of resistance, and specialize in certain kinds of practice and discourse that distinguish them from the others. Their identity is thereby created on the basis of what separates them from all the others. The feminist movement sees

itself as very distinct from the labour movement, and vice-versa; both distinguish themselves from the indigenous movement or the ecological movement; and so on and so forth. All these distinctions and separations have actually translated themselves into very practical differences, if not even into contradictions that contribute to bringing the movements apart and to fostering rivalries and factionalisms. Hence derives the fragmentation and atomization that are the dark side of diversity and multiplicity.

This dark side has lately been pointedly acknowledged by the movements and NGOs. The truth is, however, that none of them individually has had the capacity or credibility to confront it, because, in attempting it, it runs the risk of falling prey to the situation it wishes to remedy. Hence the extraordinary step taken by the WSF. It must be admitted, however, that the aggregation/articulation made possible by the WSF is of low intensity. The goals are limited, very often circumscribed to mutual knowledge or, at the most, to recognize differences and make them more explicit and better known. Under these circumstances, joint action cannot but be limited.[8]

The challenge that counter-hegemonic globalization faces now may be formulated in the following way. The forms of aggregation and articulation made possible by the WSF were sufficient to achieve the goals of the phase that may be now coming to an end. Deepening the WSF's goals in a new phase requires forms of aggregation and articulation of higher intensity. Such a process includes articulating struggles and resistances, as well as promoting ever more comprehensive and consistent alternatives. Such articulations presuppose combinations among the different social movements and NGOs that are bound to question their very identity and autonomy as they have been conceived of so far. If the project is to promote counter-hegemonic practices that combine ecological, pacifist, indigenous, feminist, workers' and other movements, and to do so in an horizontal way and with respect for the identity of every movement,

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

an enormous effort of mutual recognition, dialogue, and debate will be required to carry out the task.

This is the only way to identify more rigorously what divides and unites the movements, so as to base the articulations of practices and knowledges on what unites them, rather than on what divides them. Such a task entails a wide exercise in translation to expand reciprocal intelligibility without destroying the identity of the partners of translation. The point is to create, in every movement or NGO, in every practice or strategy, in every discourse or knowledge, a *contact zone* that may render it porous and hence permeable to other NGOs, practices, strategies, discourses, and knowledges. The exercise of translation aims to identify and reinforce what is common in the diversity of the counter-hegemonic drive. Cancelling out what separates is out of the question. The goal is to have host-difference replace fortress-difference. Through translation work, diversity is celebrated, not as a factor of fragmentation and isolationism, but rather as a condition of sharing and solidarity. The work of translation concerns both knowledges and actions (strategic goals, organization, styles of struggle and agency). Of course, in the practice of the movements, knowledges and actions are inseparable. However, for the purposes of translation, it is important to distinguish between contact zones in which the interactions focus mainly on knowledges, and contact zones in which interactions focus mainly on actions[9].

The work of intercultural and inter-political translation has just started among some movements participating in the WSF. Practice has shown that such work is needed not only to densify the network of transformative practices across movements but also inside the same movement, that is, among its different national or regional expressions. In this regard, the feminist movement is probably the most advanced. It is imperative that the WSF in the future grant more priority to the work of mutual translation among and within movements.

[9] I deal with this issue in greater detail in Santos 2006a.

Conclusion

The WSF is unquestionably the first large international progressive movement after the neoliberal backlash at the beginning of the 1980s. Its future is the future of trust in an alternative to *la pensée unique* (single thinking). This future is completely unknown, and can only be speculated about. It depends both on the movements and organizations that comprise the WSF and the metamorphoses of neoliberal globalisation. The fact that the latter has been acquiring a bellicose component fixated on security will no doubt affect the evolution of the WSF. The future of the WSF depends in part on the evaluation of its trajectory up until now and the conclusions drawn from it, with a view to enlarging and deepening its counter-hegemonic efficaciousness. One thing seems clear: it is still too early to say that after the WSF the global left will not be the same. Ultimately, this is why the WSF must continue.

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