

## CHAPTER 8

### Is the World Social Forum a Democratic Global Civil Society?

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We live in a multi-centered world in which world politics is formed by states together with transnational corporations, intergovernmental organizations as well as various non-governmental actors. Within it a major player has arisen, one which some call the “second superpower”, the “movement of movements” or the “global justice movement” – and its main convergence centre: the *World Social Forum* (WSF 2001–).<sup>1,2</sup> So far 500,000 persons have participated in the WSF which yearly gathers several thousands of civic organizations in about thousand workshops, discussing the present world order and what to do about it. Since the end of the 1990s we are witnessing what is most probably the broadest transnational mobilization of social movements ever in history of mankind. The “Battle of Seattle” 1999 against WTO and the seventh World Social Forum in Nairobi, Kenya, 2007, are just the tip of an iceberg in this ongoing networking and cooperation of various movements around the world.<sup>3</sup> This “movement of movements” is mobilizing several millions of people in very different contexts and around very different topics, people that converge in their criticism of the present militarized neoliberal world-order which is dominated by the world’s only super-power; the USA.<sup>4</sup> The World Social Forum is possible to understand as a *global counter-hegemonic project* in which the

<sup>1</sup> della Porta 2007.

<sup>2</sup> The movements gather at several other occasions but then in minor numbers, e.g. the Peoples Global Action meetings and at convergence centres during protests against top-summits of multilateral regimes (e.g. G8 or WTO).

<sup>3</sup> Polet 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Appelbaum and Robinson 2005.

contemporary corporate globalization, neoliberal hegemony and US military dominance is contested.<sup>5</sup> The movements that converge at WSF articulate so different strategies, demands, ideologies, groups and technologies that if understood as *one movement*, as della Porta (2007) argues, it is a movement united around *heterogeneity*, a quite unusual identity of a movement<sup>6</sup> For the purpose of my argument it is irrelevant if the movement is one or several. We know for a fact that several movements are converging at the WSF. As an *arena for world politics*, in which contending social groups form the politics of the world, WSF is simply not enough, since it only unites one part in the struggle, excluding its opponents.<sup>7,8</sup> But WSF is one part in the constitution of an infrastructure of world politics, as a *potential candidate* of what until recently was mainly a theoretical concept: a “global civil society”. Against a united neoliberal globalization and US imperialism a global civil society will matter. Scattered societies and groups need to find their own empowering and mutual cooperation in order to stand a chance of self-defense and transformative struggle making other possible worlds a reality.

This article focuses on the specifics of the main institutional platform of the movement(s) – WSF – regarding its democratic and global quality and scope. Firstly, to what extent is WSF the forum of the social world, i.e. globally engaging the social groups of the world? Secondly, in what sense is WSF a participatory forum for the people that do participate? Thirdly, to what degree is the forum really the social world’s own forum, i.e. is the decision-making of WSF democratic? And, as a conclusion then, is WSF possible to understand as a “democratic global civil society”? I will shortly consider other candidates of global civil society and discuss the contested and usually liberal and Western understanding of “civil society”, just enough to make my argument clear. But I will not try to determine the conceptual limits of a “global civil society”, its history or wider relations to the political economy and its global regimes, or its relation to the global justice movement(s). This is not the place to discuss globalization, the

<sup>5</sup> Santos 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Vinthagen 2002, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Abrahamsson 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Global arenas of world politics exist today, built by the combined effect of a global confrontation chain between the main actors of globalization (the summit protests from Seattle 1999 to Rostock 2007), the contending networks of WSF and WEF, and the communicative network of networks (Internet), see Vinthagen unpublished.

world order or democracy as such but the role of the WSF within such phenomena.

### Candidates of Global Civil Society

There are other potential candidates of a global civil society, now existing candidates or historical. The 19th century *abolition movement* (against slavery) was arguably the first transnational human rights movement uniting various social groups in different countries.<sup>9</sup> But it was focused on a single issue of minor global concern for its world order of British Imperialism. And it was mainly a Western movement, building unity between activists in North America and Europe, lacking profound organizational links with African societies. The 19th and 20th century *internationals* on the other hand did include a greater variety of groups, also from within the Global South. But it was again an initiative from the North, uniting only a special sector of oppositional groups (Marxist parties and trade unions) and it was attempting ideological conformity (with one socialist or communist strategy).<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the internationals typically split into new versions of the international when ideological and strategic differences appeared (at least four internationals developed of which some still exist). The 20th century *anti-colonial movements* did produce its own networks, mainly through the Non-Aligned Movement initiated at the Bandung Conference.<sup>11</sup> But that was a unity of nation states, not of movements. On the other hand it can be argued that the *international anti-apartheid movement* was part of “the emergence of a global civil society” and thus a forerunner to WSF.<sup>12</sup> The period after the Second World War made for the first time a global civil society possible, according to Thörn (2006), through new media and the growth of international governmental organizations, together with the international networks of individuals, groups and organizations within the anti-apartheid movement. The networks of the movement was, in turn, possible through the political use of the new media – what Keck and Sikkink (1998) calls “informational politics” – transnational organization and

<sup>9</sup> Keck and Sikkink 1998.

<sup>10</sup> Santos 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Sen et al. 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Thörn 2006.

mobilization, and the mobility of activist travelers in which an “extended face-to-face interaction” made identification with the “distant other” concrete.<sup>13</sup> Such fostered “solidarity” united Africans in the neighboring Frontline states, Europeans, Americans and exiled South Africans with the struggle inside South Africa, and made an international anti-apartheid movement possible. Still, it is doubtful if it before it dissolved ever did sustain a global enough infra-structure possible to be labeled a “global civil society”. I would not argue against the anti-apartheid movement as part of the *emergence* of a global civil society, but would differ as to if it ever constituted such a society. The struggle was not globally and socially inclusive enough. Simply not enough national civil societies were enough integrated in the struggle. And again, the issue, anti-apartheid, was not enough of a global concern, neither for the majority of the worlds populations, nor for the guardians of the Cold War world order, even though the implicit idea of “racial equality” was potentially more controversial, at least if taken literally. The World Social Forum, on the other hand, contest the core of contemporary world order – neoliberalism and US Empire – and is so open for participation from anyone interested that it has been criticized for letting too many different groups to join (beside various social movements, also NGOs, Churches and academics) with too many ideologies and strategies.

### **The World Social Forum**

The WSF Organizing Committee states that WSF is “characterized by plurality and diversity, is non-confessional, non-governmental and non-party”, thus belonging to the civil society sphere (WSF 2007). Among the key documents outlining the World Social Forum is first and foremost the founding document *Charter of Principles* (COP) in which it is stated in the first paragraph that “The World Social Forum is an open meeting place for reflective thinking... by groups and movements of civil society... committed to building a planetary society”.<sup>14</sup> The Charter of Principles emphasizes plurality and open space and encourage participation of some movements/organizations (e.g. workers, indigenous groups, farmers, women,

<sup>13</sup> Thörn 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Together with a clarifying “Note from the Organizing Committee on the principles that guide the WSF”, see <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/>.

and youth) and discourage others (e.g. neoliberals and fundamentalists), while forbidding some (mainly military/guerilla, governmental and political parties).

The Charter need not be understood as pacifist and anarchist, only that it outlines a forum in which not all groups are welcome.<sup>15</sup> Already here it is clear that WSF is trying to forge a space for a new politics since the Charter rejects two of the main strategies of earlier liberation attempts: the revolutionary army and the oppositional political party. A second break with older liberation traditions is the rejection of joint resolutions at WSF. Since WSF does not have and do not strive to get a political leadership or joint decision body it also refuses the typical “conference declaration”. On their own initiative it is still possible for alliances of movements or specific meetings at a forum to issue their declarations, but then not as the concluding declaration of the forum but as their own, as one of several declarations emanating from the forum.<sup>16</sup> WSF is not a global party or new international but an “open space” for cooperation, networking, co-learning, campaign-building, action-planning and dialogue between various groups, organisations and movements. An open space is an interactive collaborative learning structure in which self-organised activities are encouraged.<sup>17</sup>

The administration of this space is run by the International Secretariat in Sao Paolo together with the Organising Committee (which is based in Brazil but assists and integrates new countries that host the forum). Nowadays the International Council with its 100+ members is the main decision body. But since WSF is an open space the Council only decide on the place, time, themes, organization and funding of the forum – the content is constructed by the participants. World Social Forum is today not only a massive yearly event somewhere in the Global South but a process of 50+ forums a year which are decentralized geographically, divided into

<sup>15</sup> This has of course created much debate within and outside WSF, although it is made clear that people from such groups can participate in their “personal capacity”, not as “representatives” of their groups.

<sup>16</sup> Still, some groups try to go around that. At the end of the forums the “Assembly of social movements” stages a mass-meeting and adopts a statement developed by some persons during the forum. This statement is sometimes treated as or mistaken as the statement of the forum. Prominent leaders of movements or intellectuals have at several occasions also issued political programmes for the WSF and the movement, stirring heated debates and accusations of trying to lead a movement which rejects global leadership. See Sen et al. 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Whitaker 2006; Sen and Kumar 2003.

specialized sectors or themes in which e.g. Mayors, Judges, trade unions, parliamentarians meet at their own forums.<sup>18</sup>

Participants decide themselves how to use the space. WSF offers firstly a space for learning and *info-exchange*. Secondly it makes *contact-building* and networking possible. Thirdly an option exists of *coordination*, to act in concert with each other. Without having to make decisions it becomes possible to act in awareness of the plans of other movements and organisations. Fourthly, and most ambitious, it is possible to use WSF as a space in which to *organise* together, create new campaigns as well as plan and decide on joint actions, but not through WSF as a *whole*.

### **The WSF as a Self-Reformable Process**

WSF has already from its start been experimenting with and developing its structures. WSF is a self-organized and collective learning process and not a fixed and ready-made model of how to do the new politics. It has a “remarkable capacity to reform itself”.<sup>19</sup> Its “self-reformability” and creative innovations are probably its major characteristic feature.<sup>20</sup> Even though WSF from its inception was a clear break with the authoritarian and orthodox left, it was a rather top-down event in the beginning, emphasizing a difference between ordinary “participants” and “delegates”, with mega-gatherings (“conferences”) within the forum in which prominent leaders talked to thousands. Still, the increased emphasis on self-organized sessions (“workshops”) is a break with this monologues mass-communication. WSF has evolved step by step into a more participatory process, especially from 2003.<sup>21</sup> Now sessions are developed from consultations with participants and concerned social groups into “thematic axes” (2003–) and all sessions are regarded as equal (2004–) and self-organized (2005–). Also the dominance of Brazilian organizations in the International Secretariat and Organizing Committee is broken. A strengthened International Council has made a broad involvement of various countries, social movements and NGOs possible. With the early decision to promote national, regional and special thematic forums and the change of location of WSF since 2004 the

<sup>18</sup> See “Social Forums around the world” at <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/>.

<sup>19</sup> Santos 2006, p. 46.

<sup>20</sup> Santos 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Santos 2006.

forum is increasingly integrating a global population in the process. Since 2004 the International Council leads the WSF process and new national Organizing Committees are integrated into the permanent administrative work, making the organizational teams more international. In response to maybe the major criticism of WSF from participants and outsiders – of being just a “talk-shop” with no clear program for action or alternative – various measures which facilitate cooperation around actions and campaigns have been developed, e.g. the “Wall of proposals” (2005–) and the 4th day of action proposals (2007–).<sup>22</sup>

### What Is a Global Civil Society?

“Civil society” as a concept is since the early 1990s inherently contested by various actors interested in their own use of civil society.<sup>23</sup> The positions end up between the liberal enthusiasts who make civil society non-confrontational and the critical pessimists who dismiss entirely such a Western concept.<sup>24</sup> A common view is regarding civil society as that diverse “third sector”, the non-governmental and non-commercial sphere of society in which groups of people in concert – in various formal or informal, more or less organized associations – try to “mould rules” of society.<sup>25</sup> But even as a third sector of rule-molding our concept of civil society can emphasize different aspects.<sup>26</sup> It can be a *counter-force* checking the power of the state(s). Or a *communicative space* (of cultural rationalisation and articulation of demands/needs) in relation to both the power-administration of the state(s) & money-competition of the market. Or a *transnational articulation of plural societies* (and universal rights) in relation to multilateral/global regimes and transnational corporations. Kaldor (2003) outlines different versions of global civil society in which it is possible to understand WSF as something of either the “activist society” building a global

<sup>22</sup> On “Wall of Proposals” see Santos 2006, p. 79. On 4th day of action proposals see [www.wsf2007.org](http://www.wsf2007.org) and Vinthagen (forthcoming). On the debate on a political program see Sen et al. 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Lipschultz 2004; Walzer 1998.

<sup>24</sup> see Axford 2005; Glasius et al. 2004.

<sup>25</sup> Scholte 1999, pp. 3–4.

<sup>26</sup> This division is reworked from Kaldor 2003. She also mention the earlier understanding of civil society as the law-upholding state (rule based civilisation with rights and security) in contrast to nature and the international “anarchy”, which is not applicable here.

public sphere or the “postmodern society” building a “plurality of global networks of contestation”, distinguishing it from various civilized, market or tamed societies.<sup>27</sup> Thus, in that sense WSF could be understood as a *radical and plural* global civil society.

A global civil society implies organized communication on a global level, with global public spheres, collective identities and collective actions. The communicative processes and organized structure of the World Social Forum make the articulation of global issues, identities, movement cooperation and network-building possible. A global civil society is not just the interlinking of 200 national civil societies but the institutionalization of a global public space, both in opposition to and functionally integrated with a global market and a global state. Today a global market already exists but no global state.<sup>28</sup> I still think a global civil society is possible. Some kind of state-infrastructure or complex of state-like institutions is necessary for an (emergent) infra-structure of a civil society to materialize. But that does already exist, although no coherent and centralized global state. Together with the UN, EU, the International Criminal Court, WTO, IMF and the World Bank there exists another 200+ international governmental organizations.<sup>29</sup> If there were no global regimes and elite networks of decision-makers to direct the demands to, social movements would not get organized on a global level. The global civil society, therefore, need to be understood as different to the national. It is:

*a political space in which a diversity of political cultures interact and intersect. Contrary to national civil society, global civil society does not have a single political counterpart. Rather, actors in global civil society often act simultaneously in different political arenas, in opposition to, and sometimes in alliance with, supra-national organizations as well as nation states and local Councils.<sup>30</sup>*

Jan Aart Scholte (2007, p. 6) argues that a global civil society is a “trans-planetary political space where associations of citizens seek, from outside political parties, to shape the rules that govern one or the other arena of social life”. For Scholte, then, also business associations as well as tradi-

<sup>27</sup> Kadlor 2003.

<sup>28</sup> To Lipschutz (2004) that is a key problem making global civil society difficult to conceptualize.

<sup>29</sup> Thörn 2006.

<sup>30</sup> Thörn 2006, p. 205.

tional organizations do count as “civil society”. With such a broad definition WSF becomes a very limited expression of civil society. Instead, here civil society will be understood as inherently different and often opposed to market logic. The type of institutions and organizations that makes a relative independent articulation possible varies according to history and context of the society in question, but fundamentally it is *an organized facilitation of a communicative rationality*, contrasting the political economy system’s logic of power and money, as well as cultural status-hierarchies.<sup>31</sup>

In my search for a global civil society I am trying to understand a common and as such a *global quality* of different civil societies. My tentative proposal is that a civil society with a global potential is a society which, facilitated by dominant powers or in opposition to them, creates formal or informal, temporary or permanent *spaces of communicative rationality*.<sup>32</sup> This communicative space can be constructed separate to or within spheres dominated by states, status-hierarchies or markets. This means, as a consequence, that civil society is collaborative action built on communication that articulate needs and demands and mould rules without the use of organized military, state or corporate means or traditional authority (violence, power, money or status-influence). As communicative praxis civil society is inherently a democratic project. If we note the difference between the democratic idea and the present historical democratic institutions its emancipatory potential also becomes visible.

There is a great difference between the idea that the people concerned decide together through a free argumentative discussion in which these decisions are implemented effectively, and the historical institutions of the national and centralised system of liberal parliamentary democracy in which a majority elects a group of representative professionals. Such democratic institutions are a lot more democratic than earlier but still situated within a global apartheid system and a non-democratic market domination.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Habermas 1984; Cohen 1998; Cohen and Arato 1994. The (modern) civil society is not opposed to tradition per se but tradition as a final statement, cultural status hierarchies as monopolies of meaning, i.e. such sacred quality of certain positions, objects or values which negates critical reflection. See Cohen and Arato 1994, e.g. pp. 433–442, and their argument for a communicative rationalization of the culture, tradition and “lifeworld”.

<sup>32</sup> Kaldor 2004 argues for a similar “common core meaning” of the civil society concept which, although it is based in Western thought, is common for different societies. For her that is “a rule-governed society based on the consent of individuals”, i.e. rules grown out of communication between equals.

<sup>33</sup> Appelbaum and Robinson 2005.

The point here is that there are historical changes of democratic institutions and the moment when we believe that history has reached the end of democratic development, we will lose the little democracy we have. Instead there is the possibility to continue an old tradition of *democratisation* through movement struggles, in which we earlier have moved from the King to the Parliament, from property votes to universal suffrage, and now maybe have the possibility to move from a national democracy to a global one (which respect local difference).

Contrary to a conventional view a legal framework securing civic rights of organization and critical opposition is not necessary for a civil society, although often helpful.<sup>34</sup> It can even be argued that the new interest in the concept is a result of the recent anti-authoritarian struggles in Latin America, Eastern Europe and elsewhere.<sup>35</sup> The anti-apartheid movement in South Africa did forge a vibrant national civil society despite living under a systematic repression from a racial dictatorship. It was even possible for the movement to involve about one million people in a grassroots dialogue in which the future constitution was formulated. In 1992 the Freedom Charter was adopted at an ANC conference, in a voting process during which the dictatorship arrested participants. And this, in fact, has been and still is the normal way a democratic framework is created. The sociologist of history, Charles Tilly, has shown that democratization happens typically after a mobilization wave of oppositional movements, only sometimes before.<sup>36</sup> A civil society under an authoritarian regime is necessarily emancipatory (as being institutionalized civic communication).<sup>37</sup> WSF should be understood as such. Therefore WSF as a global civil society needs to be described as an *emancipatory* global civil society, not a classic liberal civil society.<sup>38</sup> WSF is as such attempting to liberate various (national or other) societies from the present non-democratic world order. But the question is if WSF is such a society in empirical reality?

<sup>34</sup> See e.g. Santos 2006, p. 42, as one who argues that a global civil society is meaningless without a “global mechanism to guarantee global civic rights”.

<sup>35</sup> Kaldor 2003.

<sup>36</sup> Tilly 2004a, 2004b.

<sup>37</sup> Kaldor 2004.

<sup>38</sup> According to Lipschutz (2004) a key feature for any global civil society is that it “is less a ‘problem’ for power than a product of power”, p. 205. Thus, a global civil society that do not want to be just a civilizing part of the neoliberal world order need to “(re)create forms of political sovereignty that can function, perhaps, in a counterhegemonic way”.

### **The WSF as a Democratic Open Space?**

Within WSF there is a *lack of a formal leadership* since no one can represent the WSF as a unit but a de-facto *informal leadership* of influential individuals (e.g. Cassen, Whitaker, Amin, George, Shiva, Bello) and leaders from influential organisations (e.g. some French and Brazilian organisations such as Attac, CUT and MST). Thus, the power structure of WSF is formal in the construction of *the forum as a space*, through the Council and the Secretariat, and informal in *the use of that space*.<sup>39</sup> The use of the “open” space in which campaigns, declarations, understandings and actions are formulated is, in the absence of formal rules of decisions, dominated by some persons and organizations of status. This is a serious problem since WSF as a space of heterogeneity incorporates numerous political conflicts. The conflicts, differences and tensions within the global justice movement, as a “movement of movements”, are immense, and they are played out at the forums. There are tensions between what has been termed “old” and “new” social movements, between NGOs and grassroots/peoples’ movements, activists from the North and the South, those believing in reform, transformation or revolution, between religious and secular groups, just to mention a few major ones... Since there is no formal decision-body it becomes unclear for all not-so involved how things are decided (since things are happening there are also, logically speaking, decisions made somewhere). The LSE Centre for Civil Society has shown that also WSF has a centre-periphery structure with some central organisations that have a lot more links to others.<sup>40</sup>

The informal use of the space is somehow both a major democratic deficit (for the vast majority of participants who will not understand how decisions are made) and a protection against ideological dominance from certain fractions (of which today we see e.g. a struggle similar to the history of the internationals between social democrats, communists and anarchists). It is indeed difficult to conduct deliberative democracy in a network structure like the WSF, but equally difficult to ideologically control the amorphous net.

<sup>39</sup> And even the formal level has informal aspects. The self-appointed International Council has since long had very unclear criteria for inclusion something that just recently been clarified.

<sup>40</sup> Anheier and Katz 2005.

Still, open space cannot be defended or developed by informalism. In a fundamental sense, “open space” is not possible; power and (informal) structure will always construct such a space.<sup>41</sup> And power becomes more difficult to handle without formal clarity and transparency.

### The Deficits of WSF

The main empirical studies display that WSF actually has a serious social deficit, global deficit and democratic deficit.<sup>42</sup> There is a *lack of geographical inclusion*. Each forum there is 50–80 countries that do not even have one (!) participant attending. Middle-Eastern, Asian (except South Korea, Pakistan and India), African (except South Africa) and Eastern European groups have weak representation.<sup>43</sup> Since 2004 there has been a positive improvement while it is still a problem. There is a *lack of social inclusion* of other groups than the typical participants of the educated, English speaking middle-class from Latin-America, Europe, North America and India. In these investigations it becomes clear that WSF draws an *elite of the counter hegemonic globalization* emanating from middle class sectors in their societies. A vast majority of the participants has a college degree, is employed and organized.<sup>44</sup> And as many as 10 % has a Masters or PhD... which, by the way, makes WSF one of the major academic gatherings (gathering yearly some 10–15000 academics)! From the Mumbai SF 2004 the trend was broken and several thousand Dalits (“untouchables”) took part. In Nairobi 2007 a big group of slum-dwellers also participated, although many more wanted but could not initially because of high entrance fees.<sup>45</sup> The world-tour of the WSF helps to increase the inclusion, as do differentiated fees for participants. Still, a major hindrance for inclusion remains the high costs of international flights. WSF as a global space cannot avoid favouring the more *resource strong movements/groups* that can involve in the preparation of forums and participate regularly (because of

<sup>41</sup> Nunes 2005; Freeman 1984.

<sup>42</sup> Santos 2006, pp. 69–72. See also the yearbook from LSE Centre for Civil Society: *Global Civil Society*.

<sup>43</sup> The national forums in e.g. Pakistan, Lebanon, India, Egypt, Palestine and Ethiopia are here important signs of the possible future change of WSF.

<sup>44</sup> Santos 2006, pp. 88–107. Building on surveys from WSF 2003 and 2005.

<sup>45</sup> Vinthagen (forthcoming).

the high costs of at least four inter-continental travels per year to preparatory meetings of WSF).

There is a lack of a *structure which facilitates joint projects or campaigns*.<sup>46</sup> Right now organisations and individuals present themselves at various workshops, bookstalls and seminars, creating a *political market-place*. The respect of each other, of various approaches to the same problem or different choices of important issues – is big within WSF. But the structure is badly adopted to facilitate actions and lasting collaboration (although it does occur anyway). The attempt with a 4th day of action proposals is an interesting experiment that might develop into an “open space of action-facilitation”.<sup>47</sup> A controversial debate is going on and fractions are struggling both on the formal and informal level, a debate which is framed as one between WSF as an “open space” or a “movement” (with a political program).<sup>48</sup> So far it seems like the support of open space is growing. But the battle is far from over and sometimes it raises to the level of groups setting up minor counter or alternative forums to WSF, in Mumbai 2004 by mainly communists (the “Mumbai Resistance” forum on the other side of the street) and in Venezuela 2006 the Alternative Social Forum was made up by mainly anarchists and other Chavez critical activists.<sup>49</sup>

### **Conclusion: The WSF as a Democratic Global Civil Society?**

[WSF] is not a ‘summit of grassroots organizations’ nor is it a world congress of a new international movement, but rather a free-form context designed for encounters<sup>50</sup>

The World Social Forum (WSF) is the, so far, greatest historic expression of a democratic “global civil society”. But it is a very limited such, more

<sup>46</sup> Sen et al. 2007.

<sup>47</sup> Vinthagen (forthcoming).

<sup>48</sup> Sen et al. 2007. This book is an example of how some of the proponents of the both sides engage in constructive debate with each other.

<sup>49</sup> The conflict between proponents of dialogue/open space vs. movement/action is sometimes polarized. While some argue that WSF should invite its opponents into the open space, others not only view WSF as a poor action generator but claim that WSF civilize the resistance and thus make the civil society tame (manageable for hegemonic neoliberalism). I would rather think it is an unwanted twin-effect of the attractiveness of WSF and the feeling of failure in the top-summit protests since the mythological “victory” in Seattle 1999 (when WTO was severely shaken by the protests).

<sup>50</sup> Whitaker 2006, p. x.

correctly described as a the most inclusive and participatory transnational civil society to this date. It is “representing this world as it fights for another possible world”, i.e. lives in and represents an imperialist, repressive and unjust world while it tries to transform it.<sup>51</sup> We all “exist against-in-and-beyond capital”, i.e. we are of this world, structured and defined by it, yet not only, still simultaneously able to say no, move against our being of this world.<sup>52</sup> Understood like that, WSF is a “critical utopia” in a contemporary unjust world of repression and social control giving people oppositional orientation and belonging, while WSF at the same time cannot become more utopian than its participating movements and groups enable it to be for the moment.<sup>53</sup> As such there is an existential limit to how much we can expect from the WSF. In an imperial and neoliberal world you *cannot* have a *complete* representation of a non-imperial and non-neoliberal world during a world encounter, it is just the way it is, and we need to accept that. At the same time, in order to be an emancipatory global civil society, to be against-in-and-beyond this world order, two criteria are helpful. Firstly, the WSF need at least to reach some kind of *minimal level* of global participation (“globalness”) before it can be labeled a “global civil society” and a minimal democracy in order to be seen as an emancipatory and democratic civil society. Secondly, it needs to be seen to move in an emancipatory, democratizing and globalizing *direction*. On this second criteria, WSF is strong. There are two reasons why.

The first and fundamental quality of WSF is its *experimental approach and self-reformable ability*, not only to itself as an organization but also to its political project enabling the collective work for other possible worlds. By not pretending to already know the means and end of another world, it opens up for self-criticism, collective self-reform and cooperative learning with mutual respect for difference and individuality. To my knowledge this is a unique approach to critical opposition at this level of mobilization. Normally radicals of all sorts – be that from the left or right, secularist camp or any religious affiliation – are people glowing with exclusive knowledge, arrogance and self-elect leadership over those with “false consciousness”, those who are not (yet) enlightened by the truth.

Secondly, judging from changes within WSF between 2001 and 2007 *a development on the path of its critical utopia* is possible to detect. WSF is

<sup>51</sup> Santos 2006, p. 85.

<sup>52</sup> Holloway 2002, p. 144.

<sup>53</sup> Santos 2006, pp. 10–12.

increasingly becoming a participatory space, a global space involving various social groups and nationalities and a space of collective action-facilitation. At the same time, though, paradoxically, its popularity and integration of new groups has led to an unsustainable growth. There is just so much new organizational measures can do. Up to a limit somewhere the forum cannot take on more participants without changing its form in a more fundamental way. Its contemporary mega-size is not only making it a nightmare to organize and accommodate for any city in the Global South, it is also, which is probably a greater problem, becoming an increasingly fragmented experience for those who participate.

But on the first criteria above, WSF is not as strong. The World Social Forum has a dialogical and participatory meeting culture, it attempts to create an “open space” and a “new form of politics” but still, it is not a democratic civil society, since it is dominated by informal decision and leadership structures and lacks proper formal structures for articulating agreements and disagreements. There exist geographic, actor and social (especially class, age, gender and race) exclusions that makes it a very limited space for various social mobilizations, while being an improvement from historical predecessors as e.g. the different internationals. Participation influence increases with the degree of English knowledge and Internet skills, with the money available for traveling and organizing, and with the personal network connections to the formal WSF leadership (IC and WSF Secretariat in Brazil) and informal leadership (key personalities). And certain groups criticize how they are made invisible although they do actively participate, e.g. women and young people.<sup>54</sup> WSF have the possibility to develop into something worth calling global if it develops enough of appropriate local, national, macro-regional, transnational and/or global formal structures that is able to facilitate interaction (dialogue and action) and decision-making without becoming a new “power-house” (e.g. a “5th International” or a “global party”).

One option is if WSF creates *permanent working groups on the 20-plus themes* already developed at the forums, maybe integrated with or in collaboration with movements’ own (alternative) theme-experts, e.g. on Water, Food Sovereignty or Militarisation. If these working groups developed formal organisations of democratic representation it might solve the democratic deficit of WSF by avoiding *WSF* to become a decision body but incorporating such *bodies* (in plural!) within WSF.

<sup>54</sup> Santos 2006.

I think the World Social Forum's structure (the "open space") – in Whitaker's words a "free-form context" – should be understood as *potentially* a real world version of the cyber-world "open source": WSF as a *real world Wiki*, i.e. a "do it yourself" format within a collaborative and collectively editable structure. WSF is potentially a globally accessible and interactive learning-platform with a protocol which can be improved through collaborative collective intelligence.<sup>55</sup> By offering a transparent structure for autonomous activity different grievance groups and movements can adjust the structure and fill with a content that fits their needs. It is a structure which is possible and necessary to develop. So far, it does not include globally.

The main threat or obstacle for the potential (real world) *WSF as a Wiki* is on the one hand the proposals of transforming WSF into movement in the line of an international with a central leadership of the struggle, and on the other hand, a halted self-reformability in its present participatory, inclusive and heterogeneous direction.

Thus, my conclusion is that the self-reformability of the WSF, its relatively unique globality compared to other similar attempts in history, its counter-hegemonic orientation and its communicative open-space makes it our first institutionalized *transnational and emancipatory civil society*. Still, it is not (yet) a democratic or global civil society.

The future of WSF demands that the plurality of a Wiki-kind of network creativity is combined with a collaboration of alternative theme-experts/professionals so that a *heterogeneity of perspectives* are facilitated together with *temporary unity in action*, with mobilization around common ground, alternatives and action campaigns. Some kind of framework for a strategy which both directs and limits a minimal set of goals, values and activities is unavoidable. Otherwise the heterogeneity will not act in any kind of concert but rather contradict itself. There are already some limits set, e.g. regarding armed rebellion. But there are others not regulated, e.g. regarding riot-making at summit protests. Also the use of other means need clarification, e.g. *how* to combine strikes, dialogue, boycotts, demonstrations, occupations and alliances effectively. With a joint strategic debate some kind of joint orientation and focus of movement mobilization will be possible to develop. And then an open debate on the

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<sup>55</sup> A Wiki is a media which can be edited by anyone with access to it. To learn some Wiki-basics see Lamb 2004. The main example is wikipedia.org.

movement's repertoire of various tactics, action forms and organization structures will be possible. It is self-evident that such a strategy framework need to be continuously debated, revised and improved, and it need to be flexible to context, issues and differences among the movements applying it. The challenge is to create something which is really different to earlier doctrines of party cadres and patrimonial relations, something which is itself an expression of the plurality of the movement of movements. But since WSF is already creating a new politics it should, I hope, also be possible to develop a new strategy for how to achieve that new politics on a global scale.

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