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Caruso, Giuseppe

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Global Movement Dilemmas: Transnational Representation and Impact in the World Social Forum¹

Giuseppe Caruso and Teivo Teivainen

Abstract:

Various social movement debates on organisational design have hinged on the possibility and political usefulness of devising post-representational, a-representational or anti-representational spaces. We analyse organizational options and obstacles that the WSF faces. A denial of representational dynamics may leave internal power and structural imbalances unattended. We raise the question whether the WSF process can intersect the current instances of activism across the planet including the climate justice movement. We explore its changing attitudes toward representational decision-making. Finally, we suggest that the relationship between traditional organisation-building and internet-mediated decision-making practices developing at the intersection between the local, the global and the virtual could be debated on the road to the next global WSF, likely to take place in Mexico.

Keywords:

World Social Forum; social movements; transnational representation; political representation; open space

Introduction

A new global wave of protests has emerged around climate issues, and the local-global dynamics of environmental questions are brought to bear on transnational activism. Climate change concerns have made international forum-hopping a decreasingly desirable practice among some activists. It can also be argued that there is less need for face-to-face encounters, as digital communication technology has changed remarkably since 2001 when the World Social Forum (WSF) had its first global event. The WSF has gone from being the most inspiring convergence of the so-called global civil society to having become less prominent among transnational non-state political initiatives. Reasons for its diminished visibility also include lack of sufficient funding and frustrations related to internal debates. This coincides with a general downturn among transnational encounters that seek democratic alternatives to capitalist, colonial and patriarchal aspects of the world-system. At the beginning of the current decade, there was a shift in focus from global to national and local politics among many activists - represented by the wave of protests started in North Africa and developed by

¹ Giuseppe Caruso and Teivo Teivainen thank Academy of Finland for financial support for the research project “Democratic Decision-Making within Transnational Social Movements”.

the Occupy, Gezi Park, Indignad@s and a wealth of other such movements. Yet, we believe, the WSF also developed unique features still worth learning from. It also might have a future, which is why we continue to engage with it.

While the global WSF event has lost some of its initial energy, multiple thematic, local and regional forums have developed into a networked web of processes that, combined, keep the WSF drive alive. Plans have been advanced to organize the next global WSF in Mexico, tentatively in 2020. Since 2018, Mexico has had an arguably more progressive government than before, which may create new possibilities for organizing a forum there². The regional dynamics have also markedly changed. For example, the European Social Forum has ceased to exist, though new initiatives such as the WSF of Transformative Economies, to be organized in 2020 in Barcelona, have emerged. There are also thematic social forums on water, migration or nuclear power. There has been new energy in forum processes in some parts of Africa, or in places like Iraq and Kurdistan. The Finnish Social Forum keeps being organized annually since 2002, recently without public funding.

In this paper we reflect on whether and how the WSF offers itself as a useful space for transnational activism. We ask if debates on its political impact may be in contradiction with its original open-space identity. We answer this question by exploring its changing attitudes toward representational decision-making. We firstly take stock of the current state of affairs in the WSF. Thereafter, we discuss some of the WSF's dilemmas, and finally, we reflect on the future relevance of the WSF experience³.

The Current State of Affairs

The latest WSF global event took place in Salvador, Brazil in 2018. A renewed investment of resources and the excitement transmitted by the activists, mostly Brazilian, flowed into the WSF, but the overall weakening trend persisted. A focus on difference and inequality was foregrounded by locating it not in the relatively wealthy southern city of Porto Alegre where four of the first five WSFs took place, but in the comparatively poorer and more Afro-Brazilian Salvador da Bahia. It also helped to retell to both new and experienced activists the stories about what the WSF had been and what its aims were. This is how its website introduced the WSF 2018 to its participants:

The dreams of humanity today are confronted with the fundamentalisms of wars and xenophobia, and systems of domination with their new ways of striking liberties and democracies. The ability to resist is once again challenged. That is why organizations

² The dynamics between state power and social forums and movements are rather complicated. Consider, for example, how people involved with the Nepal Social Forum have expressed concern about the Nepali government, led by the Nepal Communist Party, making life increasingly difficult for some Nepali social organizations involved in the forum.

³ In this context the word dilemmas conveys both the positioning of an actor in front of alternative paths, but also the undesirability of either path. Facing the alternative paths discussed here, WSF participants have stood rather pensively and frustrated at the crossroad not resolving to entertain either exclusive path.

and movements aligned with the Charter of Principles of the World Social Forum once again join together to gather their diversity of struggles and join forces for resistance.⁴

Dreams and resistance, to oppose fundamentalisms and domination. Under these inspirational headings, movements and activists that had contributed to make the WSF an inspiring experiment, as well as new ones, met once more in Brazil. They were activists from women's, indigenous, LGBTQ, environmentalist and landless movements and many others. While a sense of exhilaration ran deep and high, old difficulties presented themselves. The first question that WSF activists faced is synthesised, again, in an extract from the WSF 2018 website:

The movements and struggles gathered at the WSF were able to drive changes and show alternative paths which are now seriously threatened. In Latin America, in particular, more democratic experiences were possible through the rise to power of more progressive and diversified forces, including women, indigenous people and workers. And against which all conservative forces have teamed up.⁵

These words reflect on past successes, especially in Latin America, which have been gradually eroded by right wing and "populist" advances in many parts of the world. Whereas following its inception the WSF had been able to catalyse and be the place of convergence for progressive activists who, strengthened by the density of the networks developed in the WSF, were successful in winning important political battles, recently some of those advances have been lost. Is, then, the WSF still politically relevant, in Latin America and across the world? The WSF's organisers have been criticized for remaining unduly faithful to a mission, to be an encounter of activists and not a political movement, which is now proving, so the critics suggest, self-defeating. A more structured organisation would be necessary, they suggest, to respond to the challenges posed by the advances of the political adversaries. Should the WSF change its constitutive identity, enshrined in its Charter of Principles, to avoid irrelevance?

Although the current momentum of the WSF appears weaker than the one at the beginning of the century, the social forum web of activities provides at least a possible alternative story to the dilemma afflicting WSF activists. While social movements are subject to cycles including ebbs and flows (Tilly, 1978; Tarrow, 1994; Rupp and Taylor, 1987; Bringel and Pleyers, 2019), the WSF has at the same time given input to a wealth of activities around the world linked to its Charter of Principles. A good overview of the scope and extension of this network of activities is given by the WSF calendar.⁶ Sizeable fora took place since the WSF in Salvador and will take place in the run-up to the Mexico WSF. Some of the most established are the Pan-Amazonian Social Forum⁷, the Social Forum on Migration⁸, the

4 For details, see <https://wsf2018.org/en/english-world-social-forum-2018/>, accessed on June 4, 2019
5 *Ibid.*

6 For details, see <http://openfsm.net/projects/wsf2012-support/wsf2018-calendar>, accessed on June 4, 2019

7 For details, see <http://www.forosocialpanamazonico.com/en/>, accessed on June 4, 2019

8 For details, see <http://fsmm2018.org/?lang=en>, accessed on June 4, 2019

Urban Social Forum⁹, the Internet Social Forum¹⁰, the Social Forum on Mining and Extractivist Economy¹¹, the Nepal Social Forum¹², the Iraqi Social Forum¹³, the World Antinuclear Social Forum¹⁴, the World Social Forum on Transformative Economies¹⁵, the World Social Forum on Health and Social Protection¹⁶. This far from complete list gives a sense of activities spearheaded by the WSF.

Open space or directive organising?

Some activists and commentators allow that the WSF global network is relatively strong in the face of the challenges posed by limited resources and alternative initiatives that have at different times catalysed considerable efforts in different parts of the planet. However, now like at the very inception of the forum, these same activists and commentators find that WSF's organising model is less effective than alternatives which would afford better coordination and ability to speak on behalf of its constituencies, there exists an ongoing debate between the proponents of WSF's open space model and those criticising it as an ultimately or indeed inherently flawed political tool. Some of the critics of the open space (Santos, 2006), help us illustrate the terms of this tension. They maintain that building alliances able to resist the onslaught of imperialism and capitalism, requires both cooptation of allies and directive leadership (Teivainen, 2012). In the face of this need, these critics notice that the WSF has been, since its inception, nothing more than a mosaic of parallel events and workshops which might exacerbate fragmentation between activists. This is the formulation of the so-called actor/space debate in and about the WSF (Teivainen, 2005; Teivainen, 2011; Caruso, 2017a; Caruso, 2013; Caruso, 2012).

The WSF Charter of Principles states that it "is an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, and the free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action". Over the years this formulation has been both recognised as the organisational expedient that contributed to the success of the WSF and that, at the same time, has led to its decline. The open-space model drew from the global political imaginary of the 1990s globalisation protests, including the Zapatista EZLN uprising in Mexico and the global convergence against the WTO, that culminated in the so-called Battle of Seattle (Caruso, 2017b; Waterman, 2004; Seoane and Taddei, 2002). Political convergence was deemed a practice of free association of movements and activists with

9For details, see <http://urbansocialforum.or.id/>, accessed on June 4, 2019

10For details, see <http://internetsocialforum.net/isf/?lang=es>, accessed on June 4, 2019

11For details, see <https://www.thematicsocialforum.org/peoples-dialogue-assessment/>, accessed on June 4, 2019

12For details, see <https://www.facebook.com/groups/515612878791120/>, accessed on June 4, 2019

13For details, see <http://iraqsf.org/en/homepage/>, accessed on June 4, 2019

14For details, see http://www.nuclear-heritage.net/index.php/Global_Anti-nuclear_Social_Forum_in_Madrid, accessed on June 4, 2019

15For details, see <http://www.riposs.org/forum-social-mondial-economies-transformatrices/?lang=en>, accessed on June 4, 2019

16The next one is planned to take place in Bogota, Colombia, in June 2019. For details, see https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCNV_73rb9vavTSR9d5FBiDg and <https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Political-Organization/VIII-Foro-Social-Mundial-Salud-y-Seguridad-Social-2260884600846316/>, accessed on June 4, 2019

diverse backgrounds, visions and political goals, as opposed to the subsumption of difference under an ideological and organisational unity. The Zapatista ethos opposed instrumental views about replication or scaling up of specific, even if successful, initiatives. Each struggle, they believed, was unique and contextual. If simplistic scaling up was deemed inadvisable (for reasons related to the perceived authoritarian temptations of lumping activists' motivations and purposes under one coordinated direction and hierarchical structure), dense networking helped fight isolation and show the intensity and extension of the malaise caused by global injustice.

On one side of the debate, the choice not to speak as an actor was seen as a constraint to political growth and relevance. If the WSF could not speak as one, then a political role could not be performed, these criticisms stated. The proponents of the open space, instead, insisted that a political role was already performed by the movements that met in the open space and jointly organised actions without specific WSF's directions. The debates raised by this dilemma were approached in two different ways. The first was the creation of a space in the WSF events dedicated to building a coherent movement articulated around an agenda of action and a final statement of intents: the Assembly of Social Movements (see Teivainen 2019). The alternative strategy was to facilitate during WSF events Convergence Assemblies where movements could develop alliances and ad-hoc organisational structures without specific direction by local or international WSF bodies. In the recent WSF global events, the Assembly of Social Movements has often been absent. Instead, Convergence Assemblies have proliferated in which activists would draft shared agendas of action for the following months. We believe that the articulation of these practices has contributed to keep the WSF model vital over the years. We believe as well, however, that part of the conflicts around directive organising versus facilitating convergence may have been partly fraught by a series of disagreements on the cornerstone on which political action is built, namely political representation.

Political action and the representative dilemma

The WSF was constituted as a non-representational space to discuss imaginations of and actions towards a better world. At the same time, many of the practices performed by its participants are embedded in representational webs of meanings and actions. Consequently, what has been often perceived as a disjuncture between multiple claims and a plurality of actions, has contributed to a confusing and at times disaffecting effect on WSF participants and facilitators. Recurring debates on organisational design have hinged on the possibility of devising post-representational, a-representational or anti-representational transformative political spaces. Opposing views have contested the possibility for politics to be predicated on un-mediated interactions between individuals and groups. The increasingly global scale of the WSF made non-representational claims even more complicated. The critics wondered how power dynamics and exclusion could ever be engaged in and by the WSF if according to Chapter 5 of its Charter:

The WSF brings together and interlinks only organisations and movements of civil society from all the countries in the world, but intends neither to be a body representing world civil society nor to exclude from the debates it promotes, those in positions of political responsibility, mandated by their peoples, who decide to enter into the commitments resulting from those debates.

This paragraph establishes the WSF as a non-representational space and, at the same time, recognises that politics or some aspects of politics are grounded in representational practices. In other words, participants in the WSF, and indeed its organisers, may be working as representatives of organisations and movements and represent in their actions the mandates of those organisations and movements. Two crucial dimensions of the WSF's work have developed without formal representation. On the one hand, no representative political statements are issued by the WSF as a whole. The WSF does not claim to represent global movements or "civil society". The most obvious sense of this is that there are many organizations and movements that have never participated in it. On the other hand, in the internal decision-making procedures the representational ambivalence of the WSF is evident. Consider, for instance, as in its International Council, its main governance body, each participating member represents her organization. While its overall setup is in some unspoken sense meant to be somewhat representative of world activism and societies, issues of organisational size, membership, regional origin and others are formally deemed unimportant¹⁷. Within the IC, the combination of representational foundations and non-representational practices has given life to complex decision-making negotiations.

The WSF continues to muddle through the tension inherent in this dilemma. For the activists that reject representation either as a general political principle or at least inside the WSF, the forum has been too embedded in what they consider traditional, i.e. representational, politics. For those who want to build global political parties or such like global organisations, the WSF's open space lacks the capacity for action. Such capacity for meaningful political action is predicated, according to the supporters of either aspects of this dilemma, on including or refraining from representational practices. The dilemma is sometimes posited as one between mediated (representational) vs unmediated (immediate) organizing.

The tension contained in the representation debate in the WSF recalls similar debates in the earlier globalisation protests as well as in the 2010-2012 wave of more localized protests (Nunes, 2014; Tormey, 2015; Tormey, 2005; Gerbaudo, 2012; Kinna et al., 2019). Those debates are still present and relevant, and carry some of the same unsolved tensions in current climate change movements. Who speaks in the name of whom or what? We argue that issues of representation cannot simply be eschewed from political organising. A deeper understanding of what representation means and does is crucial in appreciating apparent paradoxes like the anti-representational claims of Occupy Wall Street and its most reverberated slogan, "We Are the 99%", which surely makes a representational claim. The

¹⁷ The authors participate in the IC as representatives of the Network Institute for Global Democratization.

price of denying representation may leave power dynamics unattended and structural imbalances among movement members unchallenged.

Conclusion: New Directions and Recurring Dilemmas

The WSF it has often been depicted (virtually from its very inception) as at a crossroads. Either it will change its organisational model or it will become irrelevant. For some, political success depends on hierarchical organisation and representation (Santos, 2006). For others, faithfulness to the WSF open-space model promises a new political culture (Whitaker, 2004; Whitaker, 2005; Waterman, 2002). In the WSF, the actors championing each side of this dilemma have managed to remain in conversation. For almost two decades, if with difficulty, the WSF has been able to use these tensions without succumbing to the anxiety they provoke on its future and its political relevance. A recurring sense of movement fragmentation, however, has been felt in parts of the world, in the face of intense protest activism in recent years. Since late 2010, media and activists have focused on local, national, or sometimes regional uprisings like the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, the M15 movement in Spain, the anti-austerity revolts in Greece, Occupy Gezi in Istanbul, the student movement in Chile, the anti-corruption movement in India, the free transport movement in Brazil and more recently between climate justice protests in different parts of the planet. Whatever the differences between all these mobilizations – at some level incommensurable – they share a certain family resemblance with the globalization protest movements at the turn of the millennium. Then, in order to reinforce the picture of global unity - after a series of oceanic demonstrations against the WTO, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the G8 - many activists converged in the WSF. They wished to move beyond street protest into imaginative and transformative global politics. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the globalization protests seemed to metamorphose into a global democratization movement. A similar convergence could be initiated by current mobilisations on climate change.

As the movements that occupied squares and parks captured the attention of a global audience of activists, supporters and spectators in 2011 and 2012, influences between the social forums and the Occupy movements were pointed out. When the momentum of those movements flowed, the challenges of acting “beyond the square” created dilemmas related to how, for some critics, the organisational fragmentation of local protests limited their wider impact. As shown above, the terms of this dilemma had been rehearsed in the WSF. Sometimes, the very same commentators and activists involved in the WSF conflicts returned to face each other on issues of organisation, democratic decision-making and political relevance. Their innovations notwithstanding, those movements did not experiment with totally different political forms requiring entirely alternative imaginations. Instead, they continued a long tradition of spaces of convergence and dialogue based on consolidated principles of openness, horizontality and difference. Democratic learning between movements is key to their global futures.

What sparked the WSF was a moment of global effervescence in search of a shared space to meet and collectively build another world. Today, a similar effervescence draws people into

the streets in all corners of the world on issues of environmental sustainability, work, anti-corruption, gender equality, dignity and democracy. Spaces of convergences could contribute to connect and give visibility to these values and objectives. Spaces of convergence that, as we suggest, may be able to hold on to the apparent dilemmas of unity in difference, organized openness and democratic representation.

Current movements can benefit from the experience built over the past decades. The explicitly global scale of the WSF means that it (or a similar platform) can offer localized movements possibilities for transnational articulation and resonance. We saw signs of this happening throughout the history of the forum. When the WSF was held in Tunis in March 2013, we heard Occupy Wall Street activists commenting that the forum was the only place where they could hook up with so many Arab Spring activists, Spanish Indignad@s and other activists. Consider also the convergence of environmental activists in the WSF to prepare for the UN global climate negotiations. Some of the activists of the current climate justice movement have been working together in the WSF over many years, some, indeed, coming from previous instances of the environmentalist movement. How can, in turn, the WSF process intersect (or miss) the current instances of activism across the planet? What is the relationship between more traditional organisation-building and internet-mediated activities, so central to the activist debates over the recent decades? How are decision-making practices developing at the intersection between the local, the global and the virtual? These are some of the questions that could be debated on the road to the next global WSF, likely to take place in Mexico.

The structure and future development of the WSF depend on a thorough understanding of the challenges to global justice and the current struggles of movements around the world. Its objectives remain both analytical, to map the opportunities and challenges to global progressive change, and pragmatic, to act upon the findings. For many forum activists, this constitutes a renewed moment for the movements to develop global solidarities around struggles for survival, sometimes from unexpected angles produced by moments of being together in one place.

Giuseppe Caruso is University Researcher in World Politics, University of Helsinki. His current research focuses on representational issues in transnational social movements. He is interested in conflicting cosmopolitan visions, social justice, democracy and regimes of global governance. He has also written on the Right to the City movement; on free and open software activism; on philanthropy and activist networks, and has published a volume on traditional healers and social transformation among the Shipibo-Conibo of Peru, and a more recent one on cosmopolitanism as imagined by the World Social Forum activists. Email: giu.caruso@gmail.com

Teivo Teivainen is Professor of World Politics, University of Helsinki. His publications include “Latin Americanization of Europe”, published in *Critical Geopolitics and Regional (Re)Configurations: interregionalism and transnationalism between Latin America and Europe* (Routledge 2019); “Politics of Intra-firm Trade”, coauthored with Matti Ylönen, published in *New Political Economy* in 2018 and receiver of Amartya Sen Prize by Yale University; as well as “Occupy Representation and Democratize Prefiguration: Speaking for

Others in Global Justice Movements”, published in *Capital & Class* in 2016. On behalf of the Network Institute for Global Democratization, he took part in founding the International Council of the World Social Forum. Email: Teivo.teivainen@helsinki.fi

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