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Recovering the Global in Diverse Strategies

Forum: *Farewell to the World Social Forum?*

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Looking Back

The historical significance of the WSF is undeniable. At a time when the alter-globalization movements were at their apex, the change in emphasis from confrontation to building institutions of alternative resistance helped inspire the great enthusiasm that led to the massive participation in the Forums.

The tension between the idea of the Forum as an open space and the idea of the Forum as a body that can take political stances has been present since the beginning. However, the WSF was never just an open space for hosting conversations. It has been a space for meeting, collective strategizing, and connecting different universes. The resistance to having the Forum evolve into a more organic space for taking firm stances in the face of the great global crises was due, for many, to what Savio recognizes as the Forum's democratic deficit. Precisely because of this deficit, the idea of making political statements was seen as reckless. Who decides? How do we choose? How do we avoid statements in defense of dictatorial regimes such as Nicaragua's or situations of democratic weakness such as in Venezuela?

These questions arise because the WSF could not just mimic the traditional modus operandi of leftist parties, with all the attendant patriarchal and colonial vices. Although political parties have a role to play, and many of their members have participated in the WSF as individuals, we should not be accepting parties as institutions as long as they resist their own democratization.

This democratic deficit did not mean that there were no statements at all. However, the early efforts to speak with one global voice have been weakening. For example, it has not been possible, throughout these nineteen years, to increase the presence of movements and institutions located far from the locations of the successive Forums. This has been the result of a variety of factors, from the economic costs of travel to a de-emphasis on the internationalist character of struggles to the difficulty of incorporating new voices and movements.

At a Crossroads

It is clear that the WSF is no longer what it was. There are new movements at the local-territorial and/or regional and interregional scope, often fighting for human rights and against extractivism and land grabs. The movements participating in the Forums have new demands and are facing new challenges, such as climate change and the rise of fundamentalism and conservatism, in particular, in Latin America, after the great progressive “wave” (which itself was not free of extractivism, homophobia, or misogyny).

The growth of the fundamentalist right requires both resistance and defense of past gains. But it also requires a thorough review of the political and economic “styles” of progressive governments, whose democratic deficit is also evident, at least in Latin America.

It is not that radical pluralism has impeded the unity of the movement. Such pluralism, recognized and legitimized, is the only thing that can foster a unity of struggle. And, although there is an enriching pluralism in the myriad movements (ecological, feminist, ethnic, racial, LGBTQ) in confrontation with today’s untamed capitalism, allied with patriarchy and colonialism, such a pluralism is not a shared assumption across the different movements. In the face of the paradigmatic, epistemic, civilizational crisis, only an intersectional view of diversity can open a longer-range horizon in the struggle for change.

Therefore, the important issue is not unity itself, but the possibility of articulating the diversity of strategies for confrontation with the ecological, patriarchal, capitalist, racist powers that are implicated in all the major problems we face today. At this crossroads, it is urgent that we recognize that, in light of the progress desperately needed, only a critical review of our political practices can reveal how we must change our movements and institutions.

The Social Movements Assembly, created as a decision-making space where thousands of community members from hundreds of countries could come together to make movement decisions, was an important advance. However, the old vices of the actually existing left were a roadblock to inclusiveness. As a result, several other movements organized their own parallel assemblies: women's, indigenous, Amazonian, environmentalist, human rights, etc. The women's assemblies were enriched by exploring connectivity between women's, anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-colonial struggles. Even so, colonial tensions, also present in the WSF and within women's movements, manifested more than once, especially between Sahrawis and Moroccans, in the Senegal and Tunisia Forums.

Looking Ahead

The WSF has not preserved its original form because the contexts and conditions of movements, including the democratic institutions that they face, have changed. However, the new thematic and regional forums have the potential to have even greater impact. We have seen powerful thematic forums on issues such as migration and economic transformation (covering a range of issues from feminist economics to fair trade to the social and solidarity economy), as well as regional ones such as the Pan-Amazonic Forum (FOSPA).

However, these forums also reveal in some cases the weakness of such a democratic and diverse political culture as a basis for collective action. FOSPA is an important case: it has managed to stay relatively successful throughout all these years with its own dynamic and broader agenda. At the last event, the indigenous women's issues clearly infused the whole event. The campaign "My Body, My Territory" was launched with the establishment of a court to deliberate the impacts of bodily violence against indigenous women in different counties. In spite of its importance, two years after, the actual coordinating team seems not willing to continue with this path.

What has weakened, for now, is the global nature of these struggles.

These struggles are in more regional and interregional spaces, more local, more territorial. We need to devise strategies of recognition and dialogue across diverse perspectives. In this process, the ["translation" theory](#) of Boaventura de Sousa Santos is undoubtedly a valuable strategy

towards connection in plurality. For example, women are fighting not only for gender justice, but also for an agenda that, from women's perspective, incorporates ecological perspectives, human rights, economic justice, sexual justice, recognition of other perspectives and worldviews, etc. That is, a joint fight against the perverse alliance between capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism.

Finally, we need to take a critical look at the WSF International Council as well. When the IC was established among existing movements and institutions in the first Forum, the possibility of including other members was set aside. There have been several attempts to change this: to incorporate the organizers of the thematic and territorial Forums; to expand the presence of new or more visible movements that were not clearly incorporated at the beginning, and that also corresponded to the new problems and dynamics that were occurring in the different regions. This is not to ignore the great efforts many have made to achieve greater democratic dynamism in the IC, to eliminate people who do not attend, to expand its contents, etc. However, nineteen years later, we have almost the same IC as we did in the beginning.

If the WSF continues, then the IC has to change. The inertia that hinders its evolution must be overcome.

The next WSF, already in preparation, will be in Mexico. It has the support of the Nordic countries, and it has an active team, which aims to incorporate more movements. I believe, however, that it will be the most limited of the recent Forums. Still, it will undoubtedly have significant participation of migrant movements, indigenous movements, ecologists, feminists, peasants, unions, etc. Let's begin to imagine how to connect further local-regional-global dimensions and how to connect with other global initiatives in the coming years.

Recreating the future requires recovering, and overcoming as necessary, the lessons from past experiences. Our challenge and responsibility is to pursue strategies for doing so.

About the Author



Virginia Vargas is a Peruvian sociologist, feminist militant, and co-founder of the Flora Tristán Peruvian Women’s Center. Her work focuses on democracy, politics, and feminism in Latin America and the world. She has published widely and been a visiting professor at universities in the US, Europe, and Latin America. She participates in numerous networks and feminist initiatives in Latin America, such as Articulación Feminista Marcosur, and serves on the International Council of the World Social Forum.

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