The World Social Forum

An Open Space or a Movement of Movements?

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T HE MOST interesting attempt to create a global space for critical social movements is the World Social Forum (WSF), organized annually since 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and in January 2004 in Mumbai, India.[1] Even though, to begin with, the event was organized simultaneously with – and also as a protest against – the World Economic Forum (WEF), in each subsequent gathering there were fewer attempts to interact with the WEF. The process has stimulated a considerable amount of enthusiasm, as well as various sceptical comments on its possibilities for facilitating social transformations.

The best-known slogan of the WSF is 'Another world is possible'. The enthusiasm caused by the apparently simple and ambiguous phrase can be understood as a counter-hegemonic challenge to the equally famous slogan of Margaret Thatcher, 'There is no alternative'. After four annual social forums, however, simply repeating that another world is possible is no longer enough. An increasing number of participants and observers of the WSF process have started to ask what the other world(s) might look like. Thus far, the WSF has been able to provide few concrete answers to that question. While this has been often considered a key limitation of the WSF, for some of its original creators, the WSF should not even attempt to give any clear answer to that question, at least not through a unified voice.

The World Social Forum is a space that, according to its Charter of Principles, 'brings together and interlinks only organizations and movements of civil society from all the countries in the world' (WSF, 2001). The Charter was drafted by the Brazilian Organizing Committee soon after the first WSF meeting and approved with modifications by the WSF International Council (IC) in June 2001 in São Paulo. It has achieved a

quasi-constitutional status within the WSF process, even if its authority has occasionally been challenged.

Some of the main challenges concern Article 6 of the Charter, even if it is seldom explicitly mentioned in the debates. According to the Article, 'the meetings of the WSF do not deliberate on behalf of the WSF as a body. . . . The participants in the Forum shall not be called on to take decisions as a body.' In practice, this has meant that the WSF as a body never made a declaration, for example, against the war in Iraq. According to many of its 'founding fathers', such as Chico Whitaker, making a declaration against the war would have been a violation of the Charter of Principles (on Whitaker's concept of the WSF as an 'open space' see Whitaker, 2004a; see also Teivainen, 2002). The issue was hotly debated in meetings of the WSF International Council, especially in January 2003 in Porto Alegre, but the decision was not to issue any declaration. The question was not about whether anyone present would not have been opposed to the war, it was about the concept of space that the WSF is supposed to be.

Many debates have been waged in and around the WSF about whether it should be considered simply a space for these movements or whether it could become some kind of movement of movements itself. There are many actors who would like to see the WSF evolving into a fully fledged political movement. The idea is that this movement should make a real political difference by altering the course of globalization. The official line in the WSF process, however, has been that political projects that go beyond the Charter of Principles can be an attribute of the organizations that take part in the WSF but never of the WSF itself.

The WSF 2004 in Mumbai, India, has made the social forum process more truly world-wide.[2] In fact, Mumbai meant opening up the space of the forum in two distinct ways. First, since most participants tend to come from the region surrounding the venue, the flavour of Mumbai was rather different from Porto Alegre. In the previous three forums, Latin Americans and Europeans dominated the scene, and therefore the move to India was a symbolic opening towards the world as whole. Second, this time a significant portion of the participants were Dalits, that is, the casteless people of India, and other marginalized groups. Academic intellectuals and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were in a minority, except at the workshops, panels and roundtables held in English (simultaneous interpretation facilities were not available to the same extent as in Porto Alegre).

In 2005, the WSF will return to Porto Alegre. When the International Council of the WSF in January 2003 decided to hold the WSF 2004 in Mumbai, it simultaneously decided that the WSF 2005 would take place in Porto Alegre. In fact, it would probably have been impossible to reach a consensus on holding the 2004 event in India if there had not existed the promise of returning to Brazil. Those who feared that organizing the Forum in India could turn out to be a total failure were thus bought off with the idea that, even if Mumbai failed, it would be back to the good old Porto Alegre in the following year. Moving the annual WSF event to another

continent raised difficult questions about the continuity of the process, including its institutional memory, which the Brazilian Organizing Committee had provided thus far.

What is the point of this gigantic global gathering? In Mumbai there were a number of panels and roundtables that discussed critically whether the WSF space could simply continue to grow and open up further, or whether the time has come to turn it into an organization that could somehow translate diversity into a common political will. Could there be alternatives to these two possibilities? It has been suggested that WSF should assume a new form in the future. Instead of a massive once-a-year event and a number of thematic, regional, national and local events during the year, these could be coordinated into a simultaneous burst of social forums all over the planet. Thus the main event would be smaller and more focused, while the possibilities for participation would be multiplied. Should this be seen as a step toward movement, on the one hand, and more formal organization, on the other?

Assembly of Social Movements

One way to avoid political silence without violating the Charter of Principles is to facilitate processes whereby organizations that take part in the WSF produce political declarations. The most important attempt to move beyond the self-imposed limits for declarations and other forms of political action is the Assembly of Social Movements that has taken place at all annual events of the WSF. Ideally, most of the participating organizations would sign such declarations and they could have powerful political impact. Until now, the social movement declarations produced during the WSF events have not been circulated very widely and their impact has been relatively modest. Nevertheless, they have created controversies among the WSF organizers.

Even if these declarations do not officially claim to represent the WSF as a whole, Chico Whitaker, one of the key initiators of the WSF process, and others, have been highly critical of them. Whitaker fears that the media may consider them as semi-official conclusions. This can then lead to political disputes about whose concerns are expressed in the declarations.

For Whitaker, who has been the most vocal proponent of the WSF as 'purely a space', the activities of the Assembly have been a cause for concern, because they may compromise the WSF method. According to Whitaker, the groups behind the Assembly of Social Movements succeeded in their 'most daring coup' at the Mumbai WSF (Whitaker, 2004b). The issue was that the Indian Organizing Committee had given the Assembly a space to read its conclusions in the closing ceremony of the Mumbai WSF.[3] As a result, some media interpreted the social movements' call as the main declaration expressing the collective will of the WSF, which for Whitaker went against the established WSF spirit and method. The controversy was mostly triggered by a news cable of Agence France Press that reported on the social movements' declaration. In the following IC meeting in Mumbai,

Whitaker wanted to reach a decision that the IC would declare that the declaration of the Social Movements Assembly was not an official declaration of the WSF. After long discussions, no such vote or declaration was produced by the IC.

There exists no clear dividing line between the 'social movements' and 'non-governmental organizations'. NGOs are founded and often small, while popular movements emerge out of heterogeneous influences and actions, including those of NGOs. However, sometimes a clear-cut dichotomy between them emerges in the debates within the WSF governance bodies. In this dichotomy, the organizations recognized as 'movements' are more willing to issue statements and formulate common political goals, whereas members of the constructed 'NGO community' tend to be more cautious. This division has been reflected, for example, in the debates on the periodicity of the main WSF events. At the meeting of the WSF International Council on 4–7 April 2004 in Passignano, Italy, the original proposal of the Brazilian Organizing Committee was that centralized world meetings of the WSF should no longer be organized on an annual basis but every two years. This position was supported by some of the key social movements, and the representative of the influential Via Campesina coalition of peasants even advocated organizing the main WSF every three years.

One of the main arguments of many social movements was that preparing for annual world events demands too much organizational energy. At the same time, many social movements expressed support for a suggestion that, in the years when there was no centralized WSF, the social movements should organize another kind of event to protest against the World Economic Forum. This plan made some of the Brazilian Organizing Committee members change their position during the Passignano meeting. Their reasoning was that if the social movements say that annual forums demand too much of their organizational energies, how come they intend to organize something else instead to fill the vacuum?

It was not possible to reach a definitive conclusion, at the Passignano meeting, as to the periodicity of the main WSF events. The WSF International Council decided that the main annual WSF of 2007 will take place somewhere in Africa, and it had already earlier been decided that in 2005 the event would return to Porto Alegre. It was, however, not possible to reach consensus on what should be done in 2006. Whether there will be a centralized WSF event in 2006 will be decided at the International Council meeting, which is scheduled to take place immediately before the next centralized WSF event, which starts on 26 January 2005 in Porto Alegre.

Debating Politics of Open Space in Mumbai

If the World Social Forum is a counter-event to the World Economic Forum, Mumbai Resistance was the counter-event's counter-event. Mumbai Resistance was conceived as a 'truly anti-imperialist' parallel event that took place next to the World Social Forum venue in Mumbai. One of the concerns of the originators of Mumbai Resistance was that the WSF is not open to 'all

forms of struggle', referring to the rule, expressed in Article 9 of the Charter of Principles, that military organizations cannot participate in the WSF.[4]

The same article of the Charter states that representatives of political parties cannot participate in the WSF either. Since the two main communist parties were visibly involved in the organization of the forum in India, this rule caused confusion. The issue had been debated in the International Council, for example at its meeting in Miami in June 2003, and an understanding was finally reached that the parties would not be formally inside the Indian Organizing Committee or other official bodies of the WSF in Mumbai, even if representations within these bodies were in many cases allocated taking party membership considerations into account.

Within the International Council in Mumbai, one of the debates on the limits of the open space method concerned the uneasiness some felt about the social movements' declaration being read at the closing ceremony. Many other debates took place inside and outside the formal boundaries of the event, as well as in the official programme. One of them was the event organized by the Network Institute for Global Democratization (NIGD) to discuss the politics of the 'open space'. One of the motivations for the event was that, within the WSF process, there had been too little critical self-reflection and too few public debates on the future of the process. In the event, the starting point was Immanuel Wallerstein's remark that the 'world revolution' of 1968 is also the heritage of the WSF.[5] Boaventura de Sousa Santos emphasized that the WSF is about avoiding the negative and tragic utopias of the 20th century and about developing new critical utopias. These critical utopias presuppose new non-Eurocentric forms of knowledge. Now that the spirit of Porto Alegre has been successfully replicated in Mumbai, the next step is to democratize the WSF itself. One possibility, suggested by Santos, is to use new information technologies in order to hold instantaneous referenda in the WSF and thereby make the forum more truly participatory.

As one of the architects of the conception of open space, Chico Whitaker stressed the dangers of either falling back to the past of Leninist vanguardism or degenerating into absolute dispersion. The open space method is meant to overcome this choice. Jai Sen, however, argued that the WSF is not genuinely open. Even its minimal political programme excludes a number of concerns and individuals; in fact, no space can be neutral. Sen would like to open up the forum to everyone. Virginia Vargas countered this by saying that she does not accept the idea of allowing in, for instance, right-wing religious fundamentalists.

Meena Menon, in turn, ridiculed the idea that open space is a postmodern concept. The method of the WSF is not a philosophical but a practical question. The open space of the WSF works well in bringing the activists together and that is its justification. Aníbal Quijano made the qualification that the WSF also facilitates debates between those who disagree. For Wallerstein, the WSF is a method for getting different anti-systemic movements together. Wallerstein criticized the democratic deficit of the WSF but not the method of open space as such. There is a need for

both open space and real political outcomes. Therefore, the WSF should explicitly allow for organizing action-oriented networks and even facilitate their actions.

Wallerstein also underlined the fact that real decisions are being made at the WSF all the time, such as the decision to take the forum to Mumbai. However, there are some 120 insiders in the International Council, 1000 to 2000 semi-insiders who follow, and take part in, discussions but do not participate in decision-making. Then there are those hundreds of thousands who participate in various social forums but merely abide by decisions made by the few. This is why there is a widespread perception that the WSF is a top-down organization, despite all talk to the contrary. It has even been stated that taking part in the WSF International Council was 'a bit like being in the Politburo and not knowing who Stalin is'.[6]

Toward Global Parties?

The WSF can be conceived as a parliament in the original, Latin sense of the term, as a place to talk and converse (*parlar* means to talk, *mentum* a place or space). For the time being, however, there is no general session of deliberation, neither are there other mechanisms for democratic will formation. Even if George Monbiot (2002) has suggested the WSF could form part of the process of building a real 'world parliament in exile', the WSF cannot be considered anything like a parliament in the contemporary, deliberative sense, not to mention in terms of a parliament's legislative functions. There are many groups within the WSF that aim to build global democratic institutions, and some of them place considerable emphasis on a world parliament as a key to any global democratization. Only few of these groups, however, believe that the WSF itself could or should be transformed into a world parliament.

Global projections of institutions that are rooted in national political communities risk reproducing the problematic aspects of domestic analogies. Ever since Hedley Bull (1977: 46–51) coined the term, criticisms of domestic analogy have been used to criticize attempts to apply democratic principles to world politics. Straightforward proposals of global parliamentary federalism often do include simplistic analogies, but we believe that there are also possibilities for democratizing world politics that go beyond simply projecting democratic institutions as we know them into global contexts. Elsewhere, we have explored from a non-federalist perspective the possibilities of applying parliamentary mechanisms to global politics (see Patomäki and Teivainen, 2004); here we would like to reflect on another institution that has generally emerged in nation-state-centric politics but that could also be useful in transnational contexts, namely the political party.

While one of the main challenges of the WSF is to change the meaning of politics, debates about its relationship to present and future political parties are waged in an overwhelmingly traditional language. In the debates on the possibility of global political parties, one should be cautious about

simplistic dichotomies of political party/social movement that have been reproduced and, to a certain extent, been useful in the national contexts. It is equally important to try to avoid the reproduction of the categories of Western national politics of the late 20th century. Political parties have often been seen as eroding institutions, which have increasingly become part of the state administration.

Political parties emerged in modern Europe and Americas in the 18th and 19th centuries. Although there were parties of opinion and cliques in the ancient city-communities of Hellas, the metaphor of the body politic dominated the political imagination. The idea was that in one organism or body, it is not healthy to have conflicts or contradictions. Organized political parties were invented only when this metaphor was replaced with the individualist idea of social contract (see Ball, 1988). The idea of a party representing the universal interests of humanity also emerged in the 19th century, which led, after the Russian revolution of 1917, to the construction of totalitarian one-party states. During and since the Cold War, the model of polyarchy (competitive elitism) has prevailed in the West.

In the polyarchies of the West, members of political parties stand as candidates in elections and for various state offices. Thereby they gain access to the process of law- and policy-making. Other political actors may lobby representatives and officials or put pressure on them through media, for instance. Although in reality the powers of law- and policy-makers have been increasingly limited, at least there remains a relatively unambiguous idea of what politics is all about. In world politics, however, it is not clear what forms political activities should assume. If the WSF became a movement, and a more formal organization, could it also become a global political party in some sense, even in the absence of parliamentary institutions? Alternatively, should the WSF somehow facilitate the creation of world political parties? What should world political parties do?

It is clear that the WSF forms a loosely defined party of opinion. 'We oppose neoliberalism, imperialism and violence in all their forms.' 'Another world is possible.' The idea of the WSF is clearly not, however, to create a well-defined political programme, compete in elections or take over states. The question is, is it possible to do anything other than merely organize a pluralist space for meetings, discussions and festivities? Can transnational civil society organizations and movements accomplish anything efficacious to bring about 'another world'? This question may also be detached from the abstract possibility of constructing a global party in some unspecified sense. For now, at least, the focus could perhaps be on how different kinds of transnational political actors and alliances could be empowered to contribute to democratic transformations of our world.

It is nonetheless important that concrete strategies of change emerge from within the space (or movement) of the WSF. Global democratic changes are not possible without transformist global political movements, which must consist of not only civic actors but also states. Any transformation requires regulation as well, in the form of international – and later perhaps

global – law. Currently, only states can create and change international law. Whatever form global civil society assumes, including the possibility of replacing the term 'civil society' with something much more accurate and imaginative, it can only achieve transformations by making interventions in more traditional-sounding processes, with the aim of creating new forums of deliberation, agenda-setting and decision-making. To the extent that the empowerment of global movements will be based on well-articulated programmatic visions, they may also constitute steps toward world political parties.

Conclusions

Mumbai was an important moment in the process of rethinking politics and political possibilities to create 'another world'. With Mumbai the WSF process itself became more global and less tied to one particular locality, the city of Porto Alegre in Southern Brazil. Gradually and hesitantly, the structures and procedures of the WSF are becoming more clearly defined and, possibly, democratic. While the WSF acknowledges that it is actually making at least some decisions on behalf of all the participants, it continues, first and foremost, to provide spaces for NGOs and movements.

Only four years ago, the WSF was just a casual suggestion. Now new ideas and proposals are being forged within the WSF and also outside it. It is very likely that some of these ideas and proposals will become at least as real and vivid as the WSF has done. There is no reason to understand world developments in a particularly optimistic light – on the contrary; but the WSF is seen by many to provide a basis for new dialectics of hope. The prevailing spirit in Mumbai was very encouraging for most participants, as witnessed by all those who have written reports about the WSF IV saying that it has given them new strength to continue with their struggles.

The story of the WSF remains unwritten. Will it become an institution in its current form or be transformed into something other than an open space? In January 2005, we may know a little more, when WSF V takes place in Porto Alegre. During the first months of 2004, there have been various changes in the organizing process. The new Brazilian Organizing Committee consists of 24 organizations, instead of the earlier eight. The main themes of the event are no longer directly decided by the International Council but will result from an open consultation process in which, in principle, everyone can participate through the Internet. There is also an increased emphasis on applying principles of ecological sustainability and participatory economics in the WSF event itself. The event will no longer be organized in the lavish Catholic University of Porto Alegre, but in tents constructed using methods that are supposed to reflect the ideals of the WSF Charter of Principles. These changes tell us that there exists a learning process in the World Social Forum and that it is *in movement*, even if it is not *a movement* of a traditional kind.

Notes

1. The first meeting in January 2001 attracted some 5000 participants from 117 countries and thousands of Brazilian activists. For the second forum, the figures had grown significantly, rising to over 12,000 official delegates from 123 countries and tens of thousands of participants, mostly from Brazil. The third forum in January 2003 attracted over 20,000 official delegates and approximately 100,000 participants in total. The global media impact of the second and third Forums was also significantly stronger than in the first year.

2. The idea of organising the main annual WSF in India came up in a discussion in a sauna in Helsinki, following an NIGD (Network Institute for Global Democratization) and Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs-organized brainstorm session on global democracy initiatives in June 2001. Participants in these relaxed sauna discussions included Vijay Pratap, an Indian activist from New Delhi, and Cândido Grzybowski, from Ibase, Rio de Janeiro, and the WSF Organizing Committee, who took the idea to Brazil and put it on the WSF agenda. See also their contributions in Rikkilä and Sehm-Patomäki (2002).

3. *Call of the Social Movements and Mass Organisations*, Mumbai, January 2004.

4. The debate on excluding, for example, the FARC guerrillas of Colombia had taken place many times before Mumbai Resistance existed (see, e.g., Valenzuela, 2002).

5. Based on Wallerstein's comments during the event, but already expressed in Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein (1989: 111–15).

6. Personal e-mail communication with Noam Chomsky on 2 June 2004, who had heard the comment from Michael Albert.

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