



# The political and its absence in the World Social Forum – Implications for democracy

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It has become increasingly accepted that the world cannot be properly understood through theoretical lenses that consider state actors as the exclusive domain of the political. At the same time, there has been surprisingly little systematic analysis of how the political is manifested in the actions and articulations of the globalisation protest movements that have been subject to much general attention since the spectacular street actions in Seattle during the World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting in 1999. The movements themselves have tended to pay more attention to making politicising claims about institutions considered their adversaries, such as the WTO or the International Monetary Fund (IMF), than to thoroughly debating the implications of the political nature of their own praxis. This lack of attention to the political nature of the articulations among the globalisation protest movements is also reflected in the way they have generally been analysed as members of an emerging 'global civil society', especially when these analyses rely on dichotomous oppositions between the political and the social or, to add another dimension, on the holy trinity of the political/social/economic.

On the one hand, I tend to be sceptical about the usefulness of the *civil society blah-blah-blah* that we so often hear in both academic and activist meetings. One example is the kind of talk where the World Social Forum (WSF) is posited as providing a social counterpart to 'balance' the excessively economic focus of the World Economic Forum. This kind of talk generally either assumes away questions of politics or looks at the political as something that simply has to do with the role of states vis-à-vis either of these forums. On the other hand, I would not want to deny totally the possibility of using 'civil society' as a meaningful concept, especially since the social movements and other social actors themselves often refer to it. For the purposes of this article I will not rely on any concept of 'civil society' as a pre-defined theoretical construct or analytical tool. I will rather focus on 'practices that are shaped in its name' (Amoore and Langley, 2004). In other words, I will refer to concrete social movements and non-governmental organisations that may claim to form part of 'civil society',

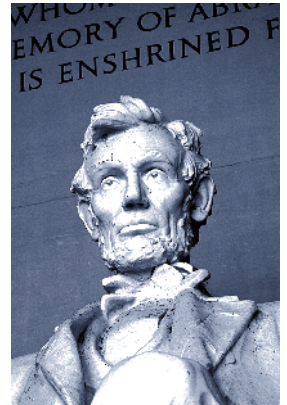
but my focus will be on the politics of their articulations, especially in the context of the WSF.<sup>1</sup>

### *‘Civil society’ and ‘democracy’ in the WSF Charter of Principles*

The WSF had its first annual gathering in 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and has thereafter become perhaps the most important global arena for social movements and networks that seek democratic transformations of the capitalist world-system. It offers an excellent case study for analysing the possibilities of global democratisation in the 21st century. On the one hand, it is an attempt to facilitate democratic transformations in local, national and global contexts and an arena in which these transformations are debated. Nevertheless, the WSF has faced various contradictory demands that have complicated the democratisation of its own internal organisational structure, which has been expanding from a mostly Brazilian-based organisation towards an increasingly global site of world politics.

The key document that defines the guidelines of the WSF is its Charter of Principles, elaborated between the first two forums, in 2001 and 2002. ‘Civil society’ is mentioned twice and ‘world civil society’ once in the Charter of Principles. The Charter makes clear that who gets to define ‘civil society’ at least in principle gets to decide who can take part in the WSF, because the WSF ‘brings together and interlinks only organisations and movements of civil society from all the countries in the world’. The standard definition of civil society offered by the Charter states that it is ‘a plural, diversified, non-confessional, non-governmental and non-party context’. In other words, it does not include representatives of political parties, governments or military organisations: three typically ‘political’ kinds of organisations.

Despite the oft-repeated lip service to the WSF as an open ‘civil society’ space, it is by no means open to all kinds of social movements and non-governmental organisations. There is no strict ideological litmus test to screen the participants. Rather than strict boundaries, the ideological orientation that the participants are supposed to have constitutes frontier zones in which many such organisations that may not be committed to all the elements spelled out in the Charter of Principles in practice take part in the process.



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1 For a strongly critical view on the usefulness of the concept of global civil society to analyse the ‘transnational archipelago of transnational interactions’, see Tarrow, 2002: 245.

According to the WSF Charter of Principles, the organisations that can participate in the Forum are defined as:

...groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neo-liberalism 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.

In the Charter of Principles, ‘democracy’ is directly mentioned four times. Whereas Clause 1 defines the WSF as an open meeting place for ‘democratic debate of ideas’, Clause 4, when speaking about ‘globalization of solidarity’ as a new stage in world history, says it will rest on ‘democratic international systems and institutions’. And, finally, Clause 10 tells us that the WSF upholds respect for the practices of ‘real democracy’ and ‘participatory democracy’.

The WSF by no means includes all the movements and networks that aim at democratic transformations. Its composition has various geographical, sectorial, ideological and civilisational limitations. The emergence of the WSF was, however, a key moment in the gradual shift of emphasis in the aims of many of these movements. The reactive protest dimension has been partially replaced by a more proactive democratisation dimension. A somewhat simplistic but illustrative way to locate this shift is to call the wave of activism that made one of its major public appearances during the World Trade Organization meeting in 1999 in Seattle ‘globalisation protest movements’ and to use the term ‘global democratisation movements’ to characterise the activism of the new millennium symbolised by the WSF. In other words, the WSF provided a channel through which many of the globalisation protest movements of the 1990s have become the global democratisation movements of the 21st century.

### *Politicisation as a method of democratisation*

As argued by Barry Gills (2002), the globalisation protest movements need to be viewed as ‘symptomatic of something far greater than a mere reaction to globalization’. The main question I want to pursue is to what extent the emergence and further expansion of a forum that these movements have created points to new possibilities to apply democratic principles in the globalising world. In this article I can only provide brief reflections,<sup>2</sup> and one of the issues at stake is how the movements have opened up new spaces for democratic claims by po-

2 For further elaborations see, for example, Teivainen, 2002b; Teivainen, forthcoming.

liticising such social relations that have traditionally been considered to be outside the boundaries of the political. Transnational relations of capitalist production and gender hierarchies are two well-known examples of the spheres that the movements have attempted to politicise. Less attention has been paid to the articulations and power relations between the movements themselves.

The road from politicising protests to transformative proposals is filled with dilemmas. The dilemmas become particularly thorny when the explicit ultimate aim is to articulate proposals of many movements into collective projects to create a radically different world. In such situations we must pay close attention to the workings of power not only in the structures that these movements want to transform but also within their own articulations. Even if the main slogan of the World Social Forum asserts that ‘another world is possible’, it is embedded in the existing one. The WSF’s organisational structure and material resources are in many ways conditioned by the existing power relations of the capitalist world.

For the reproduction of capitalism one of the ideological defence mechanisms has been depoliticisation of power relations, especially but not only those located in the socially constructed sphere of the ‘economic’. The new democratisation movements must face depoliticisation not only out there, in the world external to their movements. They also have to tackle the dilemmas that depoliticisation presents in their own internal organisational efforts.

The difference between the inside and the outside of the organisational constructs of these movements is never absolute. For the sake of analytical clarity, however, we can make a distinction between internal and external depoliticisation of the WSF. The former refers to the claims according to which the WSF is not a locus of power, as stated by its Charter of Principles. As an expression of wish this sounds excellent, but as a description of reality it is clearly erroneous. There are various kinds of power disputes within the WSF process, and if the aim is to increase the horizontality of WSF decision-making, denying the existence of current hierarchies is not a good way to begin. What I would call the external depoliticisation of the WSF consists of ideas and practices that consider it as a space where movements gather but which in itself should not have the characteristics of a political movement. I do not intend to claim that these depoliticising tendencies are necessarily always harmful or outright undemocratic. My hypothesis is, rather, that they have presented various kinds of dilemmas that the WSF organisers have only gradually started taking into account. The



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WSF has experienced a learning process that is political in two inter-related senses. Like any process of learning, it is political because it involves various relations of power between those engaged in it. It is also political by reproducing and confronting different meanings and boundaries of the ‘political’.

### *Rethinking the political*

The politicisation practised by the globalisation protest movements has been only partial, but it opens up new democratic horizons. Both within the movements and inside academia there is still much need for a radical rethinking of what kinds of possibilities politicisation opens for democratic transformations. The WSF process, however, embodies the idea that there exists a new conception of the political that transgresses traditional definitions, especially though not only vis-à-vis territorial states and political parties. As has been stated by Cândido Grzybowski (2004), the WSF participants ‘must be radically political’ and engage in a ‘new way of doing politics’. A key Brazilian organiser of the WSF, Grzybowski concludes insightfully that ‘we engage in a fully political act, but it seems that we fear its consequences’ (*ibid.*). Also many academic observers like Arturo Escobar (2004) have seen a ‘new theoretical and political logic on the rise’ in the WSF, even if its contours are ‘still barely discernible’.

To explore the political in the WSF and in the globalisation protest movements, it is important to move not only beyond state-centric conceptions but also beyond idealised accounts of horizontal networks that create new forms of participation that are assumed to be opposed or unconnected to questions of representation. The death of representational politics has been prematurely announced and celebrated by various activists and theorists of the movements (see Passavant and Dean, 2004). In the beginning the WSF organisers tended to exclude the questions of representation from the discussion on the new political logic within the WSF. There have, however, been increasing demands to deal with the perceived lack of representativeness within the WSF governance bodies. For example, during the first years of the WSF process there have been relatively few African or Asian organisations that have participated in the key decision-making bodies of the process, especially its International Council. Trying to deny the need to talk about representation became increasingly difficult as the underrepresentation of Africans and Asians grew more visible. And once talking about representation was accepted as a legitimate concern in the process, it was possible to consider the process in more political terms.

There exists a plethora of definitions of the political. As regards the sites in which the political can be located, Roberto Mangabeira Unger's two definitions of 'politics' provide a helpful starting-point. For him, the narrow meaning of politics can be stated as 'conflict over the mastery and uses of governmental power'. To analyse the politics of practices and spaces other than those directly related to governments, it is more useful to rely on the broader meaning, which he defines as 'struggle over the resources and arrangements that set the basic terms of our practical and passionate relations'. (Unger, 1987: 145-46.) Here I will take the broader meaning as my first starting point and consider the political not only in relation to state governments but also in other kinds of social relations including articulations between social movements.

A key question in defining the political is its relationship with democratisation, in other words, with the increase in possibilities people have to take part in decisions that concern the basic conditions of their lives. My second starting-point here is that to be political is to politicise and politicisation is a key aspect of democratic struggles. It means revealing the political, and therefore potentially democratisable, nature of such relations of power that are presented as neutral. Politicisation has been a central feature of many radical democratic attempts to expand the established boundaries of the political, including socialism (politicising the relations of domination associated with capitalist economy) and feminism (politicising the relations of domination associated with patriarchy).

One of my key assumptions is therefore that the political consists of the variety of social relations in which democratic claims can be assumed to be valid. The fact that many politicising projects have not led to effective democratisation has often resulted in disillusionment with politicisation. Democratic hopes of radical political movements taking over the state have over the past decades repeatedly evaporated when newly installed governments have started to practise structural adjustment as proposed by international financial institutions and other policies in which key decision-making tends to be shielded from democratic oversight. Politicisation is a necessary, but by no means sufficient, condition for democratisation.

Even if not synonymous with democratisation, politicisation is a necessary element in democratic struggles, both today and tomorrow. Whereas some radical theorists of the past have claimed that in a post-capitalist future politics could be replaced with an 'administration of things' (Engels, 1989), we can observe similar depoliticisation in the current claims that decision-making within the WSF can 'escape the logics of rivalry and power' (Whitaker and Viveret, 2003). As



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Chantal Mouffe (1993: 140) has affirmed, ‘to negate the political does not make it disappear, it only leads to bewilderment in the face of its manifestations and to impotence in dealing with them’. Relations of power cannot simply be fantasised away, neither in analysing how social relations have been nor in imagining or proposing how they could be. As one of the world’s most important processes in which social movements interact, and at the same time a site of sometimes ferocious power struggles, the WSF provides multiple challenges for rethinking the political. In particular, it offers theorists and activists a possibility to construct such conceptions of the global political that may be helpful for both knowing and democratising the world.

While the political should not be considered as exclusively linked to states, neither should it be conflated with the social by simply claiming that everything needs to be politicised (see Isin, 2002). Instead of the postmodernist tendency to politicise for the sake of politicisation, which easily leads to an endless cycle of deconstruction in which the construction of institutions is difficult, the real need is to politicise in order to open up possibilities for democratisation in sites of socially consequential power. My main focus is on such forms of the political that challenge the existing power relations of the capitalist world-system. Without pretending to locate the roots of all social power in the reproduction of capitalism, I would argue that while the WSF is explicitly opposed to ‘domination of the world by capital’, its organisers have to date paid insufficient attention to how capitalist power relations affect the internal organisation of the WSF itself.

### *Democratic challenges to economism*

The separation of the political and the economic is one of the mechanisms through which democratic claims have been contained under capitalism. According to the doctrine of economic neutrality, economic issues and institutions are somehow apolitical, beyond political power struggles and therefore not subject to democratic claims. With the constant, even if not always lineal, expansion of the social spaces defined as economic, the possibilities of democratic politics have been increasingly restricted.<sup>3</sup>

The doctrine of economic neutrality is most obvious in institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, but it also manifests itself in the WSF process. Especially during the first years of the process, questions of funding, labour relations and provision of services within the WSF were considered mainly technical issues, handled though a depoliticised

<sup>3</sup> On economism in general and what I call transnational politics of economism in particular, see Teivainen, 2002a.

'administration of things'. The fact that the WSF is organised inside a capitalist world is also evident in the disadvantaged structural position of participants from relatively poor organisations and countries. To claim that the WSF is an 'open space' may sound like a joke in bad taste for those who do not have the material means to enter the space. Furthermore, even if the organisers of the WSF have increasingly tried to apply the principles of a non-capitalist 'solidarity economy' in the forum itself, the apparently mundane issue of the logistics of accommodation has been heavily conditioned by the profit-making logic of the local hotel industry that especially in Porto Alegre has heavily raised prices to take advantage of the increased demand during the annual WSF.

One of the results (and also causes) of the recent intensification of globalisation protest movements has been the possibility to radically rethink the economic/political boundary. Not all these movements are, or consider themselves, anti-capitalist, though I am particularly interested in their potential to create conditions for a democratic post-capitalist world as well as the possibility to create democratic organisational forms despite or inside capitalism. Many of the globalisation protest movements have aimed at politicisation of global relations of command associated with institutions such as the World Trade Organization, World Economic Forum and transnational corporations. These institutions claim to be purely 'economic', and therefore not subject to democratic norms. One of the ideological contradictions of the contemporary global expansion of capitalism is that while the 'economic' institutions become more powerful, their political nature becomes, at least potentially, more evident.

The political nature of the economic institutions does not become evident automatically. The contradictions of capitalism create conditions for critical responses, but these responses are not generated without active social forces. The new transnational activism that emerged in the globalisation protests of the 1990s has made it more visible that 'economy' is a political and historical construction. To the extent that the movements can convincingly demonstrate that apparently economic institutions are in reality important sites of social power, it becomes more difficult for the latter to be legitimately based on inherently non-democratic principles such as 'one dollar, one vote'.

Economism is an ideological concealment of the political relations of command inherent in the 'economic'. These power relations are hidden behind the doctrine of economic neutrality, but we are not only dealing with an imposed illusion. When enough people act as if something called an economic sphere with an autonomous and natural logic really



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exists, the sphere becomes ‘real’, even if socially constructed. By acting transgressively, by politicising the economic through protests and proposals, the globalisation protest movements have created conditions for a radical unthinking of the economic/political boundary. The WSF is one of the main processes in and around which this politicisation has taken place. It is, at the same time, important to ask to what extent the WSF itself reproduces economism and creates apparently non-political structures in its mode of organisation.

### *Negations and affirmations of the political in the WSF*

After various annual main events organised between the first forums held in Porto Alegre and the latest one held in January 2007 in Nairobi, and a rising number of local and regional forums, one of the most controversial questions for the WSF is to what extent it should remain merely an arena where different movements gather and to what extent it should be conceived as a movement in itself. Another key issue concerns the dilemmas of making the WSF process more democratic. I would argue that these two questions have been tackled by the WSF organisers in overly depoliticised terms. The frustrations that this depoliticisation has triggered have, however, led to attempts to politicise the process through sometimes excessively state-centric understandings of the political.

The WSF may not be *a movement* of a traditional kind, but it needs to be *in movement* in order to respond to the challenges its growth has presented. One of the intellectual prerequisites of this movement is to think of the WSF in political terms that transgress both the traditional state-centric conceptions of political practice as well as the currently fashionable depoliticised understandings of ‘civil society’. The political needs to be embraced, resignified and used to create conditions for a more democratic world and a more democratic WSF process.

While almost no-one involved in the WSF process would hold that the WSF is or should be totally apolitical, I shall argue that there has existed a depoliticising tendency that has caused various problems for the process. Some of the problems related to the internal power relations of the WSF and to its role in the world have been innovatively confronted by the organisers over the years, but despite the learning process many of these problems remain.

The WSF was originally constructed as an ‘open space’ where movements discuss democratic alternatives to domination of the world by capital and to different forms of imperialism. Compared to the tradi-

tional methods of political parties and alliances of social movements, one of the novelties of the WSF is that it has avoided constructing mechanisms that would pretend to represent the WSF as a whole. No-one is allowed to express positions claiming to be those of all its participants. While this principle resonates well with the emphasis on horizontal and leaderless networks that many radical activists profess today, it has also caused increasing frustration among organisations such as the transnational peasant alliance Via Campesina, which would like to make the WSF more effective in proposing and promoting concrete strategies of social transformations.

The Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire (2002) once stated that in order to change the world we must first know that it is indeed possible to change it. This helps us understand one dimension of why during its first years the WSF has experienced a spectacular growth and provided so much inspiration for social movements and other actors engaged in processes of democratic transformation. The apparently simple WSF slogan ‘another world is possible’ has aroused enthusiasm because it helps break the demobilising influence of another simple slogan, generally attributed to Margaret Thatcher, according to which ‘there is no alternative’ to the existing capitalist order.

After repeating in forum after forum that ‘another world is possible’, many WSF participants have become eager to know what that other world may look like and how we are supposed to get there. Various participants have become increasingly frustrated with the depoliticised dimensions of the WSF. For some, the demands for a more political WSF have meant the need to create more explicit alliances with, or allowing more involvement by, traditionally political actors such as political parties of progressive governments. For others, the key challenge is to invent ways in which the process itself needs to be practised more politically without assuming that the only way to move beyond the frustrations caused by the depoliticised understandings of civil society is by involving traditionally political actors.

One way of distinguishing these different approaches within the WSF is to postulate a difference between ‘strategic politics’ and ‘prefigurative politics’. The former option has been expressed by politicians such as Venezuela’s president Hugo Chávez as well as intellectuals such as Samir Amin or Ignacio Ramonet, who claim that the WSF should move from being merely a ‘folkloric’ event or a ‘bazaar’ towards a more strategic role that necessarily implies a more explicit articulation with progressive governments.

The prefigurative option, based on creating for the movements and their articulations new modes of internal organisation that consciously resemble the future world they want to create (Grubic, 2003), has been prevalent among many participants of the Intercontinental Youth Camp, a relatively autonomous space generally located in the political and geographical peripheries of the major WSF events. The advocates of prefigurative politics have generally been critical of the internal hierarchies within the WSF, including those that result from an excessive association with governments, and opt for less state-centric forms of being political.

As pointed out by those who emphasise prefigurative politics, the WSF has not always practised what it preaches. In particular, the aim of constructing a democratic world has not been accompanied by sufficient attention to constructing democratic social relations within the WSF itself. At the same time, the criticism of the existing hierarchies within the WSF by youth camp activists and others has often been based on conceptions of horizontal networks or power-free open spaces that do not provide effective strategies for large-scale democratic transformations. In order to change the world, the democratic politics of the movements needs to be both strategic and prefigurative.

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