The World Social Forum – A New Space of Politics?

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Introduction

For much of the 1990s neoliberal globalization was portrayed as inevitable.[1] Following Margaret Thatcher's dictum, that "there is no alternative," neoliberal globalization was depicted as an unstoppable force. A newly restructuring world capitalist economic system was transcending state borders leading to a hollowing out of the nation-state and the erosion of local cultures. Superceding the nation-state was a supra-territorial constellation of power consisting of transnational corporations, international organizations, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), and selected state bureaucrats in economic and trade related departments. In effect, the centre could no longer hold, power was dispersing and government was giving way to governance, in particular, global governance. These changes in process and structure were at the heart of globalization defined by Held, *et. al.,* as:

> A process (or set of process) which embodies a transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions … generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction, and the exercise of power. (16)

Increasingly freed of the constraints of the nation-state, and assisted by transportation and new information and communications technologies (ICTs), capital and the market were becoming global and universal, while politics, democracy and citizenship, it would seem, were to remain confined to the particularities of place. Yet, this vision of a globalized world was never entirely accurate. Throughout the 1990s neoliberal (or corporate) globalization faced resistance. From the Zapatista Rebellion in 1994, to the Multilateral Agreement on Investment in 1998, to the streets of Seattle in 1999, Davos in 2000, and Quebec City and Genoa in 2001 evidence of serious cracks appeared in this new spatial and institutional network of power.

Globalization, in sum, was losing its one-dimensional characterization, its processes being much more ambiguous, complex and contradictory. Moreover, the actors in the globalization process were expanding. As Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink have noted the 1990s were a period of transnational collective action involving nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and social movements which were emerging as a "powerful new force in international politics" (4) engaging these new forms of global governance in new arenas and venues of action. Yet, to a significant degree, the accent was largely on resistance with an emphasis on anti-corporate globalization activities taking place at the chosen venues of the institutions of global governance. In other words, anti-corporate globalization was being shaped by what it was in opposition to and not so much by alternative visions although these alternatives were beginning to be discussed.

By 2001 there was a marked shift in this regard. In part stung by the repeated criticisms that activists had no alternatives and nothing to offer but criticism the anti-corporate globalization movement moved on to new terrain, creating their own global venue, the World Social Forum (WSF). The WSF first met in Porto Alegre, Brazil in January 2001, in the global South, at the same time, not by coincidence, as the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, Switzerland.[2] The juxtaposition of these two forums, one intended to provide a space for the creation of a neoliberal utopia of unfettered markets and capital, the other to create a critical utopia based on the premise that "Another World is Possible" represents the latest stage of a dialectical process within globalization itself. (Kellner)

Only recently, however, has the WSF as an event, process, space, and political phenomenon been given the academic attention within political science that it deserves.

The intent of this paper is to address that gap. In this paper I will: 1) briefly discuss the purposes of the WSF; 2) situate its purposes and form of politics within a theoretical context arguing that it represents a shift in the way politics, democracy and the political can be perceived; and 3) critically examine its tensions, contradictions, strengths and limitations. My perspective is that of a participant obsever at four Social Forums – WSF3 in Porto Alegre, Brazil and WSF4 in Mumbai, India, the European Social Forum (ESF) in Paris, France, November 2003, and the Alberta Social Forum (ASF), October 2003, the latter of which included service on the organizing committee. Along with attendance at dozens of conferences, plenary sessions, seminars, and workshops and conversations with fellow participants, I have reviewed much of the available literature, both academic and non-academic (much of it on the Web).

The Purposes of the WSF

The WSF, if attendance is taken as a measure, was the right idea at the right time. At the first WSF in January 2001 approximately 20,000 participated. By the next year that number had risen to 50,000 reaching 100,000 in January 2003 and 130,000 in January 2004 (80,000 official). Undoubtedly what attracted so many people was simply the opportunity to meet, network, affirm themselves, discuss, engage and encounter others opposed to neoliberal globalization. The WSF is after all, a space, a meeting place that civil organizations and movements opposed to neoliberal globalization can call their own, a point underscored by the first principle of the WSF Charter of Principles:

> The WSF is an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism and domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism….

Probably the foremost proponent of the WSF is Francisco (Chico) Whitaker one of the prime movers of the Forum from its inception. Whitaker explains his view of the WSF-as-space in the following manner stating:

> A space has *no leader*. It is only a place, basically a *horizontal space*…. It is like a *square without an owner*. (2004, 113)

Whitaker then proceeds to claim that:

> It is a space created to serve a common objective of all those who converge to the Forum, functioning horizontally as public space, without leaders or pyramids of power. The Forum is intended to serve as an incubator of ideas, a space in which movements to contest neoliberal globalization are created. (2004, 113)

Much of the debate about the Forum focuses on these claims, that it is flat, horizontal, devoid of power relations and whether that it should remain only a space and not become an actor or a movement, points that I shall return to later in the paper.

Whitaker is careful to point out that the Forum is not a neutral space. Indeed, the Forum is a space of defined exclusions. According to its charter only those adhering to its principles may attend. Neither party officials nor military officials nor representatives of government in their official capacities may participate. Those espousing violence are not welcome.

The notion of the WSF as a space is underscored in its principles. For example, the Forum is not a representative or deliberate body and, therefore, does not make decisions or act as a body. Neither can anyone officially speak on behalf of the Forum. As a space the WSF asserts that "Another World is Possible", that the WSF is a space for creating alternatives to neoliberal globalization. Moreover, unlike neoliberal globalization which is perceived as leading to cultural homogenization, the WSF celebrates plurality and diversity, as a space of participatory democracy among all "ethnicities, genders and

peoples." (Principle 10) As a space it is a venue where nongovernmental organizations and movements can meet, "strengthen and create new national and international links." (Principle 13)

Finally, the Charter of Principles does not see the struggle against neoliberal globalization as being waged only at the global level although the WSF is clear in its intent to match the global reach and organization of global capital. Rather, as a process it "encourages its participant organizations and movements to situate their actions, from the local level to the national level … seeking active participation in international contexts, as issues of planetary citizenship" all with the purpose of introducing "onto the global agenda the change-inducing practices that they are experimenting in building a new world in solidarity." (Principle 14)

In sum, the WSF and its Charter of Principles seek to create a new imaginary with new ways of conceiving public space, politics, democracy and citizenship, an imaginary distinct from the politics of modernity.[3] In the modern era the study of politics has been territorially based, centring around the activities of the sovereign state. According to the Westphalian model of politics, the political universe is composed of sovereign states (specific territorial units with their own population) with exclusive authority within their boundaries. (Krasner) This model privileges a certain view of politics. Inside, state sovereignty structures a spatially delimited territory and political community. Outside, in the absence of any overarching community, the relations between states are characterized by anarchy and chaos. According to Walker:

> It is this proliferation, affirmed by accounts of the modern state as an institution, container of all cultural meaning and site of sovereign jurisdiction over territory, property and abstract space, and consequently over history, possibility and

> abstract time, that still shapes our capacity to affirm both collective and particular identities. (445)

The hold that the modern territorial state has upon our imagination is enormous. We assume that politics, democracy, and citizenship has been and can only be state-centred. For example, Stephen J. Rosow notes "since the revival of democratic theory in the eighteenth century, the *demos*, the 'we' of democracy, has been associated with the sovereign territorial state." (29)

In part the creation of the WSF represents a response to the corrosive effects of neoliberal globalization on the state and democracy. Neoliberal globalization is seen as posing a threat to democracy to the extent that it constrains states, undermines sovereignty and creates a system of global governance where capital dictates state policies. According to Brodie, "the ascendancy of the market over the state and *inside* the state … atrophies the public, closes political spaces, and further marginalizes the already marginalized." (7) The atrophy of the public and the problematizing of the state, territory, and sovereignty have, in turn, profound implications for politics and democracy. From this perspective interpretations of globalization which view a restructured capitalist system as operating in a global space of flows and politics as restricted to place "depoliticise democratic politics." (Rosow, 44)

Yet, at the same time I, argue, globalization assisted by ICTs create "fissures in the seams of the nation-state system" permitting new spaces of politics and democratic activity to emerge on a transnational basis. (Rosow, 43) Today, the WSF and its growing number of local, national, regional, and global forums are the best example of this reinvention of politics, public spaces, and democracy on a de-territorialized basis. Intellectually, then, the WSF encourages us to call upon a variety of theoretical

perspectives to analyse it as a political and democratic phenomenon without a territory or a centre.

The WSF in Theoretical Perspective

Prominent among these perspectives, I argue, is the work of Hannah Arendt.[4] Pertinent to an analysis of the WSF Arendt assists us in addressing such questions as where can political activity occur? How do new ideas and voices enter the political realm? How is public space created and preserved? Does politics and democracy necessarily revolve around state institutions? When customary venues and institutions of political activity close, where does politics go?

Unlike another theorist of the public sphere, Jurgen Habermas, who advocated an integralist, unitary, state-centred conception of public life and the common good, Arendt stressed plurality and the potential multiplicity of public spaces, spaces that are not necessarily state-centric. Politics and public spaces, according to Arendt, are not necessarily tied to any particular place, territory, or set of institutions, they can be instantiated in a variety of social spaces. Arendt contends:

> The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location, it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be. (197)

Consequently, Arendt claimed, "wherever you go, you will be a polis." These words, wrote Arendt, "expressed the conviction that action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost anytime and anywhere." (198)

Arendt's conception of politics and public spaces has an open and contingent quality that are not found in other state-centric conceptions of the political. The political and the public may occur in specific locations and representative institutions, but then,

again, they do not have to. The political and public spaces may be anywhere but not necessarily everywhere.

Arendt's emphasis on action, words, power, and contestation underscore her agonistic approach to politics. Arendt's conception of politics, much like that of Chantal Mouffe, involves both association and contestation. Politics is a kind of action in concert that is also a site of struggle in which we act both with and against our peers. (Honig, 1995:189) We not only act and struggle together to create and maintain political space, we also try to distinguish ourselves within it.

The emphasis on our desire for distinction and recognition within public space underscores Arendt's view of politics as a realm of appearance, performance and drama. According to Arendt communication is not strictly rationalist, "passion, drama, and the visual are all assumed to features of public discourse" and action. (Dahlgren, 1995:145) Through performance and communication we attract the attention of spectators with the purpose of communicating something about our common world. As Arendt observes, "no one in his right mind would ever put on a spectacle without being sure of having spectators to watch it." (Arendt, 1982:62)

Arendt's interpretation of politics and public spaces is historically specific and contingent. The fact that politics and public spaces are human creations means that while they can be created and expanded, they can also contract or close altogether whether through violence, through the disappearance of the political into the technical, administrative realm of bureaucratic experts or through colonization by a world of consumption. In sum, Arendt believed that in our age public space(s) had declined, that

there were fewer and fewer spaces available for political action and contestation over issues of common concern.

Yet, while public spaces were disappearing, Arendt believed the potential for political processes to create new public spaces always exists, that power, action in concert, can always upset or alter ongoing social process and create public spaces where previously they did not exist. According to Arendt:

> The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle. The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. (Arendt, 1958:178)

This includes the creation of new public spaces and (re)politicizating and (re)publicizing issues that had previously been depoliticized and depicted as bureaucratic, administrative and technical.

While Arendt tolerated representative government as an example of a public space, she much preferred direct, participatory, grassroots democracy. She believed, moreover, that there was a lost, but retrievable treasure of direct democracy, one that had been buried by marxism, liberalism, and professional party politicians. This treasure could be found in the writings of Jefferson, the anarchists Proudhon and Bakunin, and a host of innovations, and, albeit, short lived experiments. (Isaac, 102) Underlying these writings was a sense of rebellion and resistance against concentrated state power. What Arendt advocated was a direct, grass-roots, participatory democracy as a "kind of insurgent politics rooted in civil society." (Isaac, 102) In Arendt's estimation matters of public concern had to be open to all. As Isaac notes, Arendt "celebrates the average citizens ability to think, deliberate and act." (106)

Superimposing Arendt's view of politics on the WSF we find a number of parallels. These can be illustrated through a brief exploration of the ways space and democracy, and within these concepts, politics and the political, are reflected in the Forum process. What emerges is an understanding of the Forum not as a timeless, global unitary sphere but one that is variegated and closely related to time and place.

Previously, Whitaker described the Forum as a space, a square without an owner. However, he did not provide a sense of the pluralism and dynamism of that space and its relation to particular places. While this is a de-territorialized space in the sense that it does not centre on the activities of government and representative bodies, this should not be taken to mean that the Forum-as-space is not reflective of place, its particular local setting. The first three forums were situated in Port Alegre, Brazil, were dependent on local support and organizations, drew most participants from Brazil, particularly from the middle-class sectors of the heavily Europeanized state of Rio Grande do Sol, and focussed, initially at least, on the thematics surrounding neoliberalism and imperialism. WSF4 in Mumbai, however, provided a different hue to the Forum, first, in its decision to hold the Forum in Mumbai, a symbolic statement to a city of financial power and conservative politics; second, in its rich diversity of participants drawn from much more socially marginalized South Asian groups including poor women, Dalits (Untouchables), and Adivasis (forest-dwelling peoples); and, third, by its introduction of a broader range of cultural themes including: patriarchy, communalism (religious sectarianism and fundamentalism), and casteism and racism.

India, in sum, Asianized the Forum making it at the same time in hybrid fashion, more local and more global. The regional European Social Forum (ESF) in November

2003 is another example of a Forum which, while focussing on neoliberalsm was reflective of a number of themes – war, democracy, and racism – but with a European accent reflecting European realities such as the European Union and its impending expansion and adoption of a new constitution. On a much smaller scale, the ASF (October 17-19, 2003) highlighted issues of global concern such as privatization, the Free Trade Area of the Americas, water, immigration, war, racism and poverty but from an Alberta perspective. In brief, each Forum represents an intersection of the global and the local.

Within the space of any Forum a variety of activities and processes take place at the same time. In one sense the Forum-as-space can be viewed as a short term popular university where one receives an intense education and critique of neoliberalism, imperialism, war, and other themes of the particular Forum. Not unlike a university one speaks, informs, discusses, encounters, shares experiences and develops lasting relationships. Yet, as in a university, not all of this happens inside designated spaces, for example, the classroom. It happens in other spaces wherever people congregate and offsite as well, including online. So, too, in these respects any Social Forum must be viewed as a plural space with both an inside and an outside.

Inside the Social Forum-as-space, in particular, the annual World Social Forum, one finds a series of conferences of up to 25,000 people, plenary sessions of several thousand, and seminars (200 to 1,000). Each usually features noted intellectuals and activists with the audience in most instances in a passive, consumptive role. Perhaps the heart of any Forum are the hundreds of self-organized workshops all addressing some facet of neoliberalism or a Forum theme. Sizes range from 20 to 150, and in the best

instances, pre-figuratively embody the democratic values and ideas of the Forum. Thus at WSF3 I attended a session sponsored by the NGO, Corpwatch, entitled "Strategy Session on Monitoring/Confronting Transnational Corporations." The session attracted 30-40 participants from four continents speaking a variety of languages, a potential problem of communication solved by volunteer translators from the audience. The session included a variety of shared experiences of corporate wrongdoing in mining, oil exploration, deforestation, and, in the case of Colombia, the murder of 173 union leaders in 2002, acts conducted, it was claimed, with the complicity of the Colombian and United States governments and a transnational soft drink distributor. The session also included a sharing of tactics, including tactics used against Talisman Oil of Calgary regarding its operations in the Sudan, and potential strategies for future action including the establishment of an online observatory to promote boycotts, mass action, the creation of manuals to assist judicial action, and the publicizing of instances of corporate abuse. Not all workshops at the various Forums I have attended have been this participatory. A significant number of Mumbai workshops featured primarily talking heads at a front podium.

While the various types of sessions exemplify the Forum-as-space in terms of its "inside" there are also "outside" spaces of a vast, at times, overwhelming spectacle charged with performative action. This year's Forum in Mumbai took on giant proportions. While 80,000 officially registered, another 40,000 were admitted who could not afford the nominal cost in Indian Rupees. With an additional 10,000 volunteers, the daily numbers that gathered on the site of a former industrial park were closer to 130,000. By no means did all those present on the Forum grounds attend the various plenary

sessions, seminars, and workshops. South Asians used the Forum-as-space in an entirely different way with endless colourful marches consisting of a wide variety of civil society organizations featuring music and dancing in a display of self-affirmation and promotion of their particular cause. This was combined with 150 street theatre plays put on by participants, a film festival, hundreds of book stalls, NGO exhibits, a media centre, and outdoor food courts all providing spaces where participants could meet, encounter, discuss, and network in the sweltering heat and dust of the Forum.

Some groups such as the Dalits (Untouchables) who attended in large numbers were instrumental in creating the Forum both as a public space of spectacle and performance and as space of encounter and discussion. The Dalits were among the most significant supporters of the WSF (Mumbai). Keenly aware of the negative effects of globalization upon themselves as a marginalized and mostly invisible minority, the Dalits were particularly concerned about the retrenchment of the Indian state in terms of welfare provision and the negative impact of urbanization, itself stimulated by globalization, upon the mass of their rural numbers.

The Dalits made skilful use of the WSF as a space of empowerment and a public space, a space of appearance where they could make themselves and their causes known. In preparation for the WSF Dalits marched and organized meetings in all 22 states of India to bring the pending WSF and the impact of neoliberal globalization upon their community to the attention of other Dalits and Indians generally. On the grounds of the Forum the Dalits projected themselves in a variety of ways, through, for example, colourful banners, marches, chanting and singing, all designed to draw attention to themselves. Inside, in a large number of sessions, big and small, Dalit leaders eloquently

addressed the impact of neoliberal globalization in terms of intensifying casteism and their dehumanization, denial of human rights, public space and citizenship within India. They addressed, in particular, the scourge of manual scavenging (the removal of human excrement by hand), a practice both unconstitutional and illegal but still widely practiced, a practice intensified by neoliberal globalization with its accentuation of poverty. Other sessions addressed a local (ie. India) and global strategy to combat manual scavenging and, more generally, the Dalit struggle, including the strengthening of a global Dalit Solidarity Network. Much like the Zapatistas of Mexico the Dalits are organizing on a global scale to draw attention to their cause and to name and shame the Indian government into action. This is a local-global pattern of interaction encouraged in general by the WSF, a practice analysed in more academic terms by Keck and Sikkink in their analysis of the creation of transnational advocacy networks. According to Keck and Sikkink:

> When channels between the state and its domestic actors are blocked [i.e. when public spaces disappear], the boomerang pattern of influence characteristic of transnational networks may occur: domestic NGOs bypass their state and directly search out allies to try to bring pressure on their states from outside. (12)

Advocacy networks, they note, are most obvious in terms of human rights campaigns. What is more, these networks may form in a variety of ways and places, including conferences, in this instance, the WSF.

Indeed, as a political phenomenon, the WSF is a product of, and incubator of, networked organizations. In this sense the WSF is emblematic of what Manuel Castells contends is a shift in a new global informational economy from an emphasis on vertical bureaucratic organizations to networked organizations. In sum, assisted by ICTs the

Social Forums as events and process have replicated the ability of capital and states to network in terms of scale, organization, and creation of venues.

The Forums, then, as space seek to vivify the abstraction of neoliberal globalization with actual experiences. These public spaces are amplified by the adept coverage of the WSF by alternative media, much of it online, intended to promote the Social Forum across boundaries of place and time, facilitating the creation of transnational public spheres whether it be a European public sphere promoted by the ESF or a global public sphere by the WSF. The result Appadurai claims is that "globalisation is likely to proliferate political spaces rather than confine them to a singular global culture administered by a political shell of liberal democratic states." (as quoted in Rosow, 43)

The WSF and Democracy

In related democratic terms the democracy engendered by the Forum-as-space and process stands in contradistinction to representative democracy with its hierarchical, territorial base and legitimizing intent. The democracy associated with the Forum and anti-neoliberal movements is commonly depicted as horizontal, participatory, non-territorial and agonistic. It assumes, much like Arendt, that the average citizen has "the ability to think, deliberate, and act" politically. This assumption of the capacity and knowledge of the everyday person to engage directly in political activity rests upon very important assumptions of knowledge, assumptions that challenge contemporary concepts of the political, politics and human agency.

As WSF participants Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Hilary Wainwright note, modern concepts of power and politics are, to a considerable extent, predicated on expert

knowledge, Western-based, rational, technical, scientific knowledge. This knowledge paradigm suffuses much of modern social and economic organization including the left. Implicitly, or explicitly, the left (their primary concern) assumed a vanguard role for the party and the state. As Wainwright notes:

> The presumption behind conventional social democratic thinking was that the state under the control of the party was the prime agency of social change, the engineer of social justice. … The role of the labour movement, the mass supporters, was to get the social engineers into place so that they could deploy the instruments of state. Implementation of policy was seen as a technical matter, best left to the experts. (11)

The left certainly has no monopoly on this concept of knowledge with its particular view of power relations and decision-making. Expert knowledge predominates in all forms of governance. This privileging of rational, technocratic knowledge is particularly noticeable in institutions of neoliberal governance such as the WTO. The WTO is commonly depicted as exemplifying a tradition in which state bureaucrats craft in secret agreements and deals with input from selected business and producer groups which are then presented to parliamentary bodies in national capitals as a *fait accompli.* In the late 1990s much of the opposition to trade agreements centred around these processes, an opposition that continues to this day all with the intent of subjecting any agreements to broader, democratic social control. Speaking at the ESF 2003 Antonio Triacario attributed much of the failure of the Cancun WTO Ministerial meeting in September 2003 to the insistence of trade bureaucrats, including Pascal Lamy and the European Commission, that negotiators were "talking about technical details not politics." However, Triacario insisted trade negotiations are very much about politics, democracy and power.

Much of the criticism of neoliberal governance is implicitly centred around whose knowledge should count and around unmasking the power hidden in corporations and institutions of global governance. In this regard both Santos and Wainwright concern themselves with alternative ways of viewing the relationship between knowledge and power. Santos calls for a new ecology of knowledge, one that makes avant garde, scientific, rational, technical knowledge just one form of knowledge. Santos insists that there is "no knowledge with a monopoly on the intelligibility of the world." (Notes WSF Mumbai) According to Santos "the concepts of rationality and efficiency presiding over hegemonic techno-scientific knowledge are too restrictive. They cannot capture the richness and diversity of the social experience of the world." (238) Part of this new ecology of knowledge lies in confronting the "monoculture of scientific knowledge with the identification and rigour that operates credibly in social practices." (239)

This theme is echoed by Wainwright who argues that at the heart of the rise of new social movements in the 1960s and 1970s was a questioning of what was claimed to be rational, expert, objective knowledge. According to Wainwright:

> These movements questioned the definition of which counts as knowledge, the narrowness of the sources of knowledge considered relevant to public policy, the restricted categories of people whose knowledge was valued and the processes by which knowledge was arrived at. (23)

Instead, Wainwright argues, new social movements as horizontal networks were built upon sharing the practical, everyday knowledge of their members. The women's movement, for example, was very much about previously isolated and marginalized women getting together and sharing and reflecting on others' experiences. This sharing of knowledge, experience and expertise was then frequently supplemented by other forms of

knowledge – theoretical, historical and statistical. (Wainwright, 23) In retrospect Wainwright claims:

> What had been invented in the first phase of the participatory left was an open, networking approach to knowledge which more recently has been qualitatively developed with – the sometimes double-edged – help of the Internet. (23)

As the above quotation implicitly acknowledges this is not a question of either/or in terms of knowledge forms. Indeed, the movement of movements against neoliberal globalization of which the WSF is a part could not exist without scientific, technological knowledge, in particular, ICTs. As Waterman notes the " 'movement of movements' is marked by its networked form and communication activity; a matter recognized by enemies and friends alike." (2004a, 56) ICTs permit not only the breaking down of barriers between previously isolated groups and movements, they permit a vast creation and sharing of a variety of types of experiences and knowledge.

In this sense the Forum-as-process and as space is both "articulated within and dependent upon cyberspace" and probably could not exist without it. (Waterman, 2004b, 92) According to a newsletter of an Italian website the use of the worldwide web by social movements

> has meant that previously utopian aspirations to reformulate the relations between the local and the global, to achieve non-hierarchical co-ordination between different actors, creative exchange between communities and cultures, now have the technological means for their realisation. (Transform)

As a space of politics and the sharing of knowledge the Forum is emblematic of the feminization of politics as a process of breaking down the isolation of marginalized groups and a coming together to share and reflect on the experience of others, a point not without irony at the Forum itself, as we shall see later.

The implications of the above for democracy are profound. Within the Forum process there is a suspicion, if not outright rejection of, representative democracy with its paraphernalia of electoral and party politics and concept of a non-political neutral, rational public bureaucracy administering on behalf of the winning party or coalition. Rather what is extolled is a direct, grassroots, participatory democracy that is moving into society itself on a variety of levels and not centred per se on state institutions. Perhaps no where is the failure to recognize this shift in the terrain of politics and democracy more marked than the historic left, a phenomenon which lead to a rupture prior to the WSF4 and the creation of what became know as the Mumbai Resistance, a point taken up later in the paper. Speaking more generally, older versions of leftist organizations "failed," as Osterweil states,

> to achieve lasting social change because they had a narrow understanding of what constitutes the 'political.' Today, many actors … have still not realized that if they truly hope to combat neoliberalism and oppression they cannot work only in the traditional political terrain. (186)

This new form of democratic politics that is being practiced is becoming more direct and, in many instances, confrontational. Moreover, this cannot be simply dismissed as a politics at the margins. Indeed, there is growing evidence to the contrary. Pippa Norris, for example, maintains that:

> Multiple newer channels of civic engagement, mobilization and expression are rapidly emerging in post-industrial societies to supplement traditional modes. Political participation is evolving and diversifying. (Online Chpt. One, 2)

The Internet, Norris argues, has been instrumental in facilitating alternative channels of political engagement. The model of democracy that is emerging is much more direct, pluralistic and contentious than ever. (Mouffe, Arendt) This form of democracy is increasingly *apropos* to the information age when politics is becoming uncoupled from

the nation-state and disappearing into networked forms, whether these be networked institutions of neoliberal governance or the networks of civil society organizations and movements challenging neoliberal globalization.

The WSF as Contested Terrain

As a form of contentious, democratic politics the WSF cannot exclude itself for the Forum "is a space for activism to turn upon itself." (Anand, 141) It is, as Osterweil notes, "a plural and contested space." (187) As such, the WSF has its own antagonisms, differences, and tensions that have become self-evident in recent years as democratic contention turns inward. This section will highlight some (but by no means all) of these tensions which can be seen as both strengths and weaknesses of the Forum process.

Particularly contentious is the claim by Whitaker that the Forum is simply a space, one without a pyramidal politics or power relations. For many, the Forum is flat and horizontal, a rhizomatic, nomadic network of networks. As Hardt and Negri assert "Davos was a small hierarchy blocked on a mountaintop and Porto Alegre an unlimited network expanding across the plains." (xvii) In fact, however, the WSF does have its trees, hierarchy and pyramids of power. Immanuel Wallerstein, for example, argues that the WSF could not function without an organization, one that is hierarchical, has power and makes decisions. (Author's Notes WSF4) What he and others are asking for is more transparency and accountability, particularly of the International Council, the association of 150 non-elected networks that decide "where the meetings are held, who will speak at the plenary sessions (the 'stars') and who may or may not be excluded from attendance." (Wallerstein, February 20, 2004)

Wallerstein's concerns are echoed by Teivo Teivainen, a member of the International Council, who argues that the pretence that "there are no relations of power that should be made visible within the WSF" de-politicizes the WSF. Teivainen insists that while the Charter of Principles proclaims the WSF "is not a locus of power," "not an organization," the WSF does have relations of power. (2004a:2)) Like Wallerstein, Teivainen calls for more transparency, particularly of the International Council and its Brazilian Organizing Committee composed largely of middle-aged men.

The patriarchical overtones of the Forum process has played out in a variety of ways. For example, at the WSF1 the feminist group DAWN had to fight to have feminist perspectives incorporated into plenary sessions. (DAWN) While in recent years the WSF has been more inclusive in sponsoring thematic panels related to gender and in including more women on major panels, the process is by no means perfect. In Mumbai, for example, a major plenary session on "Neoliberal Globalization and Its Alternatives" included only one woman out of eight speakers and that was as moderator, much to the consternation of many women in attendance. At the ESF 2003 the point was made at a seminar on "Feminism and the Alter-Globalization Movement" that while the movement against neoliberal globalization and the WSF embodied many of the ideals and values of the feminist movement, feminist perspectives were yet not fully recognized and integrated into the Social Forum process. (Author's Notes)

The issue of hierarchy and power relations, particularly those of gender, are related to and rivalled by the ongoing debate of whether or not the WSF should be a space, movement or actor or both. Whitaker, for example, cogently argues that the WSF cannot be both a space and a movement. Space, he insists, must be perfectly flat or

horizontal. A movement, he argues, implies organization, objectives, strategies, programmes, tasks, and leadership, in effect, hierarchy. Space, he maintains, can facilitate the creation of movements, but a movement cannot easily create a space such as the WSF and manage to attract the movements the WSF currently attracts. Similarly, Gina Vargas writes that a Forum-as-movement would deny the horizontal space of the Forum, preventing it from being the collective property of those desiring to use it. The WSF would, in effect, become a singular social movement "acting in the name of a wide and generic global movement in which inclusion is not guaranteed." (230)

Others such as Teivainen and Wallerstein feel that this position is too rigid. According to Teivainen "it is is possible to be an *arena* and an actor simultaneously" once "reasonably transparent and democratic mechanisms have been established." (2004b, 126) Wallerstein argues for a middle ground whereby the WSF would "allow space within its framework for the creation of networks who take action." (Author's Notes, WSF4) These frameworks, Wallerstein insists, should be recognized by the WSF. In one sense the WSF has moved in this direction by the emergence of a Social Movements Assembly at the global WSF meetings as well as regional Forums. At WSF3 the Assembly created a Social Movements World Network to be used as a means for international mobilization. (Transform Newsletter) In other ways the WSF has facilitated action. To a considerable extent the massive anti-war protests of February 15, 2003 which mobilized 12 million people around the world were initiated and organized within the WSF process. Finally, on May 19, 2004 the WSF announced it was intending "to transform the WSF into a space that is capable of facilitating interlinkages and common actions among different participants who together in the WSF."

While the anti-war protests indicate that the WSF can take action there is still a deep concern within the WSF process that too much emphasis is put on words, critiques of neoliberal globalization, and not enough on viable alternatives and programs for action. These criticisms are divided along reformist and revolutionary lines themselves reflective of a long term historical schism within the left. On the reform side are those such as Bernard Cassen, a prime mover of the WSF process, who lament that the Forums have produced "a lot of talk but nothing concrete to build on." Moreover, he insists, "we can't continue like this … going from Forum to Forum and repeating the same things. We have to create a common basis of propositions." Cassen also expressed the need seldom articulated at the Forum of the "need to take our ideas to those in power" implying the necessity of engaging in state politics. (Author's Notes, ESF2003)

Prior to Mumbai the frustration of some with the emphasis on reform spawned a breakaway forum, the Mumbai Resistance, a counter-forum to the counter-forum of the WSF. The Mumbai Resistance, revolutionary and Maoist in tone, held their counter-forum across the street from the WSF attracting approximately 2000 participants where they denounced the WSF as a reformist talking shop incapable of taking action, including violent action, to "smash" and overthrow the imperialist, capitalist system creating a socialist society.

By and large, however, there is considerable wariness at the Forums of any attempts to create programmatic alternatives, a process that is seen as exclusionary and hierarchical with a few writing the programme and the others following it. Others insist that "the purpose of the Forum is not to construct 'another-world' but *many* worlds," the

WSF providing space to network and initiate the process. (Anand, 143) According to one participant at the ESF:

> We don't need [an organization] to speak on our behalf or to build a unified programme. The politics of representation generate pyramidal bodies in which information flows up and decisions flow down. In the network society this kind of body is an anachronism. (McLeish, 3)

Still others point to the rapidly spreading Forum process at all levels across the world as a positive democratic outcome with their democratic grassroots involvement, an alternative in its own right to traditional modes of political action. In general, this reluctance to follow a programmatic alternative is commonly expressed within the WSF process.

Participants are also wary of programmatic alternatives, reform or revolutionary, that will lead to taking state power. There is a widely held fear that taking state power would split the anti-neoliberal globalization movement. (Pierre Khalfi, Author's Notes, ESF2003) While the anti-neoliberal globalization movement is widely anti-state in nature there remains a considerable ambivalence towards the state, with many seeing the state as "sometimes an enemy, sometimes … a friend" (Santos, Author's Notes, WSF4) and arena to defend the people. (Vargas, Author's Notes, WSF4) Moreover, there is little, if any, evidence of WSF participants willing to engage in the electoral process as a means to capture power even as they desire that the state be socially controlled by civil society. (Bello, Author's Notes, WSF4)

While there are other sources of tension and contention, I would like to conclude this section with an exploration of the role of intellectuals versus grassroots organizations within the Forum process. Intellectuals are given a prominent role at the WSF,

particularly at conferences, plenary sessions and seminars, too great a role to some. The exclusion of activists in favour of intellectuals has lead to the complaint:

> That, with unlikely frequency these central spaces within the Forum are converted into private space for intellectuals and academics that submerge into invisibility the most affected social sectors and that kidnaps the participation of social movements. (Nicholson and Egireun, 2)

As a consequence there have been increasing calls for these large sessions to be reduced in favour of the self-organized participatory workshops of NGOs and social movements.

The above claim is a proxy for the tension that exists at the Forum over what types of knowledge that should be privileged. Some such as Andrej Grubacic criticize the postmodern left for abandoning science and rationality quoting Noam Chomsky, a noted WSF speaker, in the process:

> To deprive oppressed people not only of the joys of understanding and insight, but also of the tools for emancipation, informing us that the project of the Enlightenment is dead, that we must abandon the illusions of science and rationality – a message that will gladden the hearts of the powerful. (Chomsky in Grubacic, 39)

Still others see these disagreements over knowledge as a source of strength. The openness and networked nature of the WSF process, this argument posits, permits those who differ to share the democratic space with some wanting to rescue science, modernity and the state and others who see contemporary problems as a consequence of hierarchy and rational knowledge. (Anand, 145)

One result is that all of the above tensions and differences make it very difficult to classify and create theoretical order over the WSF phenomenon. This too is a strength according to Peter Waterman who argues that the "secret" of the WSF "is to keep moving." Stasis, institutionalization, bureaucratization, all have to be challenged. The dynamism of the Forum, Anand argues, prevents scholars from "undercutting resistance

by showing how it works." (145) The very unpredictability, if not messiness, of the WSF process means that "it becomes difficult to represent or map the WSF as a single coherent event. It also makes it much more difficult to appropriate." (Anand, 146)

Conclusion

Today, the World Social Forum process has gone beyond being a counter venue to the World Economic Forum to becoming a venue recognized in its own right, no longer defining itself in terms of the other. In fact, institutions of global governance constituting part of the World Economic Forum have expressed a desire to participate at the WSF. When, in 2002, World Bank head James Wolfensohn asked if he could speak at the WSF he was refused. Presently, the WSF is less concerned about defining itself in terms of the WEF and more concerned about its own future path. While the Forum process has been successful beyond the expectations of its initiators, at least in terms of numbers, vitality and proliferation at all levels globally, in a variety of respects it faces an uncertain future.

To begin with, the spread of the Forum process to other levels has raised a number of questions. First, how much emphasis should be placed at the annual global Forum versus the others? The annual Forum with its increasing giganticism is a huge challenge in terms of organization and done on a shoestring budget. Its huge size is daunting, if not overwhelming, to most participants. Some have called for a reduction in size of the Forum with limited numbers of representatives of grassroots organizations and social movements attending. This, in turn, has lead to retorts that any such representation is hierarchical and antithetical to the spirit of the WSF and its Charter of Principles. As a way out there are increasing calls to have the Forum held every two years and place

greater emphasis on Forums at the sub-global level. The growth of other Forums also raises the question of how these other Forums can or should be controlled by the WSF itself and its limited administrative apparatus. At present there are very limited means of controlling what other forums do in the name of the Forum process as a whole.

A third vexing question has to some extent been addressed, that is, how imperative is it that the Forum process present concrete alternatives to neoliberal globalization? For some it is very important that this be done. For many other grassroots organizations this is not so consequential. They derive independent benefit by simply attending the Forum, being energized by it, taking advantage of the opportunity to share experiences and network with others. Indeed, one could argue that this is an outcome of the Forum process, deepening democracy, increasing social capital and strengthening civil society thereby implicitly reshaping politics in another image.

Another, often unasked question, is how long can the Forum process last? Would it continue if an empowered and more democratic state itself challenged neoliberal globalization, reining it in, producing a more equitable and fairer globalization process? After all, there have been historical reversals of the internationalization of capital and the market. In the late nineteenth century capital had much freer rein domestically and internationally but was circumscribed to a much greater extent in the twentieth century. Why could this not happen again given that the institutions of global governance are a product of state action? Or has politics in an informational, networked age moved so far into society ensuring that entities like the WSF will continue?

Finally, the WSF represents a challenge to political scientists and how they practice and think about their craft. As Karen Shaw reminds us,

> Any attempt to theorize the political today needs to take into account not only that the character and space of politics are changing, but that the way we study or theorize it … may need to change as well. (2003, 199)

In regard to the latter the imaginary of political science as a discipline is still very state-centric. It is not easy to place the study of the WSF within existing fields of political science. Perhaps the area of International Relations could be taken as a model where, in recent years, it has proven sufficiently elastic to accommodate competing visions of the political, making it less state-centric, welcoming scholars from a variety of disciplines, for example, sociologists and communication theorists, who serve to broaden the intellectual perspectives of IR.

Endnotes

[1] For a detailed exposition on neoliberalism and its relation to globalization see Phillip G. Cerny, "Mapping Varieties of Neoliberalism," 2004.
[2] For a brief history and overview of the WSF structure and process see Francisco (Chico) Whitaker "World Social Forum: Origins and Aims," and Transform, "WSF Governance: Secretariat, International Council and Organizing Committees," in Transform!, Newsletter number 1, March 2004, http://www.transform.it/newsletter/news_transform01.html, accessed April 19, 2004.
[3] By imaginary I am referring to the way we perceive our collective social and political lives. For analysis of the concept from a variety of perspectives see *Public Culture,* Vol. 14, No. 1, Winter 2002.
[4] While Rosow comments upon the potential utility of Arendt's work in discussing a global, de-territorialized democratic politics, he does not explore the potential in detail.

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