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An Agenda Beyond the WSF Forum: *Farewell to the World Social Forum?*

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I have been involved in the World Social Forum process since 2000, when representatives of eight Brazilian social organizations and movements—later called the Organizing Committee—met to launch the first forum in Porto Alegre the next year. My relation to the WSF has had two phases: first, deep engagement from 2000 to 2010 and, second, a critical position with gradual withdrawal after that. I draw from this experience in this contribution to the timely debate that Roberto Savio provokes.

The WSF was conceived as an open space that would be a battery recharger of active citizenship, now necessarily of planetary dimension because of the need to resolve the contradictions of capitalism at a global scale. The WSF has undoubtedly made a fundamental contribution to the emergence of a worldwide citizen culture, and continues today propelled by civil society organizations, social movements, and networks around the world. In its early years, it helped build collective political intelligence about the problems, challenges, and possibilities of the struggles we waged, each in our own way across the planet. It underscored our interdependence as we share the same world and the same challenge to remake it. For our great diversity of identities and cultures, our plurality of views and perspectives, the WSF offered us an open space—a kind of factory for a new political culture—for us to recognize ourselves as part of a shared humanity and a shared planetary system.

The world's cultural, political, and economic context has changed greatly since 2001. The multiple recent crises are expressions of the contradictions and limits to which globalized capitalism submits humanity and the sustainability of life on the planet. "Another possible world" remains an urgent need. However, as I have argued in the past, we need to think beyond the

WSF, while still allowing it to continue the inspiring task for which it was founded. WSF meetings nourished dreams and hopes for many around the world and should continue to do so with the younger generations of today.

The WSF as Inspiration and as Limit

The most obvious contribution of the WSF was as a galvanizing force that opposed Davos and asserted that “another world is possible.” It did this by appealing to the capacity for transformative action of the multiple and diverse collective subjects, organized into resisting organizations, movements, networks, coalitions, and alliances to formulate concrete proposals and fight for their realization. The WSF created the foundations of a new political culture of transformation precisely by establishing horizontal planetary dialogue as an imperative, without antagonism, racism, or patriarchy—dialogue within and between collective subjects, each recognizing each other as equals. Due to its open space for diversity and plurality—as defined in the Charter of Principles—the WSF has become a reference point for meetings and exchanges, without hierarchies or priorities.

However, we all brought our mental structures, values, and practices, with all their contradictions, starting with the simplest: we confuse diversity with each one doing what they wanted, making difficult the collaboration and synthesis that is the *raison d’être* of the WSF space. In fact, we were deluded about the size of the task ahead with our way of thinking and acting freighted by conceptual and political tendencies that undermined unity. Not least, despite the massive presence of feminist organizations and movements, tenacious machismo did not give women proper relevance in dialogues and exchanges. Also, while language and cultural diversity are heritages to preserve, we could not cope with the problem of translation, despite the information and communication technologies available to us.

Despite these problems, a great legacy of the WSF was the rescue and appreciation of politics as the quintessential arena for building another world, and citizen action as the necessary transformational force. In a capitalist world increasingly dominated by bigness, privatization, commodification, cynicism, and violence, the WSF highlighted core ethical principles and values for thinking about nature, life, the economy, and power.

The WSF's strengths lay in rekindling hope and renewing human agency, questioning the determinist assumptions and antagonisms typical of leftist culture, and valuing the diversity of collective subjects. However, the WSF had its limits: most clearly, its emphasis solely on building consciousness and will for action, rather than action itself. For transformative forces to emerge, we need to take a path beyond the WSF to new forms of collective action.

Elements for an Agenda Beyond the WSF

Repoliticizing the relationship between the biosphere, power, culture, and the economy and acting from a planetary and cosmopolitan perspective is the starting point. The WSF has given centrality to politics and power, downplaying market relations and the economy. In this way, it pointed to the power of active citizenship, but did not elaborate and define the agenda or agendas for struggle. Rather, the agendas of each individual movement, network, coalition, and alliance were debated and often updated at WSF events, but the responsibility for carrying them out rested with the one who adopted them without formal support from all Forum participants. It is the duty of Forum participants to carry the political agenda forward before and after events. The "beyond the WSF" I refer to embodies this sense of ongoing intervention, taking inspiration from the WSF only as a moment of reflection and exchange.

Today, I think that the central issue for confronting capitalism is the search for alternatives to the "crisis of civilization" rooted in colonial, racist, patriarchal, Eurocentric, and imperialist rule over peoples and nature, and in industrial growth, productivism, and consumerism. Environmental destruction and social injustice are intrinsic conditions of capitalism, exacerbated today by globalization at the service of the great economic and financial conglomerates under the imperialist militarized guard. The fracturing of the social fabric and the eroding of the resilience of the biosphere, the common basis for life itself, is becoming irreversible. To make all life sustainable, it is essential to tackle injustice on both its social and environmental sides: eco-social injustice. It is no longer possible to limit our call to changing social relations of production, heretofore the dominant ideal of the left. The ideal of industrial society—its productivism and limitless accumulation, the goods and services it provides, and the style of consumption and life it generates—is part of the eco-social injustice that we must confront. The idea of resistance to the commodification of everything was always well-represented in the WSF. But this is

only part of the story. The whole vision of human civilization and its relationship to nature needs to be reimagined, from local to global, reflecting the possibilities and limits of the biosphere and the cultural, scientific, and technical creativity of each people, in a spirit of interdependence and planetary solidarity, resilience, and sustainability.

Accordingly, a key element of the new political culture and social transformation agenda is to decolonize and liberate our ways of thinking and acting. In the context of the “crisis of civilization,” we need to advance a deep shift in power and economic institutions. What condemns many to poverty, exclusion, and multiple forms of inequality and domination is not a lack of development, but development itself. Development constantly reinvents racism, patriarchy, xenophobia, and intolerance to dominate and exclude. Today, it is visible in the territorialization of racism, the fissures between city and countryside and between agribusiness and social forms of production, and the relations between peoples and nations. Patriarchy is renewed and naturalized by capitalism, which devalues, but benefits from, an economy of care, imposing a double workday on women.

In the struggle for “another possible world,” or, as I prefer to say, “another possible civilization,” we are faced with the unavoidable need to oppose citizenship and peoples’ sovereignty to national states and their monopoly in the world sphere of power. This implies taking on the existing legal framework that denies equal rights and destroys the natural foundations of life. This is fundamental: citizenship is not a gift of states, but a political condition of being part of humanity. Therefore, the agenda of rethinking and refounding the state necessarily arises as a political expression of the power that equal and diverse “citizenships” confer on it.

Interdependence between peoples and nations in today’s globalized capitalism is undoubtedly a major problem created by the imperialist domination of developed countries, particularly the United States. But this interdependence carries a contradiction that offers a huge possibility for the future. The WSF itself, as a space for an emerging planetary citizenship, would not have been possible were it not for the diffuse awareness that we are part of the same humanity and share the same planet. Interdependence, however, cannot be theorized and practiced without a concrete location, where we have the essentials of our lives and relationships with others and make our exchanges with the biosphere. Burning questions arise. How can we rethink this place, in terms of power, culture, and

economy, from a planetary citizen perspective? And how can we rethink world power from a perspective of territorialized citizenship?

A Possible Way of Acting Beyond the WSF

The fundamental need is to reorganize our forces in order to propel the agenda of building another civilization. The WSF serves as an inspiration, but it lacks the capacity to undertake the difficult and continuing task of collective organizing, assessing political opportunities, and waging the struggle. The process of action begins by agreeing on a broad agenda. This already points beyond the WSF to the plurality of citizens as a possible historical block for constituting and instituting planetary citizenship of another world. The tricky question is how to build coalitions with a maximum common denominator (to counteract the lowest common denominator of certain generic and empty statements) for forging the agenda and as a basis for political action. This requires inter-movement coalitions and active organizations of citizens. The relative success of existing thematic campaigns and networks for strategic thinking, such as the Great Transition Network, is a point of departure. However, we need differentiated and coordinated actions of a militant citizen movement contesting existing structures and powers in the most diverse situations. For this, intra-movement networks and organizations are needed for linking local and world-embracing strategic visions. This requires the patient work of building new collective political agencies, necessarily plural and diverse, with their own identities and proposals, from local to global, understanding their potential power to transform the world.

The crucial challenge is the construction of counter-hegemonies in concrete local societies and at various levels of political influence, up to world power structures. How can we do this without factionalism, as is the tradition of the left? The answer lies in building open coalitions, which starts by recognizing others as indispensable, and depends on honoring and implementing their agenda. In this way, active consensus can be generated, which is fundamental in the struggle for a new hegemony. For this, public space for debate and free circulation of ideas will remain essential.

About the Author



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