

THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM: FROM PROTEST TO POLITICS?

Heather Gautney

I. INTRODUCTION

The World Social Forum

TRUE TO its name, the Global Justice Movement, often referred to as the “Anti-globalization Movement,” emerged from various locales around the globe. Although the histories of its constituent movements vary widely, its origins can be traced as far back as the anti-IMF riots of the mid-1970s, and more recently, the Zapatista uprising against NAFTA in 1994. Protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 and the shutdown of the Multilateral Agreement on Investments in 1998 set the stage for the 1999 demonstration in Seattle against the WTO, which is often cited as the Movement’s birthplace. After Seattle, the Global Justice Movement gained substantial momentum, staging protests at nearly every meeting of the World Bank, IMF, WTO and G8 to highlight the consequences of unregulated globalization and demand increased accountability from these and other supranational institutions. Following September 11th and the inauguration of the War on Terror, the Global Justice Movement essentially merged with larger anti-war efforts around the globe while maintaining its critique of neoliberalism and linking it to the problem of war and imperialism.

In addition to the aforementioned supranational institutions, the World Economic Forum (WEF) has been part of the Global Justice Movement’s protest circuit dating back to 1994 when the Chiapas Solidarity Movement protested the meeting and Kurdish and Turkish groups held an anti-WEF rally at the meeting site in Davos, Switzerland. Founded in 1971 by Swiss business professor and entrepreneur, Klaus Schwab, initially the WEF was a small, predominantly European event. In the 1990s, however, it grew in popularity among North American, European and Asian business elites to attract a broad array of world business and religious leaders, press and entertainers, union leaders, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) officials and leading intellectuals.

In 1998, the Actions Alliance “Freedom for Patricio Ortiz” mobilized an anti-WEF demonstration in Davos, together with anti-racist and anti-sexist groups, the Kurdistan Centre, and the Anti-WTO Coordination. In each of the following five years, demonstrations were staged by the Anti-WTO Coordination, and in 2000 the “Bernese Declaration,” together with other NGOs, launched “Public Eye on Davos,” a project that sought greater transparency of the WEF and demanded more public participation in its deliberations.

The World Social Forum (WSF) emerged in this context as a criticism of the WEF and its constitution as an undemocratic, unaccountable entity of world leaders from the Global North. Founded by Francisco “Chico” Whitaker, a former entrepreneur in Brazil, Oded Grajew, secretary to the Commission on Justice and Peace of the Council of Brazilian Bishops, and Bernard Cassen, director of the French newspaper *Le Monde Diplomatique*, the WSF was originally billed as a “counter-Davos” and as a venue for the Global Justice Movement to move beyond protest and toward the formulation of concrete objectives.

In 2001, its first year, the WSF attracted some 20,000 participants, including delegates from a wide range of organizations in over 117 countries. Since then, it has grown to attract roughly 155,000 participants (in 2005) and spawned regional and local forums in over 100 countries, spanning six continents. Described by globalization theorist Immanuel Wallerstein as “a major actor on the world scene,” the WSF has been attended by a host of world leaders, diplomats, intellectuals and Nobel Prize winners. It has received worldwide press coverage from mainstream media and was the primary organizing body for the worldwide anti-war demonstration in February 2003 that attracted tens of millions of people, spurring the *New York Times* to identify the anti-war movement as the other “super-power.” (Tyler 2003)

The WSF Charter of Principles

As the size and visibility of the Forum have increased over the past five years, its constitution has been further honed and contested. In April 2001, after its first year, eight members of the WSF Brazil Organizing Committee composed the WSF Charter of Principles, a 14-point set of guidelines “to be respected by all those who wish to take part in the process and to organize

new editions of the World Social Forum." The first Principle, perhaps the most important, defines who participates:

WSF Principle #1: The World Social Forum is an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a planetary society directed towards fruitful relationships among Humankind and between it and the Earth.

While many of the Forum's participants support the idea of an open, contested space, others criticize the Forum's failure to live up to its own mandate. 1. Contrary to its claims to horizontality, the WSF favors big name intellectuals, NGOs and social movements over unaffiliated individuals. 2. The Forum is inaccessible to organizations and individuals without adequate funding or those from certain geographic locales. 3. While claiming transparency, the WSF's Organizing Committee has made, behind closed doors, a series of critical decisions regarding the direction of the Forum. 4. Despite its Charter, which prohibits the participation of state actors, the WSF has procured funding from the Brazilian Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) and allowed Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and various French government officials to address the Forum. In addition, individuals with direct ties to national governments, such as ATTAC and the Brazilian Workers Party, are members of the WSF Organizing Committee (e.g., Chico Whitaker was elected as a Councilor on the PT ticket). 5. The WSF privileges certain geographic locales (namely, Brazil) and certain kinds of organizations and social movements (i.e., the Charter prohibits armed resistance movements from participating). and 6. The WSF lacks focus and a unified political program.

In an attempt to address these criticisms, the WSF Organizing Committee adopted the following changes: 1. In 2004, the Forum was held in Mumbai, India to allow for more geographically diverse participation. 2. Since 2003, the Forum has attempted to cultivate local, regional and thematic forums around the world, although no sustained effort has been made to link them to each other or to the World Social Forum (see Menser in this issue). 3. The 2005 WSF format was altered to consist primarily of self-organized assemblies rather than speakers in large venues. 4. In 2006, the WSF will decentralize and operate at the regional level.

Despite these efforts, however, the Forum has failed to address the most challenging of its criticisms – the question of political impact. In a recent commentary on the WSF, Hilary Wainwright (2005) wrote:

The global social justice movement and the anti-war movement have both effectively won the moral arguments. But they have not had a commensurate impact on the exercise of political and economic power...How could the strength of moral arguments and the movements behind these arguments be turned into effective sources of transformative power?

Wainwright's sentiment is echoed by many of the social movements that participate in the Forum, as insiders or within autonomous spaces. In effect, the debates have tended to polarize into distinct standpoints: one, from anticapitalist, antistatist groups who locate the potential for political and social transformation from within autonomous social movements, and the other, from progressive NGOs and social democratic groups aligned—directly or indirectly—with national governments. A 2002 debate between Susan George and Ezequiel Adamovsky demonstrates this point. George's organization, the Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens (ATTAC) is a social democratic organization with 30,000-plus supporters throughout France and several hundred ATTACs in other countries, including Brazil, Italy and Hungary. The organization's main objective is to enact Economics Nobel laureate James Tobin's 1978 proposal to tax speculative financial transactions as a way to reduce economic inequality around the globe and further develop national public services. Adamovsky, on the other hand, participates in the Asamblea movement in Buenos Aires and is a member of the People's Global Action (PGA) network, which in its own words, is "a worldwide coordination of resistances to the global market [and] an instrument for communication and coordination for all those fighting against the destruction of humanity and the planet by capitalism, and for building alternatives." In the debate, Adamovsky (2003) describes the fundamental difference among political orientations within the Forum:

To put it simply, on the one hand, there's the approach of most non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that want to reinforce the role of civil society as a check on the power of corporations. The NGOs want to restore the balance that society has lost and make capitalism more humane. On the other hand there is a more radical approach, shared by some social movements and radical collectives, which wants to strengthen the antagonistic movement against capitalism, to fight this society and build a new one.

II. WHICH CIVIL SOCIETY?

As stated in Principle #1 of its Charter, the WSF is composed of “groups and movements of civil society.” While Adamovsky identifies civil society with reform-oriented NGOs, the WSF’s use of the term remains rather nebulous, leaving one to speculate—which civil society does the WSF aim to cultivate?

Taking a few steps back, the concept of civil society dates back to the writings of Cicero and the ancient Greek philosophers, although in classical usage it was often equated with the state. It was not until the 18th century that political theorists such as Thomas Paine and Georg Hegel began to theorize the relationship between civil society and the state. While Hegel coupled civil society with the market, concerns over the commodification of social relations emerged with Marx and spilled over into 20th century political thought, influencing such theorists as Antonio Gramsci and Jurgen Habermas.

In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci (1971) identified the ideological and cultural underpinnings of capitalism, asserting that bourgeois hegemony and social inequality relied upon the consent of the masses, practiced within the sphere of everyday life. Gramsci believed that a *war of position* could be forged within the realm of ideas and cultural practice—a *counter-hegemony* waged within the sphere of civil society against the hegemony of the bourgeois state. Writing roughly forty years later, Habermas shared Gramsci’s concern over market domination of the *public sphere* and identified bourgeois civil society as a pseudo-public, marked by a level of cultural consumption and manufactured consent that precluded critical reflection. Unlike Gramsci, however, who saw civil society as a site of class struggle, Habermas sought, within the context of liberal parliamentary democracy, to reconstitute a public sphere characterized by universal procedures—a “discourse ethic” that enabled unrestrained communication and transparency at the level of public life and precluded domination by particular interests.

Countless political commentaries have pointed to the extraordinary resurgence of the concept of civil society over the last 30 years across the ideological spectrum. Its revival occurred within the shifting social and political landscapes of Eastern Europe and Latin America in the 1970s and 80s during their transitions from totalitarianism and authoritarianism to liberal democracy and continued into the 1990s in Western Europe and the United States amidst concerns over social fragmentation. Contemporary theorists of civil society share their predecessors’ preoccupation with the erosion

(and in some cases annihilation) of the public sphere, but aptly situate their analyses within the present-day context of globalization. Following Habermas, for example, Cohen and Arato (1994) argued that liberal democracy offers the conditions for an expansion of citizen rights and freedoms, asserting civil society as the mechanism through which various societies and traditions can interact and form associations across class, national and civilization lines. Etzioni (2000), on the other hand, offered a communitarian approach to the question of civil society that points to community ties and loyalty as the basis for the "good life." This view rejects state regulation of moral behavior and the idea of a neutral, interest-free civil society and favors communities as mediators between individuals and the state. Contrary to both views, Hardt (1995) argued that civil society has "withered away," and globalization has given birth to new forms of sovereignty in which institutions, such as political parties or trade unions, no longer effectively mediate between individuals and the state.

Does the WSF aim to cultivate a civil society whose goal is to wage a war of position—to serve as a venue for the development of ideas and cultural practices, ultimately challenging the system itself? Or, is it an effort to reconstruct a public sphere characterized by pluralism, communication ethics and institutional transparency within the limits of liberal democracy? Does the Forum, and the contradictions with which it grapples, indicate that civil society has withered away and that a truly emancipatory politics requires direct and absolute democracy?

The WSF as Public Sphere?

In the tradition of critical theory, Habermas (1991) provides a critique of contemporary liberal society, pointing out that democracy, and the system through which private individuals and interests regulate public authority, has been weakened by the way in which the major spheres of social life—the market, the state, and civic organizations—had been overrun by mass consumption and strategic rationality. Alternatively, he envisioned a public sphere in which ideas could be exchanged among persons unrestrained by market pressures and state coercion. For Habermas, the function of the public sphere was to mediate between society and the state—a domain in which people could organize, formulate public opinion and collectively express their desires to state officials. In his later work, Habermas (1984) continued in this vein, asserting a theory of communicative action in which consensus and mutual understanding could be arrived at by way of a discursive

sive ethics—a deliberative form of democracy that does not favor any one historical subject but privileges instead the communicative process itself.

On the surface, the World Social Forum's Charter appears strikingly similar to Habermas' conception. Rather than a representative body or locus of power, the WSF is conceived as a process. (Cassen, 2003) Its Charter states explicitly that it is not a decision-making body nor is any person or group authorized to express positions on its behalf:

WSF Principle #6: The meetings of the World Social Forum do not deliberate on behalf of the World Social Forum as a body. No one, therefore, will be authorized, on behalf of any of the editions of the Forum, to express positions claiming to be those of all its participants. The participants in the Forum shall not be called on to take decisions as a body, whether by vote or acclamation, on declarations or proposals for action that would commit all, or the majority, of them and that propose to be taken as establishing positions of the Forum as a body. It thus does not constitute a locus of power to be disputed by the participants in its meetings, nor does it intend to constitute the only option for interrelation and action by the organizations and movements that participate in it.

While the WSF does not seek consensus or the formation of "public opinion," it does attempt to operate according to a set of universal procedures (a Charter of Principles) that governs who participates and how they participate. These procedures also apply to local, regional and thematic forums around the world, as a sort of franchise agreement. At the Forum, individuals and groups enter *as equals* and participate by sharing their respective ideas, experiences and resources. The horizontal nature of the event fosters a distinct communicative culture. Largely born of the consensus/spokesperson models used by the Global Justice Movement, participants interact according to the mores of mutual regard and respect for difference, and this fosters a powerful sentiment of unity and sense of purpose.

Despite its claim to horizontality, however, hierarchies do persist. An Organizing Committee, or Secretariat, controls where the Forum will be held, who will be included and excluded, and what the content of the larger venues will be. In addition, there are two tiers of registration: delegates from organizations that can propose self-organized events and individuals classified as "observers." While these basic organizational aspects appear somewhat superficial, they do reflect political bias. For example, at the most recent WSF in 2005, a collection of WSF Organizing Committee and International Committee members constructed the "Porto Alegre

Consensus.” a 12-point list of demands including debt cancellation, adoption of the Tobin Tax, the dismantling of tax havens, the promotion of equitable forms of trade, national sovereignty regarding food rights, anti-discrimination policies against minorities and females, and democratization of international organizations. Although the group’s intention was to construct a starting point for political action, the mere notion of constructing a consensus within the context of the Social Forum reflects a serious violation against the principles that guide the Forum.

In addition to the hierarchies associated with the organization of the Forum, some critics have described the WSF as an annual meeting of the converted that marginalizes individuals without organizational affiliation. It excludes what Jai Sen (2003) has called (ironically) the “uncivilized”—refugees and poor people who cannot afford to attend and those without a stated commitment to oppose neoliberalism (which, theoretically, opens participation to right-wing groups who do oppose it). Moreover, without structures to aid in the interlinking of movements and groups, the Forum runs the risk of reinforcing the proprietary nature of the systems it opposes—and the social and ideological divisions among its participants that it is attempting to bridge.

In addition to issues related to democratic practice, Habermas’ conception of the public sphere problematizes civil society’s relationship to both the market and the state. The WSF Charter addresses this relationship explicitly:

WSF Principle #4. The alternatives proposed at the World Social Forum stand in opposition to a process of globalization commanded by the large multinational corporations and by the governments and international institutions at the service of those corporations’ interests, with the complicity of national governments.

It seems straightforward; yet, as theorists such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2003) point to the WSF’s ability to counter the singular, instrumental logic of neoliberalism and promote the possibility of “another world,” the WSF has procured funding from the Ford Foundation and national governments at the service of neoliberalism. Its very choice of Porto Alegre was influenced by the PT’s role in the local and national government, yet one need not look further than Brazil to see how unreliable the state can be under the pressure of the IMF. It is becoming an old story. The imprudent choice to give Lula center stage demonstrates a toxic duplicity within the Forum, worsened by the choice of Venezuela as one of the sites for the WSF 2006. In the words of Naomi Klein, “How on earth did a gathering that was

supposed to be a showcase for new grassroots movements become a celebration of men with a penchant for three-hour speeches about smashing the oligarchy?" (Klein, 2003)

The WSF as War of Position?

Gramsci's conception of civil society is fundamentally different from that of Habermas and offers an alternative frame through which to view the Forum. For Gramsci, civil society was the site of class struggle. Rather than emphasizing class as a category of representation, Gramsci focused on processes of class formation. For him, civil society was the sphere in which new democratic modes of consciousness could be developed and realized.

Like Habermas' public sphere, Gramsci's civil society was a set of institutions that represented itself autonomously from both the state and market: "Between the economic structure and the state with its legislation and coercion stands civil society." (Gramsci, 1971). Here, civil society includes some institutions that overlap with the economic sphere, such as trade unions and employers' associations, but mainly refers to sites of cultural production occupied by churches, parties, civic and professional associations (as opposed to corporations and firms whose functional capacity was to organize production).

Unlike Habermas, however, revolution was always on the horizon for Gramsci, and it required mass participation. Since direct confrontation of state power (a war of maneuver) was untenable, as is the case today, he emphasized the importance of popular culture, communication and belief systems in upsetting the common sense and constituting a counter-hegemony (a war of position) against the ideological domination of the ruling class. Education plays a central role for Gramsci, who said, "Knowing is never a passive reflection of the given but an act of creating the mediations necessary to direct life." In particular, Gramsci stressed the political role of intellectuals and the development of the subordinate classes' own *organic* intellectuals—intellectuals, such as civil servants and teachers, who grow organically within a particular social class and are trained to perform particular functions for it.

Without doubt, the WSF is part of the construction of a new counterculture, begun with the Global Justice Movement, in which political groups, individuals and organizations cross traditional social and political boundaries

and share alternative forms of life. Countless commentaries on the Forum point to the diversity of the participants and accompanying cultural expressions. It has license to what Wainwright called “the moral arguments” won by the movements. And, it has cultivated a truly counter-hegemonic vision that “another world is possible.” While some dismiss the Forum as merely an annual meeting, its educational aspects and cultural cross-fertilizations foster the development and proliferation of organic intellectuals.

In addition, the move to decentralize into regional forums is a key development in the formation of the WSF’s war of position. The cultivation of local and regional forums offers the possibility of building new cultural, educational and social institutions that correspond to the needs of local communities, while capturing the totalizing imaginary of the WSF’s counter-hegemonic force.

III. CONCLUSION

The common thread among theories of civil society is the concern, not only with the rights, procedures and institutions that support democracy, but with the underlying social relations that constitute them. For its founders, the objective of the WSF was to create a space in which the social relations that constitute democracy may be cultivated. Caught in the uneasy process of weighing organizational needs against the desire to create an open space free of hierarchy, the WSF has been remarkably successful at creating a venue for people from diverse political and social backgrounds to address the pitfalls of neoliberal globalization and begin to consider alternatives to it.

While the Charter of the Forum was devised as a series of guidelines to ensure continuity and sense of purpose, it will require serious revision if it is to be of further use. Given the proliferation of local and regional forums and the goal of next year’s forum to decentralize, the Charter should be refined to accommodate the needs and recognize the contradictions within and among the communities it seeks to serve. In addition, while the spontaneity and good nature of the Forum have tended to trump the structural and exclusionary practices of its well-intentioned Organizing Committee, the promise of horizontality must be further reinforced and realized if it is to act as a complement to the Global Justice Movement. Autonomous projects have operated in good faith by creating separate, self-directed spaces within the Forum, thereby showing support while

maintaining their fundamental critiques. Many of these groups have made significant progress constructing alternative models of social life and demonstrating that another world can be imagined and produced on a local scale.

The question of how the Forum understands its own constitution as composed of groups and movements of civil society must be further interrogated and defined. This paper only skims the surface of the concept, which provides a rich theoretical history through which an emancipatory politics can be thought and understood. The viability of a non-coercive, interest-free public sphere within the current context of globalization must be questioned, as should the value of such a space that does not aim to challenge or diffuse state power. Turning back to Klein's pertinent question regarding the political strongmen, the Forum's relationship to the state must be further understood and contested. Are the politicians really attempting to co-opt the movements or is the issue more complicated? Should the movements and the Forum itself seek reform by national governments, while calling for and attempting to build "another world"? Furthermore, what is the role of the World Social Forum in the movements' resistance, direct action and civil disobedience (in the war of maneuver)? What is its role in building new social and cultural institutions and cultivating organic intellectuals at both the local and global level (the war of position)? What kinds of institutions can the WSF help to build, and how can it foster a global democracy, involving a broader range of people, while focusing on issues related to the everyday?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adamovsky, Ezequiel and George, Susan. (2003) "What is the Point of Porto Alegre: Activists from Two Generations in Dialogue with OpenDemocracy." *The World Social Forum: Challenging Empires*. Eds. Sen, J. et al. New Delhi: The Viveka Foundation.

Cassen, Bernard. (2003) "On the Attack." *New Left Review*, no. 19, January-February.

Cohen, J. and Arato, A. (1991) *Civil Society and Political Theory*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Gramsci, Antonio. (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. London (TK): International Publishers.

Habermas, Jurgen. (1991) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. MIT Press, 1st edition.

_____. (1984) *Theory of Communicative Action, vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Hardt, M. (1995). "The Withering of Civil Society." *Social Text*, no. 45, Winter.

Klein, Naomi. (2003) "More Democracy – Not Political Strongmen." *The Guardian*, February 3.

Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. (2003) "The World Social Forum: Toward a Counter-Hegemonic Globalization (Part I)." *The World Social Forum: Challenging Empires*. Eds. Sen, J. et al. New Delhi: The Viveka Foundation.

Sen, J. (2003) "How Open? The Forum as Logo, The Forum as Religion: Skepticism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will." *The World Social Forum: Challenging Empires*. Eds. Sen, J. et al. New Delhi: The Viveka Foundation.

Tyler, Patrick. (2003) "A New Power in the Streets," *NY Times*: February 17th.

Wainwright, Hilary. (2005) "The WSF on Trial." Rosa-Luxemburg Foundation website: www.rosalux.de.

Whitaker, Chico. (2003) "The WSF as Open Space." *The World Social Forum: Challenging Empires*. Eds. Sen, J. et al. New Delhi: The Viveka Foundation.

World Social Forum Organizing Committee. (2001) "World Social Forum Charter of Principles." World Social Forum website: www.forumsocialmundial.org.br.