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Beyond the Choir

Contribution to GTI Forum Farewell to the World Social Forum?

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All the various points raised by the contributors to this forum are likely right even when in contradiction with each other. That is the nature of the World Social Forum: a lively marketplace which resisted falling into the trap of a “single global campaign” approach and instead encouraged a diversity of opinions and approaches within progressive movements, allowing unexpected deliberations, partnerships, and convergences.

The past two decades of the WSF have helped shape our civil society galaxy today: diverse, sharing common values, creative in terms of strategies of influence and actions, horizontal and influential (most of the WSF’s ideas and ideals are in one way or another in the mainstream debate today). The WSF has been an outstanding experience shaped by both participants and leaders, and the process as it has been proposed (open and diverse) succeeded at preventing any one sector or actor from hijacking it—a positive track record for the left. I only regret that the Anglo-Saxon world has been insufficiently active in the process, perhaps because there were assumptions on both parts that this space was run and dominated by Latin American and European organizations and leaders. From my perspective, this mistrust still reflects a leadership divide between two Western streams within civil society organizations (CSOs): Anglo-Saxon and Latin CSO worlds and traditions. The fact that the neoliberal system is broadly seen historically as an Anglo-Saxon ideology might be partly responsible for this obvious tension.

Once again, the World Social Forum is reflecting who has been leading civil society movements and organizations over the last thirty years in this framework. The WSF is, by the way, an excellent footprint of our sectors, strengths, and contradictions. For sure, future “archaeologists” will enjoy analyzing what the WSF has to say (and didn’t say) about our contemporary societies.

But from my perspective, the most urgent issue is to grapple with the difficult questions for the future that the World Social Forum couldn't address yet:

- Should CSOs come together to collectively agree on strategies for breaking the glass ceiling of radical progressive people in our respective societies? In other words, should we keep putting all our scarce resources into talking and targeting the already convinced?
- In this new context, can our current radical narratives (pointing out the bad guys and assuming we are the good ones) be effective enough to engage with people who either disagree with us or don't have radical opinions on all the latest issues?
- Where can we calmly discuss the fact that intersectionality is not a strategy strong enough (alone) to guide large and diverse streams of societies towards the Great Transition?
- Can we discuss the fact that current civil society "identity" strategies have involuntarily echoed and sometimes reinforced the identity narrative of our opponents?
- Can we discuss the main societal challenges ahead which consist in overcoming current national identities and institutions (toward a shared—and not universal—sense and responsibility of/on our humanity) without feeding an anti-nationalist discourse? Actually, the current universalist discourse (either economic, philosophical, and/or humanist) has almost no resonance beyond Europe (because of its World War II history) and cosmopolitan urban elites. Opposing nations and global governance has been one of our major mistakes (showing our limited understanding of the realities and societies of the so-called Global South).
- Where are the spaces where individual leaders from social movements and CSOs (based on an ambitious and utopian prospect) can start building an alternative comprehensive political project which is multi-issue (covering the entire complexity of our societies), concrete (solutions-oriented), and serious (in terms of what can be done today with the institutions and powers we have) in order to engage with new forces within society such as universities, new citizens movements, young entrepreneurs, change agents within institutions, progressive funders, media (traditional and new), etc.? Those approaches should no longer

be systematically opposed to the long-term vision of challenging and changing power and privileges.

I do hope the next twenty years of the World Social Forum (as well as other initiatives) will contribute to opening the space for more open-minded discussions and will contribute to push us beyond our current echo chambers. The majorities (which are not the sum of minorities) are ready to follow our radical thinking on the condition that we show them that the future will be built with them too!

About the Author



Olivier Consolo was the founding Director of CONCORD (European Confederation of Development and Relief NGOs) from 2003 to 2013. He has since worked as a freelance activist to link local CSO struggles, social and political innovation, and the international agenda, with a recent focus on the Middle East. He holds a Residency at the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center, and is currently collaborating with the Charles Léopold Mayer Foundation on a francophone network promoting municipalism.

About the Publication

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