

Unequal power relations in the governance of the World Social Forum process: an analysis of the practices of the Nairobi Forum

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Abstract

Through an ethnographic account of the decision-making process of the World Social Forum (WSF) and its governance structures, specifically the International Council and the Local Organising Committee, the micro-politics of the alter-globalisation movements will be explored. Looking at the debates around whether the WSF should be an open arena or become an actor, the paradox of the “tyranny of structurelessness” will be presented. More accurately, this paper exposes the asymmetry between the values and the practices of the WSF process by analysing the role of “social movement entrepreneurs” and the complex constellations of conflicting interests. Theoretical claims of horizontal consensual and open decision-making are used to eliminate any democratic procedure, paving the way to highly unequal oppressive power relations that dominate the deliberative space of encounter between different movements. The paper questions the capacity of the World Social Forum to articulate alternatives to neoliberalism, and to present different and more democratic ways of doing politics.

After having unmasked the oppressive power structures within a social movement claiming to fight against them, this paper advocates for moving beyond the WSF discursive dichotomy of “neoliberal/anti-neoliberal”, and calls for a Gramscian resistance to the hegemonic neoliberal discourse played through direct transformative engagement with the institutions of our society. This paper offers a detailed view inside the black box of decision-making processes within social movements contributing to the academic as well as the activists’ debate on their governance. This analysis is particularly relevant in the light of the global occupy and anti-austerity movements, which have been making similar claims to those of the WSF of being a leaderless initiative, without any political affiliation, and using consensual methodologies, thus facing some of the same shortcomings and challenges.

Key words: Social movements governance, anti-neoliberal movements, consensual methodologies, World Social Forum

There is another world, but it is in this one

Paul Éluard

Introduction

After the struggle of Seattle (1999), the movements opposing neoliberal policies gathered to discuss alternatives at the World Social Forum (WSF). According to its Charter, the WSF is “an open meeting space for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action” for all those who are opposed “to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism” (WSF, 2001).

Despite the WSF’s attempt to formulate this opposition in positive terms by borrowing the Zapatista’s formula of “One big no and many yesses” (Kingsnorth, 2003 cited in Glasius & Timms, 2005, p. 223) – where the no refers to neoliberalism – what unifies the actors is their fight against the common neoliberal ‘enemy’. In other words, the WSF is largely defined by what it stands against rather than by what it stands for. Diversity is claimed to be “one of the distinguishing features of the WSF” (Glasius & Timms, 2005, p. 193), but in order to enrol a wide range of actors in an open space, the forum avoided clear political statements and the support of any specific issue.

The WSF also adopted the Zapatista claim of *changing the world without taking power*. Rather than leading to a deeper reflection about the management of power, this has left the issue of power implicit and unclearly defined, particularly regarding internal organization, the consequences of which will be analysed in this paper. Naomi Klein argues that the new WSF framework “encourages, celebrates and fiercely protects the right to diversity: cultural diversity, ecological diversity, agricultural diversity—and yes, political diversity as well: different ways of doing politics” (2001). But how is it possible to do politics differently, ignoring power and having as the only common denominator the opposition to neoliberalism? Since the very beginning of the WSF process, this question raised a substantive debate between those who wanted the WSF to remain an open arena and those who wanted it to become a political actor.¹ Both models require some sort of governance, even though it is more complex with the latter. The governance of a process that claims to include everyone opposing neoliberalism and imperialism, and to refuse traditional democratic methodologies inspired by liberal-democratic processes, is highly problematic. The debate around internal social movements structures is linked to the tension between “fluidity and structure”, that is to say between a

¹ The question “arena or actor?” has been one of the crucial debates in the WSF literature and in the WSF process (e.g. Whitaker, 2004). The debate has seen some people arguing for the “open space” (Sen 2004), while others supporting the concept of “movement of movements” (Teivainen, 2004), later reconceptualised in “network of networks” (Houtart 2007) or “World Social Movement Network” (Escobar, 2004), with the idea of the WSF as a political actor. In this paper “open meeting space”, “open space”, or “open arena” are used interchangeably.

supposedly “more informal and horizontal logic” and a focus on “efficiency and delegation” (Pleyers, 2010, p. 212).

Della Porta (2009) has problematised the issue of internal democracy within the WSF, emphasising the auto-critical and self-reflexive character of the actors involved. Teivainen (2007, 2012) emphasised how lack of structures generate some ambiguity and can have a depoliticising effect, leading to undemocratic governance and leadership. This paper contributes to this body of works reflecting on the WSF internal governance practices by exploring what Caruso (2013) calls the tension between “aspirations and practices (vision and methods)” (81). The article analyses the internal decision-making process and other practices of the WSF to expose some of its contradictions, and try to understand whether or not the WSF has been able to articulate in practice the alternatives that it seeks to express, and also whether or not it is presenting different more democratic ways of doing politics. The article analyses the WSF process at a significant point in its development; despite its choice to remain an open space, the WSF 2007 tried to develop concrete proposals through a methodology that saw one full day dedicated to thematic meetings to draw up action plans.

This argument is based on the critical work of some scholars and activists, and on my reflexive autoethnography in the attempt to deconstruct the mainstream discourses around the WSF. This paper offers a critical insider perspective on the process, and is the outcome of years of involvement at different levels in the World Social Forum process with a growing reflexive approach.²

The WSF 2007

The most widely known aspect of the WSF are the global events that have taken place since 2001, always involving between 20,000 and 155,000 participants from more than 100 countries. The initial three forums were held in Porto Alegre, then the forum moved to India in 2004, came back to Brazil in 2005 and, after a year of three continental events, the 2007 edition took place in Nairobi (Kenya). The following year, the forum was substituted by a decentralised day of global action. In 2009, the forum was held again in Brazil. Subsequently, it was held in Senegal (2011), Brazil (2012), and Tunisia (2013 and 2015). Apart from the global events, there are local, national, regional and thematic forums. While global events are organised by a local organising committee, an International Council (IC) has steered the direction of the process and took decisions on forums' locations. The 2007 WSF event in Nairobi was the first one to take place on the African continent and it has been described by some as the most progressive gathering that has ever taken place

² More specifically, I have participated in various European Social Forums (2002, 2003, 2004, 2008), the WSF International Council meetings (March 2006, October 2006, January 2007), the work of the Local Organising Committee of the WSF 2007 in Nairobi and in many networks connected to the WSF process. I was also sent to represent a workers organisation at the WSF 2009 in the Amazon.

in the African continent. According to the organising committee 57,000 people registered, 60% from Africa and of these 70% from Kenya. It has also been considered to be the baptism of an emerging Pan-African civil society and offered a space to new movements, previously largely invisible. For instance, a very important achievement was the presence of an LGBTQ space within the forum, giving visibility to a strongly repressed movement in the continent (Conway, 2013).

However, many activists and scholars have made strong criticisms. A major difference from other forums was due to the diverse nature of African civil society. Churches and development NGOs were the most prominent presence at the forum, reflecting a reality in which the Church is often the (only) major mass movement at the grassroots level and the remaining work with the most marginalised people is often conducted by mostly foreign-funded professional NGOs working in development. Other criticisms I further explore below regard the sponsorships, the choice of catering services, the 'militarisation' of the forum space and the social exclusion due to entry fees. These issues are by no means unique to the 2007 edition but were particularly evident in Nairobi, pushing key activist Walden Bello to argue that the WSF had achieved its historical function and should be dissolved.³

While this article critically explores the practices around the 2007 WSF, it is important to acknowledge that the WSF and its governing body, the IC, acknowledged the need for change and engaged in an open debate and experimented with different commissions' models with mixed results (whose discussion is beyond the scope of this paper). There has also been a working group on the future of the IC, established in 2012, and in 2013 a discussion around the radical proposal to dissolve the IC in order to create a more active political movement.

Governance, leadership and internal democracy

The organisational structure of social movements has been part of the reflection of activists and scholars for a long time. Such discussion is inevitably intertwined with the issue of leadership and the role it plays in processes of social change. Despite a growing interest, social movements' leadership is still considered a 'black box' and more scholarship is needed to understand movements' internal governance. Morriss and Staggenbord (2007) call for more grounded investigations of how leadership affects the emergence, internal dynamics and successes of social movements. A number of contributions (e.g. Barker, Johnson, & Lavalette, 2001; Gitlin, 2003) have stimulated further explorations and looked at the importance of individual leaders, their personality and trajectories. These contributions also examine whether the process of selecting leadership and the internal decision-making are consistent

³ Bello, W. The World Social Forum at the Crossroad, 5/5/2007, available online: <http://www.commondreams.org/views/2007/05/05/world-social-forum-crossroads>

with the democratic values that are at the core of some movements' identity. This conversation links very well with another important and related set of debates about democracy in social movements.

On the one hand, the global process of the WSF has facilitated the exploration of internal governance and leadership of movements by enabling comparison between the movements which meet at WSF events. On the other hand, it has extended the reflection about what the governance of a global meeting space for a variety of movements may look like, particularly considering its reluctance to call itself a movement. It is this latter reflection that is of relevance for this paper. Movements' leadership and governance are already complex in themselves, but they become increasingly so at a global scale where the tension between consensual deliberation and representational decision-making play out more strongly (Teivainen & Caruso, 2014). On this regard, Della Porta (2013) provides a comprehensive overview of different conceptualisations of democracy and their relevance for internal movement organisation. In particular, she stresses the difference between a liberal democratic model and a participatory deliberative one. In the first, what matters is the democratic selection of the leadership, which represents pre-existing identities of members. In the second model, through a consensual and participatory process, members directly contribute to decision-making while at the same time forming their own identities and opinions.

The discussion over different conceptualisations of movements' democracy is strongly related with another older and important debate within social movement studies about the tension between 'spontaneity' and 'bureaucratisation'. This tension is somehow exacerbated in the complexity of the WSF, making it a privileged viewpoint. I am particularly interested in how 'ideologies of spontaneity' (Barker et al., 2001) affect the practice of a global process of coordination between hundreds of organisations.

Various authors, looking at many different contexts, have argued that social movements are not necessarily democratic. Nanda and Sinha (1999; 2003) describe populist undemocratic agrarian Indian movements, while Harvey – referring to democratic struggles in Mexico – writes that “internal practices may reproduce hierarchical rules and discrimination, [...] popular movements are not inherently democratic” (Harvey, 1998, p. 29). The WSF also struggles to be in practice the open democratic process that it aspires to be. This problematic aspect has also been extensively highlighted by Pleyers (2010) who argues that there is a structural problem in the movements and organisations converging in the WSF in that committed leaders ignore issues of internal democracy, claiming that it is a secondary issue compared to current struggles and campaigns. This apparent incoherence between values and practices has often been justified by some leaders of social movements in terms of a need for “efficiency” (Pleyers, 2010). From a feminist perspective, Conway presents a strong critique of the WSF governance arguing that “systemic sexism extend[s] from the events themselves, to the organising processes, to the governance bodies of the forum” (2011, p. 56). She also points out that the substantial

presence of feminist grassroots events is “systematically ignored intellectually and politically in the non-feminist spaces of the forum” (p. 56).

The practices of the WSF 2007

This section analyses the contradictions between the WSF discourse of open space and democratic debate, and its hegemonic practices. These contradictions have been underlined already by Albert, Sen and Teivainen (2004; 2004; 2004) in relation to Brazilian WSFs, Caruso (2004) in relation to the Indian WSF; and Conway (2011, 2013) about the entire process. I only focus on the WSF 2007 in Nairobi. It is important to notice that such critical engagement has been a constant feature of the WSF as a process of reflexive learning in which scholar-activists have used critique as a way to advance the debate on the nature and direction of the WSF.

The heterogeneity and diversity of its participants transform the WSF into an arena of conflicting interests with poor structures to deal with them (Caruso, 2004). The initiators established the International Council that would steer the process and nominate a Local Organizing Committee to organise specific WSF events. Six years after the beginning of the process, the International Council was a group of self-appointed friends who were deciding who could or could not join the Council; there was no change in the core organisations leading the process. Moreover, apart from key Brazilian actors, the committee was disproportionately composed of European actors. In order to participate, organisations were supposed to be able to pay for travel and related expenses for their representative to attend meetings in different parts of the world at least four times a year. Consensus methodologies were strongly shaped by pre-formed alliances and the charisma of certain established members. Moreover, the organisation of the forum events should normally be carried out by a coalition of local actors, but in the case of the WSF 2007 this was contracted to one NGO.

Hegemonic and excluding practices in the preparation of the WSF 2007

The first and essentially the only meeting of the Social Mobilisation Committee has been held in the headquarters of SODNET, the NGO that won the tender for the WSF and hosted the secretariat. The office is in Lavington, one of the most exclusive areas of Nairobi in front of one UN agency. To enter, there is a checkpoint with guards, and another kilometre ahead, you find another check point where you are asked your name. The guards then call the main office, and if they get a positive answer you are allowed to enter. It is the most inaccessible place I have ever been since I moved to Nairobi.

This extract from my own anthropological diary of the WSF shows how – eight months before the event – the possibility of a WSF as an open space was already compromised. The headquarters of the organising committee were absolutely inaccessible, and adequate only for formal meetings with a limited number of participants, who had to come by car or else by walking long distances. The Social Mobilisation Committee – in theory the most important committee in making a forum in a new country a success – had met once, and had two failed meetings with less than 5 people attending. This emerging contradiction is well expressed in the report of the Kenya Social Forum coordinator, who describes one of the key organisers, a world-famous activist, as being “as intolerant inside the board room as she was ‘revolutionary’ and ‘inclusive’ on public rostrums” (Oloo, 2007). The Kenya Social Forum coordinator was chosen to provide legitimacy to the process; during its preparation he felt excluded, and strongly denounced the practices of the Organising Committee. In his reflections after the forum, he describes his experience in these terms.

I have never encountered a bunch of such intolerant, arrogant and vindictive colleagues as the ones I had to endure during the planning and execution of WSF Nairobi 2007. First of all, the working environment at the Nairobi-based WSF 2007 Secretariat is the very antithesis of the WSF concept of an open space. Authoritarian decisions are made, often without consultation, by people who insist on imperiously chairing every single meeting – a far cry from the rotating chairs I was accustomed to. They draw up the agenda, decide on who can speak and for how long and will not hesitate to cut off, shout down and lecture anyone who appears to be challenging them (Oloo, 2007).

In October 2006, during the WSF International Council in Parma, while speakers as confident as they were ignorant about what was going on in Nairobi were talking about the inclusive and effective preparation of the forthcoming forum, I asked to speak to some IC members to express my critical points. (I was there as an observer who requires authorisation to speak). I was told that they knew my criticisms were well founded, but they could not raise those points because it would have meant criticising the Local Organising Committee, and be accused of colonialism (i.e. where the whites challenge the blacks). It was no surprise when just a few months later, I read the following in the above-mentioned report of the Kenya Social Forum coordinator: “Another dastardly thing was the abuse of the race card when it came to dealing with criticism from North American, European and even Indian comrades. [...] Some of my colleagues would resort to the most cynical emotional blackmail by dismissing their white-skin critics in race-loaded terms calculated to silence and stifle debate” (Oloo, 2007). This attitude prevented any request for accountability in what was supposed to be an open process.

The type of decision-making process established in the WSF was particularly vulnerable to the domination of “social movement entrepreneurs”: charismatic figures who can confidently address different audiences, and who are often

more well-known on global stages than in the country where they claim to do grassroots work. They often represent only themselves, but through the legitimacy they gain from international fame can speak on behalf of others. For instance, in my work I invited a prominent activist to tour Europe in a series of high-profile meetings where she enchanted all her audiences, claiming to speak for poor African women. She got useful contacts for future funding, and even higher profile invitations to address global UN meetings. “Social movement entrepreneurs” are professional activists working for their own organisation (often more than one). One of these organisations – presenting a façade of a coalition – won the tender for the WSF, emphasising the need for a forum in East Africa. With no logistical capacity and with a coalition that was made of “a handful of people who decided to privatise a very public and of course very global process” (Oloo, 2007), they embarked in the preparation of the WSF 2007 – an activist, her best friend, and her son were managing the entire process.

The hegemonic use of consensual methodology and the failure of technology

The WSF event was divided into different thematic areas; one of the objectives was to create new connections and collaborations among different organisations and movements working on the same struggles, and possibly come up with common strategies. The forum was structured with opening and closing events and four working days in the middle; three days were dedicated to the various activities proposed by different actors, while the last day was supposed to be used to get the actors working on the same thematic area to elaborate proposals, and draw up a *global action plan*.

The three days of activities were supposed to interlink organisations working on the same topic through an online platform. Organisations could express their interest and propose activities; others would see an interesting proposal, get in touch, and prepare common activities. The idea was that the neutrality and horizontality of a software program would be able to put together actors who did not know each other. Rather than solving the issue of power and hierarchy, not having a trusted facilitator resulted in many activities turning into poorly attended presentations of one organisation’s activities. In those activities where different organisations worked together, the organisations usually knew each other before the forum and were often meetings between local NGOs and their European/Northern funders. Organisations generally refused to cancel their own activities and merge them with others proposed by unknown actors from another corner of the globe.

The fourth day of thematic meetings set to build global action plans – which was supposed to be the major methodological innovation of the WSF 2007 to make the WSF more action-oriented – did not work out as expected. A telling example was the thematic meeting of the movements working on the issue of foreign debt in developing countries. The idea was that all global organisations working

on debt would meet and discuss proposals. The organisation Jubilee USA imposed itself as the facilitator of the discussion process through consensus methodology; they immediately presented their previously prepared draft declaration and asked for input in amending it. There were two major problems with this; first, the person making the main proposal was also the person facilitating the discussion. The overlapping of these two roles is what turns a potentially participatory methodology into one actor dominating the entire discussion. Normally, if the facilitator wants to intervene, they should give the role of facilitator to someone else, but this did not happen.⁴ The second issue was that Jubilee USA came with its own draft ready. Consensus methodology cannot be used to simply ratify the proposal of one particular organisation, especially when this declaration is meant to represent all global movements working on debt.

The result was an inadequate declaration very similar to previous ones, entirely focused on the perspective of 'Northern' activists. The document did not mention the co-responsibility of the governments of the 'South', which was a central issue for those who work on debt relief/cancellation/repudiation in the 'South'. The proposed actions were the same that characterised the debt movement in previous years, most of which were not particularly meaningful in Africa, such as fasting against debt and collecting signatures. In their dual role of facilitators and main proponents, they succeeded in dominating the process and making people agree on their draft without any constructive debate. No relevant amendments were made apart from two minor cosmetic changes on adjectives. But that problematic declaration was launched with many organisations signing it as the global declaration on debt.

This attitude reflects the partnership model on which some 'Northern' organisations base their relationship with their 'Southern' counterparts; without engaging in any deep reciprocal knowledge, they fund local organisations which are often empty boxes, that maintain big offices and are very professional in managing PR with funders during events such as the WSF. Organisations that often thrive on debt, and have little interest in its cancellation.

Access to the Forum

A serious issue of access was totally ignored by the organisers: the entry fee to the Forum set for Africans was US\$7, in a country where 56% of the population was living on less than a dollar a day. This meant that people could come only if an NGO would sponsor them; they therefore needed to be part of a network with sufficient financial resources. For local people, attendance was already very costly in terms of loss of income for the time away from work, and also implied transportation costs.

⁴ Consensus methodologies put a strong emphasis on the role of facilitation. One key rule is that the facilitator plays a sort of neutral role. If the facilitator wants to make a point in the discussion, he/she should give his/her role to someone else.

The only positive note presented in the previously-mentioned report by the Kenyan Social Forum coordinator was “the presence of 4,000 slum dwellers facilitated by an inter-faith network” (Oloo, 2007). However, he did not mention how that actually came about in practice. After strenuous negotiation, a network of slum dwellers agreed to accept 500 entry passes at a subsidised rate. When they went to collect them, the Organising Committee had no personnel and told the network members to go in their storage area and stamp the passes by themselves. Instead of stamping and taking 500 passes, the network took 5,000 passes which were distributed through partner organisations and local churches to the Nairobi slum dwellers. Without this “theft”, the private guards patrolling the WSF fortress would have prevented people from entering. This action saved the image of the Forum, which remained poorly attended but at least had visible local participation.⁵

When the contradiction of the high entry fee was exposed, under strong pressure the Organising Committee decided to keep a policy of open access to the Forum, but it was not clearly communicated to the private guards, who continued to enforce pass control. However, this decision was a last-minute initiative; there had been proposals to establish a solidarity fund to facilitate the access of local people; and the International Council approved the idea but it never became a reality because no one put money into it, and the local committee did not implement it.

It was not only a problem of individual access; many organisations were equally excluded since a venue for a two-hour event could cost up to 500 euros. This was an affordable rate for internationally-funded development NGOs, but not for local social movements. It is not surprising that some local organisations, unhappy with the process of the WSF, organised an *Alternative Social Forum*, which was free and in the city centre (the WSF was located about 10 kilometres away).

The IC enthusiastically replied positively to the proposal of holding the forum in Africa, but there was a lack of consistent economic support. In theory, the Local Organising Committee should fundraise for the event. But if for the Latin American Forums (Brazil and Venezuela) both central and local government provided a substantial financial contribution, the same could not be expected from a government with little interest in social movements and anti-neoliberal struggles. Therefore, the Local Organising Committee attempted to raise funds through fees, licences for commercial stalls, and advertisement, compromising the nature of the open space.

⁵ There is an unrealistic claim that over 40,000 participants from Africa attended the Forum. However, this is a ridiculous estimation based on the fact that the open policy they applied forced them to count people and make estimations, rather than looking at actual registration. The figure was achieved by counting the same people several times, and adding an estimation of the people attending related events inside the UN compounds and so forth. The reality is that without those 5,000 passes distributed in the slums through church-related networks – which also helped people with their transportation costs – local participation would have been barely visible.

The privatisation of the Forum space

As Glasius and Timms remarked, “Every Forum consumes goods and services – otherwise it could not take place” (2005, p. 232). However, there are different ways to deal with provision aspects. While it is normal that local governments fund the WSF events and lobby to host them expecting economic returns – and that prices are inflated “to exploit participants” (Glasius & Timms, 2005, p. 232) – the WSF should preserve its anti-neoliberal soul at least within the WSF space. In 2006, Glasius and Timms warned against the risk that the Forum could become “a sales floor with a discussion area” (p. 233); that is what happened with the Nairobi Forum: it became a forum of tenders and subcontracting, i.e. an NGO fair.⁶

While WSF scholars (e.g. Santos, 2007) emphasise the important creation of the Africa Water Network during the WSF 2007, bottles of privatised water were sold at the price of a half day’s local salary. Food provision was subcontracted to private companies, among them a company owned by the family of a member of the Kenya Social Forum, and the 5-star catering service of the hotel owned by the then Kenyan Minister of Internal Security – one of the richest men in the country, as well as the person accused of tortures and extra-judicial murders committed by the police during the previous regime. Prices were high even by European standards (Oloo, 2007).

Funds for the WSF events are received without thought to the contradictions connected with the first article in the WSF charter, i.e. opposition to neoliberalism. Funds derive from the core of the neoliberal supporters: the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and in the case of the WSF 2003, even the oil company BR Petrobras.⁷ Governments also fund the WSF, threatening the non-governmental and non-party nature of the Forum. Among the sponsors, there were also several international NGOs that receive funds from USAID, and therefore the US government indirectly funds the Forum. The fact that such pro-neoliberal actors are willing to fund the Forum is very telling. If opposition to neoliberal globalisation remains confined to a yearly folkloristic festival led by neoliberal NGOs, why not fund such an innocuous gathering and by so doing legitimise the neoliberal democratic discourse? In this regard, Michel Chossudovsky (2010) tries to understand why organisations such as the Ford Foundation fund actors involved in anti-capitalist struggles. He argues that neoliberal organisations are “funding dissent” in order to oversee and shape their various activities; and he concludes that alongside the process described by Chomsky in his book *Manufacturing Consent*, there is a parallel and equally important process of “manufacturing dissent” in a way that does not threaten the establishment.

⁶ See for instance the article, ‘World Social Forum: just another NGO fair?’ by Firoze Manji (2007), *Pambazuka News*, Issue 288. Available online: <http://pambazuka.org/en/category/features/39464>

⁷ For a list of the funders, see “Financial sponsors of the WSF” in Timms and Glasius (2005, p. 230).

The Nairobi Forum constituted an embarrassing precedent for the extent to which private sponsors were used. A telling example was the contract with Celtel, a large multinational telecommunications company that associated its logo with the WSF; not having money for advertisement banners in the city, the Local Organising Committee in Nairobi signed a contract with one of the main mobile service providers that became the official WSF sponsor, and offered around 150,000 euros of communication services. Around the city, the WSF was advertised with the logo of this big multinational telecommunication company. The employees of the multinational also managed the registration desks where people could register to the Forum using mobile credit bought on the spot, and getting their SIM cards activated.

Analysis

In this section, I would like to make sense of some of the questions raised by the challenges described above. Let me start by looking at an ontological and methodological problem. Some years after the WSF's inception, criticisms of the open arena became very strong because the WSF could not set a clear agenda with defined objectives, and therefore it was considered ineffective in resisting the neoliberal project. According to Whitaker, some people saw the WSF "as an obstacle to gaining efficacy in the struggle to overcome neoliberalism" (2008), but he claims that this criticism came from the people who *think* about the WSF rather than from the people who *do* the WSF. As an activist who *does* and *thinks* about the WSF, I argue that the *ontological* debate on the nature of the WSF – whether the WSF should be just an open space (the arena model) for discussion, or should become a political actor – has never been solved. In 2007, the will to preserve the openness of the WSF space was coupled with the need for an action plan. The choice has been to keep the WSF as an open space, but at the same time to prepare shared global action plans; however, no appropriate governance structure was created. This created a relevant *methodological* issue.

The unwillingness to acknowledge the need for a different organisational structure with an explicit and transparent decision-making process generated implicit and hidden struggles that served the interests of some better-organised groups. As Whitaker recognised, "self-nominated social movements [...] seek to put the forum inside their own mobilising dynamics, to serve their own objectives" (Whitaker, 2004). According to Teivainen, until the WSF establishes "internal procedures for democratic collective will-formation" (2004, p. 126), it is not possible to express its interests as a collective movement. However, the supporters of the 'arena' claim that the forum has to remain an open space, refusing institutionalisation and bureaucratisation. Without structures and procedures in place, power relations among the organising actors played out in a way that their influence reflected their capacity to raise economic resources, rather than their representativeness in terms of the size of their grassroots

support.⁸ The choice of a 'light structure' to facilitate the process has led to a lack of defined procedures to deal explicitly with internal conflicts; the open space has become a chaotic arena, and powerful interests exploit the situation to promote their own interests.⁹

A useful theoretical framework for making sense of this process comes from the concept of the "tyranny of structurelessness" (Freeman, 1972). Jo Freeman, a feminist scholar who has been writing about social movements since the 1960s, examined feminist movements in the 1970s and the effects of their claim of being leaderless and structureless. Although she looks at the organisation of smaller movements, her analysis is relevant for making sense of some of the processes that have been happening in the WSF.

She claims that while the idea of structureless movements in reaction to the hyper-structured and hierarchical existing social organisation was a powerful political stance, in the feminist movement, the adoption of the idea of structurelessness became "a goddess in its own right". She argues that there is no such a thing as a structureless group: "Any group of people of whatever nature that comes together for any length of time for any purpose will inevitably structure itself in some fashion" (p. 152). She argues that the problem of structurelessness did not emerge immediately when the movement wanted to raise consciousness, but rather when the movements finally decided to do something specific. Similarly, at its inception the WSF wanted to gather people opposing neoliberalism, and start a process from there. The problem became stronger when the WSF wanted to draw action plans. According to Freeman, the problem is that the lack of an explicit and agreed procedure helps some people – generally the strong – to "establish unquestioned hegemony over others". According to Freeman, such hegemony imposes itself easily, because "the idea of 'structurelessness' does not prevent the formation of informal structures". Structurelessness becomes "a way of masking power [...] most strongly advocated by those who are the most powerful" (p. 154). Consequently, she explains the importance of having a formal structure and procedures in place.

The rules of decision-making must be open and available to everyone, and this can happen only if they are formalised. This is not to say that formalisation of a structure of a group will destroy the informal structure. It usually doesn't. But it does hinder the informal structure from having predominant control and make available some means of attacking it if the people involved are not at least responsible to the needs of the group at large. "Structurelessness" is organisationally impossible. We cannot decide whether to have a structured or

⁸ Teivainen argues that NGOs based in capital cities may have better economic resources, and ultimately play a more influential role in the WSF process than vast popular movements with much wider support at a grassroots level (2004).

⁹ An interesting example can be found in the work of Caruso (2004) on conflict management and hegemonic practices in the World Social Forum 2004, where he suggests that "clearer norms need to be discussed and agreed" as well as "procedures to ensure inclusion".

structureless group, only whether or not to have a formally structured one (Freeman, 1972, p. 155).

She argues that maintaining the informal structure, especially in unstructured groups, forms the base of elite power. She describes how friendship groups work as “networks of communications outside any regular channels”, and if there are no formal channels, such friendship networks function as the only communication tool. This is very similar to what has happened with the original leadership of the International Council. Freeman warns, “When informal elites are combined with a myth of ‘structurelessness,’ there can be no attempt to put limits on the use of power” (p. 158). As I will show, the myth of the ‘open space’ worked similarly to the 1970s feminist claim of structurelessness, and coupled to the dominant informal elite of the International Council at global level and the NGO organising the forum in Nairobi, this led to virtually unchallengeable and strong power relations. As Caruso explains in relation to the Indian WSF 2004, “The concept of the ‘open space’ was used differently by different actors: to silence criticism, to impose authority [...], to explain inevitable failures [...] to placate controversy and to win arguments” (Caruso, 2005, p. 203).

Moreover, Freeman reminds how contrarily to formal structures, informal structures have no obligation to be responsible or accountable to the group at large. She concludes, arguing that, “The more unstructured a movement is, the less control it has over the directions in which it develops and the political actions in which it engages” (p. 162). A telling example of losing control over a movement’s direction was the entering of powerful neoliberal NGOs into the International Council, without creating any relevant debate covered by the chaotic arrangements and the high need for money. Another example related to the local organisation of the WSF 2007 was the choice of entering a big contract with Celtel for the sponsoring of the Forum, which was taken by only a couple of people and without any public debate.

Another important point of Freeman’s argument that is highly relevant to the WSF process is what she calls the “star” system. Similarly to the 1970s women’s movement, the WSF charter states that no one represents it, nor can speak in its name. However, media and members need someone to make public statements about the group position. Without an official spokesperson, media would generally look for the movement’s “stars” to get authoritative statements about the group, choosing the most famous activists or scholars who may not necessarily be those that other members feel to be more representative. A similar argument was put forward by Gitlin (2003) who looks at how, in the absence of official representatives, media could shape movements of the US New Left by choosing the activists to transform into celebrities unaccountable to their base. In the previous section of this paper, I have shown how not-so-representative ‘social movement entrepreneurs’ end up talking on behalf of large categories of people. Freeman thinks that this process is very destructive, because the movement has no control in the selection of its representatives to the public, and the “stars” find themselves attacked by their comrades. She

concludes that, “This achieves nothing for the movement and is painfully destructive to the individuals involved” (p. 159).

The refusal of methodologies perceived to be linked to liberal democracies led to the full adoption of *consensual methodologies*, and the elimination of ‘traditional’ democratic practices, such as voting. However, this choice – especially with the excessive idealisation of the method – led to undemocratic practices whereby the entire discussion was dominated by a well-consolidated group in the IC, self-nominated at the beginning of the process in 2001 and irremovable since there was no formal channel to renovate the leadership. As we have shown, the supposedly open space of the IC was highly influenced by the economic and social resources of the participants, and by the unquestioned membership of the founding group, exercising a feudal-type authority by working through implicit but consolidated alliances, intelligible to newcomers, and therefore more difficult to challenge, as suggested by Freeman (1972). The original core membership was enlarged to include new actors admitted at the discretion of existing IC members, creating in this way a sort of patronage relationship. The process contributed to create what Pleyers calls “an international alter-globalisation elite” (2010, p. 145).

Even Whitaker, a founder and important intellectual of the forum and strong supporter of consensus in decision-making, acknowledged that “certain types of consensus [...] are a beautiful façade of systems of domination allegedly democratic” and that “openness and horizontality do not mean absence of rules” (2012, p. 3). As Teivainen (2012, p. 191) put it, “As long as there are no clear procedures for resolving disputes within the governance bodies of the WSF, the workings of power will continue to take place mostly through mechanisms that have not been collectively agreed on”. He argues that the strongly held idea that an open space cannot become an institution or organisation depoliticises the WSF. He and others acknowledge the role of the “depoliticised structurelessness” (p. 191) as an attractive novelty at the beginning of the process. However, Teivainen claims that as the WSF became an important global platform for democratic transformations, it should take the political seriously by “recognising relations of power in order to democratise them” (2012, p. 191).

The economic aspect was also important; the IC was quite open to accept new members, but new members had to fund their participation, and possibly financially contribute to the WSF process. ‘Southern’ organisations had to fly their members across the globe at least four times a year – a commitment of well over 10,000 euros, just to be present at the meetings.¹⁰ One outcome of this IC arrangement was that while the social movements landscape changed very rapidly, the governance structure of their privileged meeting space – the WSF –

¹⁰ These tickets are particularly expensive; while a connection from Europe or Northern America to any developing country is generally direct and relatively inexpensive as the major hubs are located in these continents, South-to-South flights, for instance from Latin America to Asia, pass through Europe and are very expensive.

did not, remaining every year more distant from the social reality of the movements.

In Nairobi, the use of a 'neutral' technology (i.e. the online software) to promote new partnerships and encounters – without passing through a formally structured system – largely failed, and the participatory consensual methodologies led to the tyranny of the few 'facilitators with the knowledge'. Expert knowledge in facilitation became a key asset, whose owners abused it by using their facilitation role to impose their views, as shown in the thematic meeting on debt. To the "tyranny of structurelessness", the "tyranny of the method" was added (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). On this point, Cooke and Kothari showed the tendency of participatory approaches to conceal alternative views that might have emerged using other methods (2001).

The WSF is an open space that keeps people together united by their being against neoliberalism, and, in order to maintain its openness and diversity, it has refused to take seriously into account the issue of power. At the same time, this open space decided to build concrete alternatives and to move into action, but without rethinking its governance structures. In such a process, decisions need to be taken, and someone will take them even without adequate decision-making structures. At the Kenya Forum, the result was the domination of those who had been able to exploit their advantaged position and had the social capital and the resources to fight for their proposal without any mediating structure, rules or constraints that would limit their exercise of power. However, I would argue that even if the WSF 2007 had not aimed at preparing a global action plan and had remained just an open space, the issue of power would have needed some serious rethinking anyway. An open space that gathers all global movements together is a political actor that needs governance, and therefore structures and methodologies have to be thought out seriously, even if it had decided to avoid speaking on behalf of its members. This governance issue has been explored by other authors, particularly Teivainen (2004, 2012), and the reform of the IC has been a hotly debated argument in the subsequent years, giving the rise to a working group on the IC future in 2012, including Whitaker's proposal (2013) for its dissolution and reconstitution as a global movement.

The WSF 2007 organisational mess has contributed to the process of privatisation of the open space. In Nairobi, it was a double privatisation. On one side, the WSF contracted the organisation of the Forum to one NGO without the structures to render this organisation accountable or ensure that it would put in place an inclusive and open process. On the other, not having an operational working structure, the NGO that won the WSF tender subcontracted – often to private firms and multinationals – the provision of the services needed to make the Forum possible.

Another process facilitated by the lack of transparent and clear governance procedures and structures and connected with the "privatisation" of the Forum was the funding from big foundations belonging to the corporate elites, or from NGOs largely funded by the US government that reinforced the influence of

those more institutionalised organisations within the process, thus co-opting the forum (Chossudovsky, 2010).

The other point is the one of access; the open space had serious barriers of access against those people whose interests it claimed to defend. The system favours those people who are affiliated with bigger organisations, often development NGOs. The poor, unorganised citizens, and the more grassroots organisations could barely make it to the Forum without submitting their independence to larger networks, and often to depoliticised foreign (or at least foreign-funded) development NGOs, reproducing quasi-colonial power relations instead of the horizontal space that the Forum claims to be.

Another critical reflection concerns the discursive construction of the WSF against something,¹¹ namely neoliberalism, domination of the world by capital, and any form of imperialism (WSF, 2001). This has defined the WSF in opposition and in antithesis to neoliberalism, creating a rigid dichotomy. If the WSF celebrates diversity, its ‘enemy’ – neoliberal globalisation – is conceived as a homogeneous domain, and the WSF exercises the monopoly of diversity against the ‘One Truth’ (Whitaker, 2004). This view fails to consider that WSF practices are hybrids, and that the fight is not between two monolithic blocs, i.e. neoliberal as homogenous and anti-neoliberal as diverse and open. This conception is paradoxically reinforcing an old political practice of framing the political struggle within dichotomies. Neoliberalism, including existing institutions and political practices of current society is presented as a homogeneous domain with no spaces for engaging with it. This construction is used by WSF activists from the so-called “traditional left” (Santos, 2007) who conceive the struggle as a choice between neoliberal capital and socialism, weakening the wide range of diverse options that the WSF represents. For example, Eric Toussant¹² quotes Chávez and agrees with him on socialism as the only alternative to neoliberalism. Some radical grassroots’ groups argue that this dichotomous construction enabled “forces of the traditional left, including leftist political parties, trade unions, and large non-governmental organisations, to establish an hegemony over a new kind of movement that had largely escaped their control” (Juris, 2005, p. 2008).

This Manichean view is also connected with a very limited understanding of power, and prevents any transformative engagement with neoliberal institutions, excluding the possibility of conducting the struggle within these existing institutions of the society (e.g. international financial institutions, governments, etc.) as advocated by Gramsci. These places should be the field of struggle, and as many scholars, especially anthropologists (e.g. Lewis & Mosse, 2006), have shown, there is space for agency. The WSF rhetoric and the dichotomy it constructs with its monopoly of diversity and resistance prevents

¹¹ Glasius and Timms underline the “logical contradiction in the idea of an open space against something” (2005, p. 224).

¹² Member of the WSF IC and founder of the CADTM (Committee for the Abolition of Third World Debt).

people from viewing the entire world as a battlefield of daily resistance practices. This rhetoric also prevents WSF activists from critically analysing their own behaviours and discover how neoliberal and undemocratic practices are embedded in their daily lives and activities of their movements.

This dichotomous view of the world reinforces a misleading representation of the reality that enforces the interests of the powerful both within the neoliberal and the anti-neoliberal arrays. It transforms the struggle into ‘us’ (anti-neoliberal) against ‘them’ (neoliberal), without challenging the power structure and the practices within ‘us’ at the advantage of ‘social movement entrepreneurs’ and other dominant leaders. As shown above, the practices of WSF activists, especially in their relationships with other people or in decision-making processes, often reproduce the same mechanisms of domination on which neoliberalism is founded. Similarly, feminists’ analyses have observed an ungendered and deracialised discourse in the antiglobalisation movement, underpinned by an “implicit masculinisation” (Mohanty, 2003) which paradoxically reflects the dominant discourse of neoliberal globalisation. According to Conway (2011), the radicalism of the WSF exempts its (male) leaders from “examining their own gendered, raced and classed positionalities, from acknowledging their own privilege, and recognising how their everyday practices in the movement and in the forum can reproduce dynamics of oppression or marginalisation” (p. 57).

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to unpack the idealised view of the WSF and some of its myths surrounding a process that is inevitably and inherently messy. Many of the activists and academics who criticise ‘the neoliberal project’ have been looking at the WSF as the solution (e.g. Klein, 2001; Wallerstein, 2007), or as the “counter-hegemonic globalisation” (Santos, 2007, p. 4) opposed to the all-encompassing neoliberal discourse. The WSF discourse has quickly become idealised by the romanticised reporting of western academics, who manifested an oriental, exotic attitude towards the WSF in which they looked for evidence for their global revolutionary theories (e.g. Arrighi, Santos), rather than providing critical input to the movement. In this paper, I have sought to challenge the dominant narratives of the WSF by looking at the “asymmetry between the values and the practices of the WSF process” (Caruso, 2004, p. 577), at the gap between the discourses of democratic and open process, and the reality of hegemonic practices, and I have problematised some methodological and organisational choices. The focus of the analysis is the practices of the WSF 2007, widely recognised to have been one of the most problematic forums. As acknowledged in the article, the WSF processes has reflected upon many of these critical issues, leading to some organisational changes. However, it is still relevant to bring an in-depth reflection of the empirical experience and use it to make a wider argument.

The attempt of large inclusion and the focus on diversity conceptualised in the

framework of the open space have led to a lack of clear structure, which resulted in the “tyranny of structurelessness”. Moreover, the dichotomous construction of the struggle against neoliberalism can lead to a disengagement with the institutions of the society that, in my view, should become the field of struggle, and it has also paradoxically reinforced the position of the ‘traditional left’ rather than promoting a diverse range of alternatives.¹³

While the inclusive diversity discourse attracted a wide range of actors, the WSF diversity pillar presented some side effects that were not properly dealt with. To maintain diversity, the WSF defined itself against something – neoliberalism – so that everyone could agree and be part of it, and became quickly labelled as anti-globalisation (although many activists challenged this label identifying themselves with the term alter-globalisation). The identity of the WSF became based on strengthening the dichotomy between the WSF movements and neoliberal institutions. The movement identity was defined as an inverted mirror of neoliberalism. The enemy was defined as the supreme evil, eliminating spaces for dialogue and – to a certain extent – internal criticism. The WSF discourse, arrogating to itself the “monopoly of diversity” against the “one truth” of neoliberalism, also led to a failure to recognise the evolution and the complexity of the current mainstream neoliberal discourse, especially in its new institutional “post-Washington Consensus” form. Literature that looks at the interaction between grassroots movements and the state (e.g. Corbridge, Williams, Srivastava, & Véron, 2005) have revealed the hybridity and multi-faceted presence of the state in the life of citizens, and how movements have adopted mainstream development discourses productively to frame their struggles and make their claims to the state (Sinha, 2003). These forms of resistance produced political subjects, engaging the state and demanding rights in the language of the neoliberal state, challenging rigid approaches that over-emphasise the domination/resistance dichotomy.

My criticism of the WSF process – and particularly of its internal hegemonic practices – has been often viewed as destructive pessimism concerning the possibility of social change. I am positive about the possibility of social change, but the situation is far more complex than the neoliberal/anti-neoliberal dichotomy. On the contrary, I strongly believe in engaging and struggling against the neoliberal discourse in any available domain where there is space for agency, multiplying the battlefields, and starting with the fight against hegemonic practices within our daily lives.

The current attitude has helped to maintain despotic power relations and hegemonic practices within a process that claims “to be more participatory and democratic” (Glasius & Timms, 2005, p. 190) and thus “practising politics in a different way” (2005, p. 191). I do not believe that the WSF is only acting in the interests of “a handful of people who decided to privatise a very public and, of course, very global process” (Oloo, 2007), however, in the WSF process, there

¹³ See for instance Juris (2005).

are complex constellations of conflicting interests which need to be further analysed, made explicit, fully acknowledged and openly discussed.

An important point to make is around what happens or should happen in the “open space” of the WSF. Even from supporters of the WSF as an arena, there is recognition that the encounters between movements should be more than merely presenting each other respective agendas. The WSF can be described as a transformative encounter in which participants may change their preferences. Della Porta (2013) emphasises the difference between a view of a democratic process which simply aims at counting which view is majoritarian and one which contributes to constructing such views. For the latter, drawing upon Habermas’ work, Della Porta reminds the importance of *how* opinions are formed: “As preferences and/or identities are always in flux, the conditions under which they are formed are of vital importance for democracy” (p. 187). This explains my focus on the *how* which, in my view, entails taking decision-making rules and structures seriously.

Della Porta (2015) argues that, by experimenting with forms of deliberative and participatory democracy, these movements have demonstrated the importance of democracy for collective deliberation. This paper warns about the limitations and challenges of such methods, particularly the “tyranny of the structurelessness” combined with the “tyranny of the method”, with the hope that reflexive attitudes amongst activists may lead to further thinking about the relationship between power and global movements’ organisational structures and decision-making practices. This analysis based on 2007 materials is particularly relevant today in the light of the global Occupy as well as anti-austerity movements in Europe, which make similar claims to those of the WSF of being leaderless initiatives, without any political affiliation, and using consensual methodologies, thus facing some of the same shortcomings and challenges.

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