CHAPTER 3

THE POLITICAL AND ITS ABSENCE IN THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM:
IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRACY IN THE FORUM AND IN THE WORLD

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

dichotomous oppositions between the political and the social or, to add another dimension, on the holy trinity of the political/social/economic.

On the one hand, I tend to be skeptical about some of the assumptions behind the civil society debate that we so often hear in both academic and activist meetings. One example is when the World Social Forum (WSF) is posited as providing a social counterpart to “balance” the excessively economic focus of the World Economic Forum. This kind of talk generally either assumes away questions of politics or looks at the political as something that simply has to do with the role of states vis-à-vis either of these forums. On the other hand, I would not want to deny totally the possibility of using “civil society” as a meaningful concept, especially since the social movements and other social actors themselves often refer to it. For the purposes of this chapter I will not rely on any concept of “civil society” as a predefined theoretical construct or analytical tool. I will rather focus on “practices that are shaped in its name” (Amoore and Langley 2004). In other words, I will refer to concrete social movements and nongovernmental organizations that may claim to form part of “civil society,” but my focus will be on the politics of their articulations, especially in the context of the WSF.

“Civil Society” and “Democracy” in the WSF Charter of Principles

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

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

Despite the oft-repeated lip service to the WSF as an open “civil society” space, it is by no means open to all kinds of social movements and nongovernmental organizations. There is no strict ideological litmus test to screen the participants. Rather than strict boundaries, the ideological orientation that the participants are supposed to have constitutes frontier zones in which many such organizations that may not be committed to all the elements spelled out in the Charter of Principles in practice take part in the process. According to the WSF Charter of Principles, the organizations that can participate in the Forum are defined as groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a planetary society directed towards fruitful relationships among humankind and between it and the Earth.

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

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

**Politicalization as a Method of Democratization**

As argued by Barry Gills (2002: 164), the globalization protest movements need to be viewed as “symptomatic of something far greater than a mere reaction to globalization.” The main question I want to pursue is to what extent the emergence and further expansion of a forum that these movements have created points to new possibilities to apply democratic principles in the globalizing world. In this chapter I can provide only brief reflections, and one of the issues at stake is how the movements have opened up new spaces for democratic claims by politicizing such social relations that have traditionally been considered to be outside the boundaries of the political. Transnational relations of capitalist production and gender hierarchies are two well-known examples of the spheres that the movements have attempted to politicize. Less attention has been paid to the articulations and power relations between the movements themselves.

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

For the reproduction of capitalism, one of the ideological defense mechanisms has been depoliticization of power relations, especially—not only—those located in the socially constructed sphere of the “economic.” The new democratization movements must face depoliticization
not only out there, in the world external to their movements. They also have to tackle the dilemmas that depoliticization presents in their own internal organizational efforts.

The difference between the inside and the outside of the organizational constructs of these movements is never absolute. For the sake of analytical clarity, however, we can make a distinction between internal and external depoliticization of the WSF. The former refers to the claims according to which the WSF is not a locus of power, as stated by its Charter of Principles. As an expression of wish this sounds excellent, but as a description of reality it is clearly erroneous. There are various kinds of power disputes within the WSF process, and if the aim is to increase the horizontality of WSF decision making, denying the existence of current hierarchies is not a good way to begin. What I would call the external depoliticization of the WSF consists of ideas and practices that consider it as a space where movements gather but which in itself should not have the characteristics of a political movement. I do not intend to claim that these depoliticizing tendencies are necessarily always harmful or outright undemocratic. My hypothesis is, rather, that they have presented various kinds of dilemmas that the WSF organizers have only gradually started taking into account. The WSF has experienced a learning process that is political in two interrelated senses. Like any process of learning, it is political because it involves various relations of power among those engaged in it. It is also political by reproducing and confronting different meanings and boundaries of the “political.”

Rethinking the Political

The politicization practiced by the globalization protest movements has been only partial, but it opens up new democratic horizons. Both within the movements and inside academia there is still much need for a radical rethinking of what kinds of possibilities politicization opens for democratic transformations. The WSF process, however, embodies the idea that there exists a new conception of the political that transgresses traditional definitions, especially—though not only—vis-à-vis territorial states and political parties. As has been stated by Cândido Grzybowski, the WSF participants “must be radically political” and engage in a “new way of doing politics” (2004: 1). A key Brazilian organizer of the WSF, Grzybowski concludes insightfully that “we engage in a fully political act, but it seems that we fear its consequences.” Also, many academic
observers like Arturo Escobar (2004: 208) have seen a “new theoretical and political logic on the rise” in the WSF, even if its contours are “still barely discernible.”

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

There exists a plethora of definitions of the political. As regards to the sites in which the political can be located, Roberto Mangabeira Unger’s two definitions of “politics” provide a helpful starting point. For him, the narrow meaning of politics can be stated as “conflict over the mastery and uses of governmental power.” To analyze the politics of practices and spaces other than those directly related to governments, it is more useful to rely on the broader meaning, which he defines as “struggle over the resources and arrangements that set the basic terms of our practical and passionate relations” (Unger 1987: 145–146). Here I will take the broader meaning as my starting point and consider the political not only in relation to state governments but also in other kinds of social relations including articulations between social movements.

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

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

Even if not synonymous with democratization, politicization is a necessary element in democratic struggles, both today and tomorrow. Whereas some radical theorists of the past have claimed that in a post-capitalist future politics could be replaced with an “administration of things” (Engels 1989), we can observe similar depoliticization in the current claims that decision making within the WSF can “escape the logics of rivalry and power” (Whitaker and Viveret 2003). As Chantal Mouffe (1993: 140) has affirmed, “to negate the political does not make it disappear, it only leads to bewilderment in the face of its manifestations and to impotence in dealing with them.” Relations of power cannot simply be fantasized away, neither in analyzing how social relations have been nor in imagining or proposing how they could be. As one of the world’s most important processes in which social movements interact, and at the same time a site of sometimes heated power struggles, the WSF provides multiple challenges for rethinking the political. In particular, it offers theorists and activists a possibility to construct such conceptions of the global political that may be helpful for both knowing and democratizing the world.

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

**Democratic Challenges to Economism**

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

The doctrine of economic neutrality is most obvious in institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, but it also manifests itself in the WSF process. Especially during the first years of the process, questions of funding, labor relations, and provision of services within the WSF were considered mainly technical issues, handled through a depoliticized “administration of things.” The fact that the WSF is organized inside a capitalist world is also evident in the disadvantaged structural position of participants from relatively poor organizations and countries. To claim that the WSF is an “open space” may sound like a joke in bad taste for those who do not have the material means to enter the space. Furthermore, even if the organizers of the WSF have increasingly tried to apply the principles of a noncapitalist “solidarity economy” in the forum itself, the apparently mundane issue of the logistics of accommodation has been heavily conditioned by the profit-making logic of the local hotel industry that, especially in Porto Alegre, has heavily raised prices to take advantage of the increased demand during the annual WSF.

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

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

Economism is an ideological concealment of the political relations of command inherent in the “economic.” These power relations are hidden behind the doctrine of economic neutrality, but we are not only dealing with an imposed illusion. When enough people act as if something called an economic sphere with an autonomous and natural logic really exists, the sphere becomes “real,” even if socially constructed. By acting transgressively, by politicizing the economic through protests and proposals, the globalization protest movements have created conditions for a radical unthinking of the economic/political boundary. The WSF is one of the main processes in and around which this politicization has taken place. It is, at the same time, important to ask to what extent the WSF itself reproduces economism and creates apparently nonpolitical structures in its mode of organization.

_Negations and Affirmations of the Political in the WSF_

After various annual main events organized between the first forums held in Porto Alegre and the one held in January 2009 in Belém, and a
A rising number of local and regional forums, one of the most controversial questions for the WSF is to what extent it should remain merely an arena where different movements gather and to what extent it should be conceived as a movement in itself. Another key issue concerns the dilemmas of making the WSF process more democratic. I would argue that these two questions have been tackled by the WSF organizers in overly depoliticized terms. The frustrations that this depoliticization has triggered have, however, led to attempts to politicize the process through sometimes excessively state-centric understandings of the political.

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

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

The WSF was originally constructed as an “open space” where movements discuss democratic alternatives to domination of the world by capital and to different forms of imperialism. Compared to the traditional methods of political parties and alliances of social movements, one of the novelties of the WSF is that it has avoided constructing mechanisms that would pretend to represent the WSF as a whole. No one is allowed to express positions claiming to be those of all its participants. While this principle resonates well with the emphasis on horizontal and leaderless networks that many radical activists profess today, it has also caused increasing frustration among organizations such as the transnational peasant alliance Via Campesina, which would like to make the WSF more effective in proposing and promoting concrete strategies of social transformations.

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

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

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

The prefigurative option, based on creating for the movements and
their articulations new modes of internal organization that consciously
resemble the future world they want to create (Grubacic 2003), has been
prevalent among many participants of the Intercontinental Youth Camp,
a relatively autonomous space generally located in the political and geo-
graphical peripheries of various WSF events. The advocates of prefigura-
tive politics have generally been critical of the internal hierarchies within
the WSF, including those that result from an excessive association with
governments, and opt for less state-centric forms of being political. As
pointed out by those who emphasize prefigurative politics, the WSF has
not always practiced what it preaches. In particular, the aim of construct-
ing a democratic world has not been accompanied by sufficient attention to constructing democratic social relations within the WSF itself. At the same time, the criticism of the existing hierarchies within the WSF by Youth Camp activists and others has often been based on conceptions of horizontal networks or power-free open spaces that do not provide effective strategies for large-scale democratic transformations. In order to change the world, the democratic politics of the movements needs to be both strategic and prefigurative.

**The WSF After Ten Years: Implications for Global Democratization**

The dilemmas of politicization described above have contributed to a weakening of the initial enthusiasm about the WSF among a number of its longtime participants and observers. The WSF may certainly have lost some of the momentum it had during the first years. At the same time, the global expansion of the WSF has continued, and new movements from different parts of the world have become more actively involved. The expansion is also evident in the increased visibility of themes such as the struggles of the Indigenous or, more generally, stateless people in the agenda of the WSF. The organization of the WSF in Dakar in February 2011, the first centralized WSF event held in a country with a Muslim majority, may also help the process become more sensitive to religious diversity. Even if the Charter of Principles declares the WSF to be “nonconfessional,” various Christian organizations (and few groups from other religious tendencies) have been active in the process.

In 2010, when no global WSF event was organized, the intensity of enthusiasm varied between different regional, national, and thematic social forums. For example, while many participants commented positively on the dynamism of the U.S. Social Forum held in Detroit in June, the European Social Forum held in Istanbul in July received less passionate evaluations. In Istanbul, one of the main concerns of the participants was that we did not seem to find efficient ways to use the window of opportunity opened by the financial crisis.

The financial crisis has helped delegitimize some of the previously dominant capitalist (or “neoliberal”) beliefs and practices that the WSF participants have repeatedly criticized. Suddenly, in 2008, it seemed that various world leaders started sounding almost as if they had borrowed key concepts and expressions from Social Forum panels. Many activists,
especially the more moderate and reformist ones, may have felt that the crisis had proved them right. Nevertheless, especially but not only in Europe, the financial crisis has not led to significant success stories of counterhegemonic democratic politics.

Even if the financial crisis of the past couple of years may already seem like a lost opportunity for the WSF and its movements, the importance of the collective learning about the construction of democratic alternatives should not be underestimated. If we live in a limited world based on an endless expansion of capitalist accumulation, the current social organization of the world is becoming increasingly unsustainable. There are growing signs that the physical, social, and ecological room for the further expansion of capitalism is reaching its limits. It is, however, probable that for future historians the current crisis may seem mild, compared to more chaotic times to come. With all its contradictions, the WSF can still be considered the most promising global arena for a collective learning about the alternatives that will be needed if we want the increasingly chaotic world order to be transformed into a more democratic one.

Putting into practice the radically democratic aims of the WSF demands time and resources. The increasing awareness of global challenges such as climate change has led many activists to emphasize the urgency of radical change. The initial WSF method has been criticized for being too slow, for producing too much talk and too little action.

It is not easy to estimate the political impact of the WSF, but as many contributors to this handbook demonstrate, it should not be reduced to mere talk. In Latin America, it is widely recognized that the WSF has contributed to paving the way for various electoral victories of left-oriented groups, even if the exact significance of that contribution can be debated. A multitude of new campaigns, demonstrations, political alliances, funding decisions, and ideas have emerged during the WSF meetings. The biggest street mobilizations ever, the antiwar protests of February 2003, were partially generated inside Social Forums. Transnational action networks have been strengthened, and new generations of activists are developing skills in globally networked “movement building.” Nevertheless, the transformative capacity of the WSF may still be too low and too slow.

It is unclear whether the WSF itself can or should become a more decidedly political movement aimed at democratizing the world, or whether its most important role is to give birth to new forms of political action
that are more capable of responding to the current political moment. Its role as an arena for collective learning about the alternatives can, however, continue to be significant. A democratic world is not possible unless we learn to think politically about transnational social movement articulations. Many aspects of the forms, and even the vocabulary, of future planetary politics are yet to be invented. The WSF can be regarded as an important innovation in the road to global democratization. Whatever its own future, it is likely to remain an important inspiration for further attempts to get together and change the world.

**Notes**

1. For a strongly critical view on the usefulness of the concept of global civil society to analyze the “transnational archipelago of transnational interactions,” see Tarrow (2002: 245).
2. For further elaborations, see, for example, Teivainen (2002b); Teivainen (forthcoming-a).
4. As I did not attend the U.S. Social Forum, this comparison is partially based on indirect sources such as my conversations during the European Social Forum in Istanbul with Chico Whitaker, who had just arrived from Detroit.