

The World Social Forum: Arena or Actor?

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1 Introduction

The concentration of power in transnational and global institutions was one of the most significant social processes of the 20th century. Nevertheless, democratic theory and practice have remained very nation-state-centered. Although there were some examples of cosmopolitan democratic thinking and transnational democratic practice throughout the century, most analysts and politicians simply ignored them. An example of a reasonably moderate attempt to democratize global power relations, especially as regards the North-South dimension, was the 1970s project of the New International Economic Order (NIEO). It did not, however, lead to any significant redistribution of power and was considered a failure by most commentators of the 1980s and 1990s.

At the very end of the century, the public perception of the issues at stake seemed to be changing. While, for example, designating the undemocratic nature of the International Monetary Fund as a significant political problem was generally not taken very seriously in the early 1990s, in the last years we have seen substantial crowds of people marching on the streets pointing out this problem. Global capitalism may have entered one of its most serious legitimacy crises.

The solidarity movements related to many of the earlier attempts to democratize global power, such as the NIEO project, tended to see the problem more in terms of inter-state relations. Many of the early 2000s' movements are perceiving the world in a less state-centric manner. Instead of asking that a particular Third World state be given more decision-making power in global affairs, today's activists may ask for more power to the civil society groups that confront both governmental and corporate power all over the world. This trend holds many promising aspects. In order to imagine and construct institutional features of alternative futures, however, we may need political structures that "civil society", as it is generally conceived, is unlikely to deliver.

The Battle in Seattle during the World Trade Organization meeting in 1999 boosted the local, transnational and global organizations and movements protesting against undemocratic sites of global power.² In recent years, we have observed the emergence of an increasing number of arenas that attract civil society organizations and active citizens to express concern about capitalist globalization. The arenas are varied, in terms of both political orientation and organizational design. The spectacular demonstrations from Okinawa to Gothenburg and Genoa have received ample media coverage and become prominent models of critical civil society organizing. In most of them the main focus has been on defensive measures, being against something. While reactive protests may play an important role in democratic transformations, the concrete initiatives for the transformations are more likely to emerge from proactive meetings.

Many of the most visible civil society gatherings have been explicitly, and often antagonistically, related to events of the global elite. The principal meetings of the intergovernmental economic institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization, including its predecessor GATT, have been facing counter-events fairly quite regularly since the late 1980s, including the anti-Bretton Woods riots of Berlin in 1988 or the protests against the GATT

² See e.g. Emir Sader: "Antes e depois de Seattle". *Observatorio Social de América Latina*, enero 2001, pp. 5-8.

meeting of 1990 in Brussels. The lack of democracy in these institutions has been an increasingly important motivation of the counter-events.

More significantly but with less media attention, organized protests around these issues have been taking place in the more peripheral parts of our world. Some Third World observers, such as Camilo Guevara, characterize Seattle and other similar media events in the US and Europe as rather irrelevant for the great majorities of the world.³ While I cannot fully agree with his observation, it is undoubtedly true that in the poorer regions of the world there has been a lot going on before and besides Seattle. Middle-class youth protesting in a European or North American city have been much more attractive to the global media networks than impoverished peasants campaigning against structural adjustment programs in the South.

2 From Anti-Davos to Porto Alegre

The meetings of the formally private elite organizations such as the Bilderberg Society, Trilateral Commission and Mont Pelerin Society have tended to attract less public attention than those of the Bretton Woods institutions and other semi-public multilateral organs. Nevertheless, they constitute highly influential networks of transnational coordination in matters of global governance. One of the most influential and controversial of them is the World Economic Forum. The first informal business gathering in Davos, a Swiss mountain town, took place in January 1971 under the name of European Management Forum. Since 1982 the Davos meeting has focused on bringing world economic leaders to its annual meetings, and in 1987 it got its present name World Economic Forum.⁴

In January 1999, after various years of preparations, various organizations started organizing a counter-event in Switzerland under the banners of “another Davos” and “anti-Davos”. Apart from the World Forum of Alternatives, these included the French journal *Le Monde Diplomatique* and ATTAC, founded in France in June 1998.⁵ In the first major anti-Davos event, organized simultaneously with the WEF 2000, various groups ranging from the World Women's March to the Brazilian Landless Rural Workers first had a seminar in Zurich and then marched to Davos to hold a press conference and, some 150 of them, to face cold weather and Robocop-like police in a demonstration.⁶ The difficult geographical conditions and heavy police presence contributed to convincing some of the key organizers that it would be difficult to organize a huge anti-Davos gathering in Davos itself.⁷

In Brazil, the concrete initiative for a worldwide civil society event emerged in early 2000. Even if the emergence of the initiative needs to be understood and explained in the context of strategies of various collective actors, it is also possible to point to some key individuals that played a key role in formulating it. The first formulations of the idea are generally attributed to Oded Grajew, coordinator of the Brazilian Business Association for Citizenship CIVES.⁸ In February 2000, Bernard Cassen, chair of ATTAC and director of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, met with Grajew and Francisco Whitaker, of the Brazilian Justice and Peace Commission CBJP, in Paris to discuss the possibility to organize such a forum. Their discussion produced three central ideas for the forum. First of all, it should be held in the

³ In my September 2000 conversation in Helsinki with Camilo Guevara, whose status as the son of Che Guevara makes him some kind of politico-cultural ambassador of the Cuban government, he argued that the Battle of Seattle expressed the illusions of an alienated Western youth.

⁴ For a semi-official historical overview of the WEF, see <http://www.weforum.org/site/homepublic.nsf/Content/Our+History> (13.4.2002).

⁵ Samir Amin & B. Founou-Tchuigoua: Integrated Programmes of Third World Forum For Calendar Years 2002, 2003 and 2004. Document of Third World Forum. Dakar 2002.

⁶ Personal communication with Susan George, 15.4.2002.

⁷ Personal communication with Bernard Cassen, 16.4.2002.

⁸ CIVES has sometimes been characterized as an association of business representatives that support the Workers Party PT. This connection became more explicit when Grajew started working as Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's special advisor in January 2003.

South, and more concretely in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre. While the Brazilians had initially thought that the forum should be held in Europe, it was Cassen who pointed out the importance of holding it in the South, and more particularly in Porto Alegre.⁹ Second, the name should be World Social Forum, changing only one key word from the adversary's name. And third, it should be organized during the same dates as the WEF, partially because this symbolism was considered attractive for the media.¹⁰

Soon after it was clear that apart from *Le Monde Diplomatique* and ATTAC many other organizations influential within transnational activist networks would support the initiative, eight Brazilian civil society organizations decided to form the Organizing Committee of the forum. In March 2000 they formally secured the support of the municipal government of Porto Alegre and the state government of Rio Grande do Sul, both controlled at the time by the Workers Party PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores).¹¹ Initially it was especially the mayor of Porto Alegre, Raul Pont, who received the idea with great enthusiasm, but soon also the state government led by governor Olivio Dutra decided to dedicate plenty of time and effort into the WSF process.¹² The idea was presented internationally by Miguel Rossetto, vice-governor of Rio Grande do Sul, in June 2000 during an alternative UN meeting in Geneva.

3 Local Roots of a Global Event

Events conceived in transnational contexts may often have relatively weak roots in the locality where they are organized. In the World Social Forum of Porto Alegre, this has not been the case. Porto Alegre, the capital of the Rio Grande do Sul state in southern Brazil, is one of the most important strongholds of the Workers Party PT. Already during Brazil's military rule, the city was a center of resistance with energetic neighborhood associations.¹³ Founded in 1980, the PT has deep roots in these associations, trade unions, catholic organizations, women's movements and many other parts of the vibrant Brazilian civil society.¹⁴ One of the most important strengths of the PT has always been its ability to gather support from and critically articulate with emancipatory civil society groups.

Porto Alegre was a smart choice for hosting the World Social Forum also because both municipal and state governments were willing to allocate significant material and human resources to the event. The possibilities of autonomous state and municipal policies had been enhanced by the 1988 Federal Constitution that increased resource transfer to and taxation powers of the local authorities.¹⁵ In 2002 the municipality provided approximately USD 300 000 and the state USD one million for the event. In 2003, there was some increase in the money invested by the municipal government and a substantial decrease in the investment by the state government. This was to a significant extent a consequence of the electoral defeat of the PT in the October 2002 governor elections. The new state government led by Germano Rigotto, from the center-right PMPD party, decided to cut the money the preceding PT government had budgeted for the 2003 forum (which had in dollar terms already been slightly less than the sum invested in 2002). Not surprisingly, the new federal government of Lula da Silva decided to compensate for the cuts of the state government.¹⁶ Even though governor Rigotto repeated in many

⁹ Emir Sader "Porto Alegre, até logo", *Zero Hora* 28.1.2003, p. 19.

¹⁰ Personal communication with Bernard Cassen, 16.4.2002; also Bernard Cassen: Comment est né le Forum social mondial. Unpublished manuscript, 2002.

¹¹ On the origins of the WSF, see Francisco Whitaker "Fórum Social Mundial: origens e objetivos", at <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/por/qorigem.asp> (13.4.2002).

¹² Personal communication with Jefferson Miola 20.4.2002.

¹³ Hilary Wainwright "Porto Alegre: Public Power beyond the State", in Sue Bradford and Bernardo Kucinski *Politics Transformed: Lula and the Workers Party in Brazil*. London: Latin America Bureau 2003, pp. 103-133.

¹⁴ On the origins of the PT in Rio Grande do Sul, see e.g. Paulo Prestes: *13 Leituras Petistas*. Porto Alegre 1999, pp. 72-76.

¹⁵ Rebecca Abers: Overcoming the Dilemmas of Participatory Democracy: The Participatory Budget Policy in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Unpublished manuscript, n.d..

¹⁶ The approximate 2003 figures were USD 500 00 by the state government, USD 450 000 by the municipal government and USD 370 000 by the federal government. The federal contribution was allocated through the companies Petrobras and Banco

declarations that his new government remained very willing to host the WSF events, the relationship with the state government has clearly changed. A symbolic expression of this was the intense booing when the new governor left the congress hall during the opening ceremony of WSF III.

Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Brazil's president during the first two forums, has criticized the local authorities of mispending taxpayers' resources. According to most estimates the thousands of visitors filling local hotels, restaurants and other commercial establishments bring in much more money than what is spent by the local authorities in organizing the forum. This is also a major reason for the municipal and state governments of different political backgrounds to have a welcoming attitude toward the WSF.

Whereas in short-term commercial terms the WSF is considered a good deal by most locals, in ideological terms not everyone agrees. Two months after the WSF 2002, various business organizations and right-wing groups of Rio Grande do Sul organized a Forum of Liberties, with positions openly critical of the World Social Forum.¹⁷ During the WSF 2003, a bomb threat paralyzed some of the activities for a short moment. The local press speculated that the cardboard box containing sand, wires, a clock and a hand-written note stating that it was a bomb was probably a "joke of bad taste" by some participant of the forum.¹⁸ Despite these marginal expressions of animosity, for many international participants who had been taking part in massive protests elsewhere, the welcoming attitude of the Porto Alegre residents was one of the most pleasant aspects of the event.

4 Who Governs?

Naomi Klein characterized the organizational structure of the first World Social Forum as "so opaque that it was nearly impossible to figure out how decisions were made".¹⁹ Similar critical remarks have been raised by many others in all the annual editions of the WSF main event. Even if according to the WSF Charter of Principles the forum "does not constitute a locus of power to be disputed by the participants", disputes of power do exist.

The formal decision-making power of the WSF process has been mainly in the hands of the Organizing Committee, consisting since its foundation of the Central Trade Union Confederation CUT (*Central Única dos Trabalhadores*), the Movement of Landless Rural Workers MST (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*) and six smaller Brazilian civil society organizations.²⁰ In terms of sheer numbers of affiliates, there is a huge difference between the two big ones and the others. In the decision-making process within the Organizing Committee, the CUT and MST have generally acted "generously" towards the smaller organizations. In this sense, the disparity of resources has generally not translated into significant disparities in the decision-making power. The disparity in resources should, however, not be exaggerated. Even if much smaller, some of the participating NGOs may have better access to financial resources than especially the MST. The role of IBASE, a Rio-based socially engaged research institute, has been particularly important in fund-raising for the WSF.

do Brasil. "Governo Lula compensa corte de gastos com Fórum", *Zero Hora* 21.1.2003, p. 6; Oral presentation by Cândido Grzybowski in the WSF International Council meeting, 22.1.2003, Porto Alegre. When comparing the dollar-based figures it has to be remembered that between the second and the third forum, the Brazilian currency real was heavily devalued.

¹⁷ *Zero Hora* 9.4.2002.

¹⁸ The threat led to a break of less than one hour in the forum activities at the Catholic University of Porto Alegre, see "Ameaça de bomba assusta o Fórum", *Zero Hora* 28.1.2003, p. 14.

¹⁹ Naomi Klein: "Farewell to 'End of History': Organization and Vision in Anti-Corporate Movements", in Leo Panitch and Colin Leys (eds.) *Socialist Register 2002: A World of Contradictions*. London: The Merlin Press 2001, pp. 1-14.

²⁰ Associação Brasileira de Organizações Não Governamentais (ABONG); Ação pela Tributação das Transações financeiras em Apoio aos Cidadãos (ATTAC); Comissão Brasileira Justiça e Paz (CBJP); Associação Brasileira de Empresários pela Cidadania (CIVES); Instituto Brasileiro de Análises Sociais e Econômicas (IBASE); and Rede Social de Justiça e Direitos Humanos.

The other main organ of the WSF, the International Council (IC), was founded in São Paulo in June 2001. According to Cândido Grzybowski, director of IBASE, the idea to create an international council emerged in Porto Alegre on the last day of the first World Social Forum.²¹ During the following months, the Organizing Committee made a list of organizations that were then invited to the founding meeting in São Paulo. As of February 2003 the Council nominally consists of 113 organizations, though in practice many of them have not actively participated in the process. This number also includes the eight members of the Organizing Committee. Most IC members come from the Americas and Western Europe though many have activities also in other parts of the world. Organizations based in Asia and Africa include the Asian Regional Exchange for New Alternatives (ARENA), Environnement et Développement du Tiers-Monde (ENDA) and Palestinian NGO Network. According to some definitions the IC member should be regional or global networks rather than purely national organizations, but this criterion has not been strictly followed. Apart from the proper members, there are 15 observer organizations, mostly the representatives of regional and thematic social forums in various parts of the world.

The division of labor between the International Council and the Brazilian Organizing Committee has been ambiguous. During the first WSF the former did not exist. When founded, the International Council was assigned an essentially advisory role. Before the founding meeting in São Paulo, the Organizing Committee had drafted its name as “International Advisory Council”. The ambiguity of the relationship between the Organizing Committee and the International Council was already present in the São Paulo meeting when some delegates of the invited organizations raised the question “advising whom?” During the meeting, it was decided that the term “advisory” be deleted from the name.

The International Council has gained increasing importance in paper and, to a lesser extent, also in practice. Even if some observers have characterized it as “barely a rubber stamp”²², it has certainly played a role. For example, in at least two meetings the Organizing Committee suggested that the WSF main event should be held bi-annually rather than annually, and in both cases the International Council decided to continue with the annual meetings. The role of the International Council should not be exaggerated either. It is fair to emphasize its role in giving international legitimacy to the Brazilian organizers,²³ though this has not been its only role. Especially after it was decided that the main annual event of the WSF process in 2004 would take place in India, the linkage between the International Council and the organizers both in Brazil and India has become more complex.

A typical mechanism for making decisions in the meetings of the International Council is that the Organizing Committee, always present in the meetings, submits a proposal on an issue. Then the International Council debates the issue. The debate has normally been presided by the Organizing Committee, though other International Council members have also been given responsibilities in the running of the council meetings.²⁴ In case no clear consensus emerges, the Organizing Committee will have a separate meeting and reconsider its original proposal. In some cases, it will then (typically on the second day of the two-day meeting) present new proposal where the earlier discussion will have been taken into account. Normally, the new proposal will carry the day and most everyone agrees, more or less.

The underlying assumption in this working method is that the World Social Forum is not a deliberative body or actor that would take political stands and thereby need rigorous decision-making procedures. Until now the system has worked relatively well, making decisions through what some of the Brazilian

²¹ Personal communication, 23.3.2003 Amsterdam.

²² Michael Albert “WSF: Where To Now?”, in www.forumsocialmundial.org.br (17.2.2003).

²³ See e.g. Peter Waterman “From Comrades’ Agreements to the Reinvention of Social Emancipation”. Unpublished manuscript, 4.2.2003.

²⁴ It should be noted that the Brazilian Organizing Committee member organizations also have a membership in the International Council.

organizers call *construção*, constructing them in a critical debate and sometimes laborious consensus building. The International Council is not supposed to have mechanisms for disputing representation, nor for voting.²⁵ The only time there has been a vote was when in its first meeting it had to be decided whether the following meeting would take place somewhere in Europe or in Dakar. The overwhelming majority voted for Dakar.

The most difficult decision of the International Council thus far was made in January 2003 when the council decided to organize the WSF 2004 in India. Even if there was formally a consensus, a small minority argued strongly against the decision until the very end. The strongest opposition was voiced by some delegates from Cuba. Their main argument was that Latin America is the traditional stronghold of radical movements, the greatest expression of which being the Cuban Revolution, and therefore, as representatives of that revolution, they categorically opposed moving the forum away from the continent, in this case from Porto Alegre.²⁶

The composition of the International Council and its working methods are likely to experience changes in the future. The selection of the founding members of the International Council, mostly through invitations by the Organizing Committee, was reasonably easy when the overall process was still known to only relatively few networks. In the future, when there will be more groups interested in joining the International Council, more explicit selection procedures will, I believe, have to be established. There are indications that the question of fair representation will become more controversial in the WSF process.

Following its own plan drafted in April 2002, the Brazilian Organizing Committee has been transformed into the Secretariat. The ambiguity of the relationship with the International Council has, however, not been totally overcome. In some documents the renamed body is (self-)defined as “Secretariat of the International Council”, whereas others refer to “Secretariat of the World Social Forum”. The decision to organize the WSF 2004 in India will imply new changes for the governing bodies.

What is more or less clear at the moment is that Indian organizations now constitute a new organizing committee. It is much less clear what the composition and the role of the organizing committee and the secretariat will be in the next two years. The decision to organize the WSF 2004 in India was made simultaneously with the decision to organize the WSF 2005 back in Porto Alegre. It would probably have been impossible to reach the decision on going to India in 2004 without at the same time agreeing that the WSF 2005 will take place in Porto Alegre. Various International Council members repeatedly expressed fears that if the WSF leaves Porto Alegre indefinitely, and the next venues do not meet the expectations, the whole process might die out. Already fixing the place of the 2005 forum can be considered a guarantee against the unlikely eventuality that the process to move the Forum to India were to result in a catastrophe. In that case, 2004 could later be seen as a year in which there was no “real” World Social Forum. Some of the Brazilian organizers have in fact been arguing that the main global event should not be organized annually but perhaps every two years. In any case, it has not yet been defined whether the return to Porto Alegre in 2005 will mean that the old organizing committee consisting of the eight Brazilian groups will be reconstituted as the new organizing committee.

One aspect of the decision-making that has been somewhat neglected in the WSF process is the possibilities information technology could imply. Of course, much of the informal decision-making and strategic planning of the forum takes place through e-mail. The organizers have, however, been reluctant to explore ways in which cyberspace could be used in organizing more formal decision-making processes. Peter Waterman has argued insightfully and provocatively

²⁵ “International Council: nature, responsibilities, composition and functioning” at http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/eng/qconselho_1.asp (11.4.2002).

²⁶ The role of the Cubans has also been pointed out by Raúl Zibechi “III Foro Social Mundial: La hora de estrategias”. ALAI-AMLATINA 3.2.2003, XXX.

that the WSF “uses the media, culture and cyberspace but it does not *think* of itself in primarily cultural/communicational terms, nor does it *live* fully within this increasingly central and infinitely expanding universe”. He sees the WSF as “a shrine of the written and spoken word”.²⁷

In the new suggestions for rules and procedures of the International Council that will be discussed and possibly decided on in the next IC meeting scheduled for June 2003, it is mentioned that the use of cyberspace in the decision-making should be at least considered. There are people who consider increasing cyberspace use only to play in the hands (and pockets) of Bill Gates and the like. Some feel that increased reliance on the Internet could marginalize groups that have limited or no access to the Internet. On the other hand, considering the costs for a poor organization in the Global South to fly someone into a meeting in another continent may certainly be higher than taking part in a cybermeeting through the Internet.²⁸

5 From the Porto Alegre Events Towards a Transnational Process

For many, the increasing numbers of participants have been one of the most important assets of the WSF. The numbers are often used in the press to indicate the success of the event. The first World Social Forum in January 2001 attracted some 5000 registered participants of 117 countries and thousands of Brazilian activists. For the second forum, the figures had grown significantly, rising to over 12 000 official delegates from 123 countries and tens of thousands of total participants, mostly from Brazil.²⁹ The third forum in January 2003 was even more massive. Over 20 000 official delegates and roughly 100 000 total participants made the WSF III a truly massive event.

Others, however, thought that the number of participants and parallel events was too high for any strategically relevant debate on key issues. According to Roberto Savio, long-time director of the Inter Press Service, holding 1714 panels and seminars in the WSF 2003 led to an atomization of dialogue.³⁰ Correspondingly, Savio has proposed publicly that in future there should be severe restrictions to the number of people allowed to participate in the event. In his contribution, it has been left open who would decide who can and who cannot participate. Michael Albert has made a more concrete proposal on the issue. According to him, the main annual WSF gathering should be made a delegate event. In Albert’s vision, the WSF event would be attended by 5000 – 10 000 people “delegated to it from the major regional forums of the world”.³¹

It has become increasingly clear that the WSF is much more than a series of annual massive events. The main mechanism for the globalization of the WSF process has been the holding of regional and thematic forums in various parts of the world. Among the most visible events have been the thematic forum on neoliberalism organized in Argentina in August 2002, the European Social Forum in Florence in November 2002 and the Asian Social Forum in Hyderabad in January 2003. These forums have formed part of the semiofficial forum calendar maintained and controlled by the Organizing Committee/Secretariat and the International Council.

There have sometimes been tensions between the WSF governance bodies and the organizers of the other forums. For example, the Italian organizers of the European Social Forum 2002 wanted to use a declaration of social movements drafted by movements that participated in the WSF as the foundation of their regional forum. The Brazilian Organizing Committee, however, insisted

²⁷ Waterman 2003.

²⁸ I am grateful to Peter Waterman for articulating this point.

²⁹ These are the official 2002 figures, available at

http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/eng/noticias_numeros_FSM2002_eng.asp. Many commentators give higher figures.

³⁰ Roberto Savio “Menor es mejor”, *Terraviva* 28.1.2003, 6.

³¹ Michael Albert “WSF: Where To Now?”, in www.forumsocialmundial.org.br (17.2.2003).

in the Barcelona meeting of the International Council in April 2002 that the Charter of Principles is the only official basis for such events that are organized within the WSF umbrella.³² A further debate emerged in the International Council meeting of Bangkok in August 2002 when the Brazilians were strongly opposed to the plans of the Italians to invite political parties to take officially part in the European Social Forum. According to the Charter of Principles, the WSF is a “non-party context” and political parties are not supposed to directly take part in the activities. The Italian delegates present in the Bangkok meeting responded by accusing the Brazilian Organizing Committee of hypocrisy. The fact that the Workers Party PT has been visibly present in all Porto Alegre forums has often been considered to be problematic in terms of the Charter of Principles. The Italians claimed that the open violation of the Charter by the Brazilians had been always accepted by the participants in the WSF and therefore the Brazilians should not get upset if minor political parties play a small role in a regional forum.

Another controversy was related to the plans to organize a social forum event in Quito, Ecuador, in October 2002. The event was to focus on the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), coinciding with a FTAA ministerial meeting. During early 2002 the Quito event was in the semiofficial list of WSF events, but by mid-year it had been taken off the list. There was no public debate that I would be aware of on the issue, but one of the main reasons was the insistence of some International Council members that the Quito event would be too focused on one particular issue (FTAA) and with too narrow organizational basis. The event was organized, and many of the slogans and other symbols made it in many ways part of the WSF process even if it was not in the semiofficial list.

These controversies are examples of the organizational problems that the WSF encounters in its process of geographical and thematic expansion. On the one hand, there are reasons to maintain coherence and some underlying rules in the process so that the WSF brand does not simply evaporate. On the other hand, too much control by the International Council and the Secretariat is bound to place limits to the creativity and motivation of those in charge of the decentralized events.

Apart from the semiofficial list of regional and thematic forums, a myriad of local events have been organized under the banners of the World Social Forum. Many of these events have not received, nor asked for, any official recognition by the WSF governance bodies. Their proliferation is one of the most vital signs that the WSF process is indeed expanding. The fact that they are often beyond the control of any centralized WSF bodies gives also implies complications for attempts to see the WSF as a movement of movements with a more or less clearly defined political strategy.

6 How to Be and Not to Be Political

The WSF provides a space for actors that may construct projects in different contexts, both local and global. According to the organizers that emphasize this role, the WSF should avoid issuing declarations of support for any particular political processes. As stated by Cândido Grzybowski, “political action is the responsibility of each individual and the coalitions they form, not an attribute of the forum”.³³ Relying on a more pronounced dichotomy between forum as a space and forum as a movement, Chico Whitaker has criticized the “self-nominated social movements”

³² Francisco Whitaker “O FSM como método de ação política”, in Isabel Loureiro et al. (eds.) *O Espírito de Porto Alegre*. São Paulo: Paz e Terra, pp. 237-244.

³³ Cândido Grzybowski, “Fórum Social Mundial: a construção de uma utopia”, *Terraviva* 24.1.2003, 5.

that “seek to put the forum inside their own mobilizing dynamics, to serve their own objectives.”³⁴

Among the organizers and participants there have been different ways to emphasize the different identities of the WSF. For some they are by no means incompatible: it is possible to be an arena and an actor simultaneously. One of the expressions of this actor-identity is the term “movement of movements”. My impression on the basis of various discussions both in the International Council of the WSF and in the corridors of the forum sites in January 2003 is that there are increasing pressures to overcome the current reluctance to issue political statements. These demands often include a questioning of the way the WSF is officially governed.

One of the reasons for the reluctance to become an explicitly political actor is that the WSF does not have internal procedures for democratic collective will-formation. Therefore, no one can legitimately claim to represent the multitude of movements that constitute the WSF. Among those who share the view that the official decision-making bodies of the WSF do not have a democratic mandate to issue statements in the name of the WSF as a whole, there are different conclusions about this matter. Many in the governing bodies of the WSF tend to conclude that the WSF should therefore not even plan to become a political actor. More critical voices argue that the correct way forward is to create mechanisms for democratic participation within the political architecture of the forum. Once reasonably transparent and democratic mechanisms have been established, the WSF could more legitimately start to express itself as a collective movement.

The pressures for more explicit political will-formation are also expressed by and through the media. The press has tended to look at the WSF as a (potential) political actor in itself, while many of the organizers have wanted to downplay this role and argue that they simply provide a space for different groups to interact. These different conceptions of the event have clashed for example when the press has asked for “final declarations” and considered the lack of any such final document a proof of weakness in the organization. From the perspective of most organizers the idea has been not to produce any official final document of the event that would pretend to represent the views of the thousands of other organizations that have participated in the meetings.³⁵

The unwillingness to formulate political statements, beyond the Charter of Principles drafted in 2001, is occasionally questioned among some organizers and related actors who would like to see the WSF as an organization expressing opinions on certain issues such as the crises in Argentina, Palestine and Venezuela.³⁶ In two meetings of the WSF International Council there have been angry demands by some groups to issue a declaration on a particular topic. In the Bangkok meeting in August 2002, Walden Bello and others argued that the council should produce a public statement that encourages movements around the world to take part in the protests that will be organized during the WTO meeting in Cancún in 2003. In the Porto Alegre meeting of the council in January 2003, various delegates argued strongly in favor of making a public statement against the imminent war in Iraq. In both cases, the apparently consensual decision of the council was not to issue any such statements. It is, however, likely that there will be more intense debates on this in the near future.

³⁴ Chico Whitaker “Notes about the World Social Forum”, www.worldsocialforum.org (23.3.2003). See also Chico Whitaker “O que é o Fórum Social Mundial traz de novo como modo de atuação política?”, in *Democracia Viva* 14, January 2003, pp. 20-24.

³⁵ See e.g. interview of Roberto Bissio in *Cadernos do Terceiro Mundo* 239, 2002.

³⁶ The fact that in April 2002 representatives of groups related to the WSF International Council and Organizing Committee arranged an international observer mission to Israel/Palestine is an indication of the tendencies to increase the political protagonism of the WSF.

Some participants and observers analyze the WSF as an example of an emerging institution that may embody seeds of global democracy. For example, George Monbiot has suggested that it could form part of the process of building a “world parliament in exile”.³⁷ Some others who locate the WSF more explicitly in the historical traditions of socialist movements have visualized it as “opposition party” or “radical international”.³⁸ From this perspective, it is particularly important to modify its organizational design and the way its decision-making structure functions. The fear of many is that these modifications could lead to such politicization that would destroy the forum as a relatively neutral space that facilitates encounters between different kinds of civil society organizations.

One way to avoid political silence without violating the Charter of Principles is to facilitate processes whereby organizations that take part in the WSF produce political declarations. Ideally, most of the participating organizations would sign such declarations and they could have powerful political impacts. Until now, the social movement declarations produced during the WSF events have not been circulated very widely and their impact has been relatively modest. Nevertheless, they have created controversies among the WSF organizers. Even if these declarations do not officially claim to represent the WSF as a whole, Chico Whitaker fears that the media may consider them as semi-official conclusions. This can then lead to political disputes about whose concerns get to be expressed in the declarations.

7 Inclusions and Exclusions

One way the internal politics of the WSF have been played out is in how different groups have created or been given spaces during the main annual events. Racial tensions created some internal controversies, particularly in the first forum.³⁹ Even though during the Carnival and Soccer World Cup Brazil may show an image of racial harmony, racism is present in most walks of life, and it would be naïve to claim that it does not exist within progressive intellectuals’ ranks. For many observers, both forums have been surprisingly “white” events.⁴⁰ The perceived whiteness is not only due to the lack of large delegations from Africa, Asia and other parts of Latin America, but also to the fact that the average Brazilian participating in the forum is clearly “whiter” than the average Brazilian. It has to be remembered, as well, that Rio Grande do Sul is one of the rare parts of Brazil, Latin America and the whole Third World where many locals are light-skinned people of European, including Germanic, origin.

Gender tensions have also been present in the WSF. Even though there exist no major gender differences in the numbers of overall participants, especially the Brazilian Organizing Committee consists very predominantly of middle-aged men. In the International Council, representatives of feminist organizations and other women have played a more visible role and gender issues have been present in the program. Struggles for sexual preference rights have had an increasing, though still somewhat marginal, role in the events. There have also been other controversies on hierarchies and partial exclusions within the WSF, based for example on the celebrity status of some participants. During the first forum a group of young and angry participants raided the VIP room by one of the most transited corridors of the main forum venue. The room (with glass ceilings) had become the most visible symbol of the status differences within the forum.

³⁷ George Monbiot: “A Parliament for the Planet”, *New Internationalist* 342, January/February 2002.

³⁸ See e.g. Manuel Monereo et al. (eds.) *Hacia el Partido de Oposición: Foro Social Mundial/Porto Alegre 2002*. España: El Viejo Topo 2002.

³⁹ “Grupo afro lamenta pouco espaço”. *Correio do Povo*, 30.1.2001, p. 11.

⁴⁰ E.g. Michael Hardt: “Porto Alegre: Today’s Bandung?” *New Left Review* 14, March-April, available at <http://www.newleftreview.net/NLR24806.shtml> (13.4.2002).

The presence of representatives of the Cuban government and of the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC) raised mixed feelings in 2001. Open disapproval of Cuba's presence came mostly from outside the meeting, particularly from the local press. In Rio Grande do Sul, during the electoral campaign of 2002 the opposition sometimes claimed that the PT state government wanted to transform the state into "another Cuba". For the electoral strategy of the PT it was important to create an image that would not dissuade potential moderate voters. It was therefore not surprising that the Cuban representatives no longer had a prominent official role in 2002, even though Cuba's delegation was more numerous than the year before. The island's political visibility has in the last two forums been clearest in the marches and the surroundings of the venue where one could observe plenty of Che Guevara paraphernalia displayed by participating organizations.

During the first WSF, the FARC guerrillas received a lot of sympathy from some participants. In Brazil, the relatively strong anti-US sentiments are often reflected in solidarity attitudes towards Colombian rebels, and there were even extra-official recruitment efforts to create internationalist brigades to travel to Colombia. Not all the participants, however, were happy with the presence of a group accused of committing atrocities. For the second and third World Social Forum, the FARC representatives were not officially allowed to register as participants. The WSF Charter of Principles, drafted between the first two forums and approved by the International Council in June 2001, excludes the participation of armed organizations. Also the mistakenly approved registration of members of the Basque armed organizations was cancelled as soon as their identity was discovered in 2002.

Even if it is not determined whether the WSF will become a more active political entity with more explicit internal will-formation mechanisms, it is clear that until now the most important impact of the forum on democratic projects has consisted of the myriads of encounters between different groups and activists within its confines. Geographically, most participants have come from the Southern Cone of Latin America (especially Brasil, Uruguay and Argentina) and Southern Europe (especially Italy, France and Spain), but there has been a conscious effort to facilitate the participation of people from Asia, Africa and other parts of Latin America. Even though in numbers the Asian participation has been modest, the process has attracted increasing attention especially in India, where the WSF 2004 will take place. The participation by groups from the United States has been growing every year.

8 Limits of Civil Society Purity: Connecting with and Distancing from Other Kinds of Actors

According to its Charter of Principles, the WSF is "a plural, diversified, non-confessional, non-governmental and non-party context". Even if the Brazilian media often portrays the events as almost directly organized by the Workers Party PT, the party does not formally belong to the Organizing Committee. Its importance stems from the fact that many or the key civil society organizations involved in the process are somehow related to or sympathetic towards it, and that it controls the hosting municipal government. During the first and second forums it also controlled the state government and after the elections of 2002 it now controls the federal government.

The participation of Lula da Silva in the WSF 2001 and 2002 was technically as representative of an NGO he had founded rather than as representative of his political party. Having become the president of Brazil his participation was of different status in the WSF 2003. As a response to the accusations of using different criteria for different governmental participations, the role of the hosting governments, from the municipal to federal levels, have been given a special status in

recent semi-official formulations of the WSF procedures.⁴¹ Therefore as representative of a hosting country it was possible to include Lula in the official program, whereas the Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez who surprisingly arrived in Porto Alegre during the forum was not provided a space within the official venues of the forum.

The participation of various ministers of the government of France in the WSF 2002 was criticized by many delegates. During the same forum, the Belgian prime minister who had announced a visit was told by the Organizing Committee that he would not be welcome. He decisions on how to connect with governmental entities have suffered from a lack of coherence. The same is true of intergovernmental organizations. For example, certain UN organs have been actively involved in organizing activities related to women's issues, but at the same time the official line has been that intergovernmental bodies cannot participate.

In order to at least partially overcome these dilemmas, a new form of participation was designed by the organizers. In the International Council meetings of 2002 it was decided that the WSF would have a new category of events: roundtables of dialogue and controversy. Through these roundtables representatives of such institutions that are banned from the list of official delegates could be invited to debate and discuss. This institutional innovation was an attempt to combine two prima facie contradictory aims: to keep the WSF as a purely civil society arena or actor and not to become an inward-looking space for same-minded civil society organizations.

These roundtables did not have an important weight in the WSF 2003, but it is possible that they will be relied on more in future WSF events. The policy on who would be invited to these roundtables has not been clearly defined yet, but some key organizers think that representatives of some UN bodies could be invited, but for example the World Bank and IMF should be kept out.⁴²

The question of how to relate to the original symbolic adversary has also been repeatedly debated and modified. One of the motivations for the naming and timing of the first WSF in Porto Alegre was to attract media attention. The oppositional stance toward the World Economic Forum in Davos was combined with a search for a critical dialogue. The televised debate between Davos and Porto Alegre reflected the desire of the WSF organizers to engage with the adversary.

The global media impact of the second and third Porto Alegre forum was significantly stronger than in 2001. Even though the event was in all the three years organized simultaneously with the World Economic Forum, there were fewer attempts in the second and third year to interact with the WEF. This reflected a growing self-confidence of the organizers, some of whom liked to repeat that "from now onwards Davos will be the shadow event of Porto Alegre".

In the WSF 2003 there was, however, one particular issue that made the activists in Porto Alegre focus on Davos in their debates, often passionately. The decision of Lula da Silva to travel to Davos immediately after the WSF 2003 in Porto Alegre raised plenty of criticism among the organizers. In his main public appearance in front of tens of thousands of admirers during WSF 2003 Lula compared his decision to travel to Davos to his decision over 25 years ago to get involved in trade unions. His friends had been opposed to his getting involved with "dirty trade

⁴¹ In a meeting with the International Council during the WSF 2003 Walden Bello asked Lula if he would accept an invitation to take part in the WSF 2004 in India. Lula responded positively, but at the same time expressed his view that the WSF should not be transformed into a "parade of presidents". He added - half-seriously, half-jokingly - that if the organizers in India should have problems in inviting a foreign president, they should remember that his comrades in the Brazilian trade union still consider him a trade union leader and he could always be invited as such.

⁴² This was example was used by some Brazilian organizers in the WSF International Council meeting in Bangkok 12-15.8.2002.

union politics”, but the fact that Brazil has a vibrant and progressive trade union movement today shows that he was right to act against his friends’ advice. Lula was, however, not explicit about whether he believed the World Economic Forum could also be changed with equally progressive results. At least within the International Council, many remained skeptical.

Despite the commotion caused by Lula’s visit, the importance of the World Economic Forum for the WSF is actively being diminished. It does seem that within the WEF there is slightly more openness towards the issues discussed by critical social movements, in order to recover some of the lost legitimacy, but the movements are less willing to engage in a dialogue. The most important expression of this tendency is that in January 2003 time was finally ripe for the International Council to decide that in the future the main event of the WSF process will no longer take place simultaneously with the WEF.

In sum, the enthusiasm the WSF has generated around the world will lead to various dilemmas. Conceived as a civil society initiative, the WSF will probably have international organizations, governments and even business organization proposing it different forms of cooperation. Some organizers may emphasize the importance of clinging to strictly defined civil society partners, others are likely to have more pragmatic positions to obtain material and political support. The planned organization of the WSF 2004 in India will be a crucial moment. On the one hand it will provide a concrete possibility to give the process a better geographical (and corresponding thematic) balance. On the other hand, it may be difficult to find hosting local governments willing to dedicate as much energy to the process as has been the case in Porto Alegre.

The question of connections with other kinds of organizations should also be analyzed in terms of financial help and dependence. The WSF events have received sizable funding from organizations such as Oxfam UK, Ford Foundation and Heinrich Böll Foundation. This support has not created any significant debates on the possible conditionalities or relations of dependence it could generate. It should be taken into account, for example, that in order to get funding from the Ford Foundation, the organizers had to convince the foundation that the Workers Party is not involved in the process. Since the autonomy from the political parties has been important for the WSF organizers for various other reasons as well, the importance of the funding conditionality should not be exaggerated. In any case, the organization of the WSF 2004 in India may, however, imply more critical attitudes towards foreign funding.

9 From Anti to Alternative

Being anti-something can be politically useful, but only up to a point. The protesters of Seattle and similar events have been very effective in pointing out authoritarian aspects of the capitalist world-system. Even if various groups that have participated in these events do have programmatic statements for alternative futures, the way these events have been staged has not been very conducive in showing these futures to the world. The criticism of not being able to show a credible alternative, or any alternative at all, has become a problem for the legitimacy of the protest movements.

In most of the post-Seattle events, the protesters have often been labeled as “anti-globalization”, and some of them have used the expression themselves.⁴³ It would, however, be analytically faulty and politically unwise to simply define the movements as being *against* globalization, if the term is understood as the increasing transgression of nation-state borders on a worldwide level. Many of them are, I would claim, looking for a *different kind of* globalization, though

⁴³ Walden Bello: “2000: The Year of Global Protest against Globalization”. A printed article distributed at the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, January 2001.

some may prefer to use the older term internationalism. From a democratic perspective, the problem in some anti-globalization rhetoric is that one easily ends up with rather strange bedfellows. Professing anti-globalization pure and simple is not very helpful in terms of making a distinction between regulating the cross-border movements of speculative capital and those of black immigrants.

Outra globalização (another globalization) is an expression that has been emphasized by some of the key organizers of the Porto Alegre meetings.⁴⁴ Despite their insistence, the mass media in many parts of Latin America often talks of anti-globalization activists when referring to both Porto Alegre and some of the events inspired by it. The February 2001 protests related to a World Economic Forum regional meeting in Mexico and the March 2001 marches around the Inter-American Development Bank meeting in Santiago de Chile were the first big globalization-related protest events in Latin America after the first World Social Forum, and the media coverage of them often referred to the Porto Alegre event as an important moment in the anti-globalization struggles.⁴⁵

For those who want to argue for the possibility of a different kind of globalization, the risk of ending up with strange bedfellows is by no means absent. It is not always easy to see the differences, if any, of the “alternative” globalization proposals with the idea of many business leaders that some democratization is necessary in order to make the global expansion of capitalism acceptable.⁴⁶ Those who cling to anti-globalization discourse are often right when they claim that the alternative globalization strategies would only lead to very moderate changes. Often, but not always.

It is frequently assumed that in the anti/alternative divide of globalization debates, being “anti” represents more radical and revolutionary options, whereas the “alternatives” are on the side of more superficial reforms. In terms of thinking about how to democratize the world, this assumption is not very helpful. Within the alternative globalization specter, it is possible to find and even easier to imagine such political projects that strive for a globalization that radically transforms the world. While anti-globalization people can be pro-capitalist, pro-globalization people may be anti-capitalist.

Some of the debate and divide between the “anti” and the “alternative” is due to confused semantics or distorted categorizations. In order to fundamentally democratize the world, people who have chosen to regard globalization as a term that has been too polluted by its dominant usage and those that think it can still be given more progressive meanings can often work together. In principle, the World Social Forum offers many opportunities for this to happen.

Despite various references to the necessity of imagining and constructing a different world, the issue of democratic global order has not had a very high priority in the agenda of the World Social Forum. There have been claims by intellectuals and groups working on issues of global democracy that the WSF process has been too much dominated by nationalists whose discourse is dominated by anti-globalization themes. As noted by Michael Hardt, those who “advocate strengthening national sovereignty as a solution to the ills of contemporary globalization” have dominated the representations of the Forum. More polemically, he also claims that while the “non-sovereign, alternative globalization position” has not obtained a prominent place in the Forum, it may well have been the position of the

⁴⁴ Cândido Grzybowski: “Lógica econômica vs. lógica democrática”, in Grzybowski et al. *Neoliberalismo: Alternativas?* Rio de Janeiro: Publicações Novamerica, 1998, pp. 6-34. See also B. de Souza Santos: “O princípio do futuro”, at <http://www.worldsocialforum.org> (4.4.2001).

⁴⁵ In retrospective, *Financial Times* described the first Forum as a success. “Free trade still rules in Mexico”. *Financial Times* 27.2.2001, p. 6.

⁴⁶ Cf. Richard Falk and Andrew. Strauss: “Toward Global Parliament”. *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 80, No. 1 (2001): 212-220.

majority of the participants.⁴⁷ Be it as it may, one of the intellectual problems the World Social Forum has been the lack of open debates between different visions of how the world should concretely be reorganized if, as the main slogan of the WSF says, another world is to be possible.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Hardt: "Porto Alegre..."; see also Klein: "Farewell...".

⁴⁸ See Teivo Teivainen: "Conference Synthesis of International Organizations and Architecture of World Power", at William F. Fisher and Thomas Ponniah, *Another World is Possible. Popular Alternatives to Globalization at the World Social Forum*. London and New York, Zed Books 2003, pp. 290-295. Also available at www.worldsocialforum.org (2.3.2002).