

Politics & Society

<http://pas.sagepub.com>

The World Social Forum and the Global Left

Boaventura De Sousa Santos

Politics Society 2008; 36; 247

DOI: 10.1177/0032329208316571

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://pas.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/36/2/247>

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Politics & Society* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://pas.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://pas.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

The World Social Forum and the Global Left*

BOAVENTURA DE SOUSA SANTOS

This article has two purposes. First, it aims to put the development of the World Social Forum (WSF) within a broad theoretical and historical context. Specifically, my goal is to understand the WSF in relation to the crises of left thinking and practice of the last thirty or forty years. Second, it offers an analysis of some recent debates about the future of the WSF. It raises questions concerning its organizational makeup and asks whether it should continue as it is, or rather give way to other kinds of initiatives and struggles. Against critics such as Walden Bello, I argue that the WSF should continue and, given certain organizational changes, will contribute to the theory and practice of left movements throughout the world in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: *WSF; Globalization; Global Left; Intercultural Translation; Strong Questions/Weak Answers*

*This article is part of a special issue of *Politics & Society* on the topic, "Between the *Washington Consensus* and *Another World*: Interrogating United States Hegemony and Alternative Visions." The papers were initially presented at a mini-conference organized in conjunction with the American Sociological Association meetings in August 2007. For more on the theme, please see the Introduction to this issue.

POLITICS & SOCIETY, Vol. 36 No. 2, June 2008 247-270

DOI: 10.1177/0032329208316571

© 2008 Sage Publications

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to place the development of the World Social Forum (WSF) within a broad theoretical and historical context. Specifically, my goal is to understand the WSF in relation to the crises of left thinking and practice of the last thirty or forty years. While it can be argued that the left has always been in crisis, the recent history is qualitatively different from what came before. While some of the key events occurred in different countries, the underlying reality has been global.

The catalog of failures and setbacks includes: the assassination of Lumumba (1961); the defeat of Che in Bolivia (1966); the neutralization of the May 1968 student movements in Europe and the Americas; the invasion of Czechoslovakia (1968); the assassination of Allende (1973) and the military dictatorships in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s; Suharto's brutal repression of the left in Indonesia (1965–1967); the degradation or liquidation of the nationalist, developmentist, and socialist regimes of sub-Saharan Africa that came out of the independence movements (1980s); the emergence of a militant and expansionist right, with Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom (1980s); the globalization of the most anti-social form of capitalism, neoliberalism, imposed by the Washington Consensus; the crisis of the Congress Party India and the rise of political Hinduism (communalism) (1990s); the collapse of the regimes of central and eastern Europe, symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989); the conversion of Chinese communism into a most exploitative kind of capitalism, market Stalinism (starting with Deng Xiaoping in early 1980s); and finally, in the 1990s, the parallel rise of political Islam and political Christianity, both fundamentalist and confrontational.

Moreover, this crisis of the left appeared to be degenerative: the failures seem to be the result of historical exhaustion. Revolution, socialism, communism, and even reformism are now hidden away in the top drawers of history's closet visible only to collectors of misfortunes. The neoliberals insisted that the world as it currently exists is well made, the future finally has arrived in the present to stay. The resulting consensus on the end of history allowed the neoliberals to control the debate. Since means are political only when they are at the service of different ends, the differences concerning social change became merely technical or juridical.

In the mid-1990s, however, this neoliberal hegemony started to weaken. Its practices over recent decades intensified exclusion, oppression, and the destruction of the means of subsistence and sustainability of large populations of the world. The results were extreme situations where inaction or conformism would mean death. Such situations convert the contingency of history into the necessity to change it: victims don't just cry, they fight back. Acts of resistance, together with the revolution in information and communication technologies,

made it possible to create alliances in distant places of the world and articulate their struggles through local/global linkages.

The 1994 Zapatista uprising was an important moment of this response, precisely because it targeted the North American Free Trade Agreement. The movement also articulated different scales of struggle, from local to national to global, from the Chiapas Mountains to Mexico City to the solidary world, using new discursive and political strategies as well as the new information and communication technologies. In November 1999, the protesters in Seattle managed to paralyze the World Trade Organization (WTO) ministerial meeting. Later, many other meetings of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), WTO, and G-8 were affected by the protests of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and social movements intent on denouncing the hypocrisy and destructiveness of the new world disorder. In January 2001, the World Social Forum met for the first time in Porto Alegre (Brazil) with many global, regional, thematic, national, subnational, and local forums to follow. An alternative vision of globalization has gradually emerged from these meetings. The WSF represents today, in organizational terms, the most consistent manifestation of counter-hegemonic globalization. As such, the WSF provides the most favorable context to inquire to what extent a new left is emerging through these initiatives—a truly global left, with the capacity to overcome the degenerative crisis that has characterized the left for the past forty years.

The WSF is a new social and political phenomenon. The fact that it has antecedents does not diminish its novelty. The WSF is not a party or an international of parties, although militants and activists of many parties all over the world take part in it. It is not an NGO or a confederation of NGOs, even though its conception and organization owes a great deal to NGOs. It is not a social movement, even though it often designates itself as the movement of movements. Although it presents itself as an agent of social change, the WSF rejects the concept of an historical subject and confers no priority on any specific social actor in this process of social change. It holds no clearly defined ideology, either in defining what it rejects or what it asserts.

The WSF conceives of itself as a struggle against neoliberal globalization, but is it a struggle against a given form of capitalism or against capitalism in general? Since the WSF sees itself as a struggle against discrimination, exclusion, and oppression, does the success of its struggle presuppose a postcapitalist, socialist, anarchist horizon, or, on the contrary, does it presuppose that no horizon be clearly defined at all? Given that the vast majority of people taking part in the WSF identify themselves as favoring a politics of the left, how many definitions of “the left” fit the WSF? And what about those who refuse to be defined because they believe that the left–right dichotomy is a particularism of the global North or the West?

The social struggles that find expression in the WSF do not adequately fit either form of social change sanctioned by Western modernity—reform or revolution. Aside from the consensus on non-violence, its modes of struggle are extremely diverse and appear spread out on a continuum between the poles of institution building and insurgency. Even non-violence is open to widely disparate interpretations. Finally, the WSF is not structured according to any of the models of modern political organization, be they democratic centralism, representative democracy, or participatory democracy. Nobody represents it or is allowed to speak in its name, let alone make decisions, even though it sees itself as a forum that facilitates the decisions of the movements and organizations that take part in it.¹

These features are arguably not new, since some have been associated with what is conventionally called “new social movements.” Such movements, whether they are local, regional, national, or global, are organized thematically. Themes are fields of concrete political confrontation that compel polarization around strategies, organizational forms, and forms of struggle. Mobilization around themes works to draw in supporters and push away potential opponents.

What is new about the WSF is the fact that it is inclusive, both as concerns its scale and its thematics. The WSF brings together local, national, and global movements, and it is inter-thematic and even trans-thematic. Not focused on specific themes, the WSF lacks conventional dynamics of attraction and repulsion. It has to either develop other strong factors of attraction and repulsion or do without them. If the WSF is arguably the “movement of movements,” it is not one more movement. It is a different kind of movement.

New social movements require new social theory and new analytical concepts. Since theory does not emerge easily from the inertia of academic disciplines, the risk is great that such movements will be undertheorized and undervalued.² This risk is all the more serious for the WSF because it challenges dominant political theories and the various disciplines of the conventional social sciences. It also challenges the claims of science to be the only producer of social and political rationality. In short, the WSF raises not only analytic and theoretical questions, but also epistemological questions.

This is expressed in the idea, widely shared by WSF participants, that there will be no global social justice without global cognitive justice.³ Justice requires that the ability to define what is real and what matters must be distributed far differently than under current arrangements.

In this article, I analyse the reasons for the success of the WSF, contrasting them with the failures of the conventional left in recent decades. I will then try to answer the question of whether this success is sustainable. Finally, I will identify the challenges that the WSF process poses to both critical theory and left political activism.

STRONG QUESTIONS AND WEAK ANSWERS

My starting point is that our time is witnessing the final crisis of the hegemony of the socio-cultural paradigm of Western modernity and that, therefore, it is a time of paradigmatic transition.⁴ It is characteristic of a transitional time to be a time of strong questions and weak answers. Strong questions address our options for individual and collective life and the factors that have shaped our current horizon of possibilities. They are, therefore, questions that arouse a particular kind of perplexity.

Weak responses fail to abate this perplexity and may, in fact, increase it. But not all weak answers are the same; there are both weak-strong answers and weak-weak answers. Weak-strong transform the perplexity caused by the strong question into positive energy.⁵ They do this not by pretending that the perplexity is pointless or that it can be eliminated by a simple answer. Rather, they transform the perplexity into an open field of contradictions in which an unfinished and unregulated competition among different possibilities exists. They open space for social and political innovation; they help people and movements to travel without reliable maps. They create the possibility of the gradual development of strong-strong answers to these questions.

Weak-weak answers, in contrast, discard and stigmatize the perplexity as the symptom of a failure to see beyond the existing hegemony. They treat perplexity as an irrational refusal to travel according to historically tested maps. But since perplexity derives in the first place from questioning such maps, the weak-weak answer is an invitation to immobilism.

My argument is that the WSF has been successful because it offers weak-strong answers to two central questions of our time. The first one is if humanity is one alone, why are there so many different principles concerning human dignity and just society, all of them presumably unique, yet often contradictory among themselves? At the root of this question is a recognition that much has been left out of the modern and Western understanding of the world.

The most common of the weak-weak answers to this question is the conventional Western understanding of human rights. It ignores the perplexity by postulating the abstract universality of the conception of human dignity that underlies human rights. The fact that such a conception is Western based is considered irrelevant, as the historicity of the human rights discourse does not interfere with its ontological status. This weak-weak answer has been fully embraced by the conventional left, particularly in the global North. But this answer blinds the conventional left to new realities in the countries of the global South. Movements of resistance have been emerging and flourishing, both violent and non-violent, against oppression, marginalization, and exclusion, whose ideological bases have nothing to do with the referents of the left during the twentieth century.

These movements are often grounded in multi-secular cultural and historical identities, and/or religious militancy. Such struggles cannot be defined or

understood according to the historic cleavage between left and right. The conventional left lacks the theoretical and analytical tools to position itself in relation to such movements, and even worse, it does not understand the importance of doing so. It applies the same abstract recipe of human rights across the board, thereby attempting to reduce alternative ideologies or symbolic universes to local specificities that leave the universal canon of human rights unscathed. Without trying to be exhaustive, I mention three such movements, of very distinct political meanings: the indigenous movements, particularly in Latin America; the “new” rise of the “tradition” in Africa; and the Islamic insurgency. In spite of the huge differences among them, these movements all start out from cultural and political references that are non-Western, even if constituted by the resistance to Western domination.

In contrast, the WSF has offered a convincing weak-strong answer to this question by its decision to establish itself as a global open space. It has created a meeting ground for the most diverse movements and organizations, coming from the most disparate locations in the planet, involved in the most diverse struggles, and speaking a Babel Tower of languages. Some are anchored in non-Western philosophies and knowledges that sponsor different conceptions of human dignity and call for a variety of other worlds that should be possible.

The WSF does not answer the question of why such diversity exists, nor does it address questions of what for, under which conditions, and for the benefit of whom. But it has successfully made such diversity more visible and more acceptable by its constituent movements and organizations. It has made them aware of the incomplete or partial character of their struggles, politics, and philosophies; it has created a new need for inter-knowledge, inter-recognition, and interaction; it has fostered coalitions among movements that were until recently separated and mutually suspicious of the other. In sum, it has transformed diversity into a positive value, a potential source of energy for progressive social transformation.

The success of the WSF is that it celebrates a diversity that has not yet been fully theorized nor converted into the motor of a globally coherent social transformation. In this sense, the WSF represents the maximum possible consciousness of our time. Its weakness—the inability to discriminate among diverse solutions—cannot be separated from its strength—the celebration of diversity as value in itself—and vice versa. The WSF is as transitional as our time and draws attention to the latent possibilities of such transition. Herein lies its success.

The second strong question for which the WSF provides a weak-strong answer is the issue of whether there is any room for utopia in our world. Is there really an alternative to capitalism? After the historical failure of so many attempts to build non-capitalist societies, with such tragic consequences, shouldn't we look for alternatives inside capitalism rather than for alternatives to capitalism?

The perplexity caused by this question lies in two factors. First, if all that exists in history is historical, that is, has a beginning and an end, why should it

be different with historical capitalism? Second, how could it be that there is no alternative to a world in which the 500 richest individuals take in as much income as the poorest forty countries, meaning 416 million people? What about ecological catastrophe that is becoming a less remote possibility? How could it be that the problems caused by capitalism can only be solved by more capitalism and that the economy of unselfishness is not a credible alternative to the economy of selfishness?

The conception of an alternative society and the struggle for it have been the backbones of both critical theory and left politics throughout the twentieth century. While this conception has often been vague, it has served as an evaluative criterion of the life conditions of the working class, excluded social groups, and victims of discrimination. On the basis of this alternative vision and the credible possibility of fulfilling it, the present is considered as violent, intolerable, and morally repugnant. The historical strength of Marxism resides in this unique capacity to articulate the alternative future with an oppositional way of living in the present.

But in recent decades, much of the conventional left, particularly in the global North, abandoned this outlook. The hegemonic conception of our age—basically uncontested by the conventional left—is that capitalism in the form of neoliberal globalization is both the only present that counts and most probably the only possible future. It claims that what is currently dominant in social and political terms is infinitely expansive, thereby encompassing all future possibilities. This total control over the current state of affairs is deemed to be possible by means of extremely efficient powers and knowledges. Reflecting this *Zeitgeist*, different strains of conventional left politics have converged on the idea of a new centrism that excludes any idea of an alternative society. Their weak-weak answer denies the perplexity by insisting that devastating defeats required greater realism and pragmatism. They fail to understand that without a conception of an alternative society and without the politically organized struggle to bring it about, the present, however violent and intolerable, will always be depoliticized and will cease being a source of mobilization for revolt and opposition. This fact has certainly not escaped the right, which has based its government, since the 1980s, not on the consensus of the victims, but on their resignation.

The WSF, in contrast, offers a weak-strong answer to the question. Against this radical denial of alternatives to present-day reality, the WSF asserts the existence of alternatives to neoliberal globalisation. It takes the perplexity seriously and strongly claims that there are alternatives. But it does not define the content of such alternatives, and it does not even respond to the question of whether these are alternatives to capitalism or alternatives inside capitalism. It also claims the legitimacy of utopian thinking, but of a different kind than the one dominant at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Rather than referring to socialism, communism, developmentalism, or nationalism, it insists that “another world is possible.” In abstract, this seems very little, but in the context it emerges, it amounts to a utopia of a new type.⁶

The WSF signifies the re-emergence of a critical utopia, that is to say, the radical critique of present-day reality and the aspiration to a better society. The WSF challenges the total control claimed by neoliberalism, whether as knowledge or power, as a way to affirm the possibility of alternatives. In a context in which the conservative utopia prevails absolutely,⁷ this affirmation is more important than defining a specific alternative. In other words, the utopia of the WSF asserts itself more as negativity—the definition of what it critiques—than as positivity—the definition of that to which it aspires. Herein lies the mix of weakness and strength of its answer to the strong question about the possibility of alternatives.

The specificity of the WSF as critical utopia has one more dimension. The WSF is the first critical utopia of the twenty-first century, and it aims to break with the tradition of the critical utopias of Western modernity, many of which turned into conservative utopias that denied alternatives on the grounds that the fulfilment of utopia was already under way. The openness of the utopian dimension of the WSF is an effort to escape this historic perversion. For the WSF, the claim of alternatives is plural, both as to the form of the claim and the content of the alternatives. The affirmation of alternatives goes hand in hand with the affirmation that there are alternatives to the alternatives. The other possible world may be many things, but never a world with no alternative.

The utopia of the WSF is a radically democratic utopia. It is the only realistic utopia after a century of conservative utopias, some of them the result of perverted critical utopias. This utopian design is the major factor of cohesion of the WSF. It helps to maximize what unites and minimize what divides, it celebrates communication rather than disputes over power, and it emphasizes a strong presence rather than a strong agenda. This utopian design, which is also an ethical design, quite evident in the WSF's Charter of Principles, aims at gathering consensus across the ideological and political cleavages among the movements and organizations that compose it. The movements and organizations put between brackets the cleavages that divide them to affirm the possibility of a counter-hegemonic globalization. This utopia has made it possible for the WSF to affirm the existence of a counter-hegemonic globalization.

A SENSE OF URGENCY AND A SENSE OF CIVILIZATIONAL CHANGES

Another reason for the success of the WSF is the way it has dealt with another symptom of our transitional times. Critical thinking and transformative practice are today torn apart by two extreme and contradictory temporalities disputing the time frame of collective action. On the one hand, there is a sense of urgency, the idea that it is necessary to act now, as tomorrow will probably be too late. Global warming and the imminent ecological catastrophe, the conspicuous preparation of a new nuclear war, the vanishing life sustainability of vast populations, the uncontrolled drive for eternal war and the violence and unjust destruction of human life

it causes, the depletion of natural resources, the exponential growth of social inequality giving rise to new forms of social despotism, social regimes only regulated by naked extreme power differences—all these facts seem to impose that absolute priority be given to immediate or short run action as the long run may not even exist if the trends expressed in those facts are allowed to evolve without control. Most certainly the pressure of urgency lies in different factors in the global North and in the global South, but seems to be present everywhere.

On the other hand, there is a sense that our time calls for deep and long-term civilizational changes. The facts mentioned above are symptoms of deep seated structures and agencies that cannot be confronted by short run interventionism as the latter is as much part of the civilizational paradigm as the state of affairs it fights. The twentieth century proved with immense cruelty that to take power is not enough, that rather than taking power it is necessary to transform power. The most extreme versions of this temporality even call for the transformation of the world without taking power.⁸

The coexistence of these polar temporalities is producing great turbulence in old distinctions and cleavages, such as between tactics and strategy, or reform and revolution. While the sense of urgency calls for tactics and reform, the sense of civilizational paradigmatic change calls for strategy and revolution. But the fact that both senses coexist and are both pressing disfigures the terms of the distinctions and cleavages and makes them more or less meaningless and irrelevant. At best, they become loose signifiers prone to contradictory appropriations. There are reformist processes that seem revolutionary (Hugo Chavez in Venezuela) and revolutionary processes that seem reformist (Neo-zapatism in Mexico) and reformist projects without reformist practice (Lula in Brazil). The fall of the Berlin Wall, while striking a mortal blow to the idea of revolution, struck a silenced but not less deadly blow to the idea of reform. Since then we live in a time that, on the one hand, turns reformism into counter-reformism and that, on the other hand, is either too late to be post-revolutionary or too premature to be pre-revolutionary. As a result, political polarizations become relatively unregulated and with meanings that have very little to do with the names attached to them.

In my view, the WSF has responded very well to this unresolved tension between contradictory temporalities. Not just as an event but also as a process, the WSF has fostered the full expression of both senses and even the juxtaposition in the same panels, campaigns, coalitions of discourses, and practices that focus on immediate action and, on contrary, on long-term transformation. Calls for immediate debt cancellation get articulated with long duration campaigns of popular education concerning HIV/AIDS. Denunciations of the criminalization of social protest by indigenous peoples before the courts go hand in hand with the struggle for the recognition of the cultural identity and ancestral territories of the same peoples. The struggle for the immediate access to sufficient potable water by the people of Soweto (South Africa), in the wake of the privatization

of water supplies, becomes part and parcel of a long strategy to guarantee sustainable access to water throughout the African Continent, as illustrated in the constitution of the Africa Water Network in Nairobi during the WSF-2007.

These different timeframes of struggle coexist peacefully in the WSF for three main reasons. First, they translate themselves into struggles that share the same radicalism, whether it concerns the maximum obtainable now or the maximum obtainable in the long run. And the means of action may also be equally radical. This constitutes a significant departure from the conventional left throughout the twentieth century. For the latter, the struggle for short-range objectives was framed as legal gradualism and therefore was conceived of as a non-radical, institutional action. Second, mutual knowledge of such diverse temporalities among movements and organizations has led to the idea that the differences among them are much wider in theory than in practice. A radical immediate action may be the best way of giving credibility to the need for a civilizational change, if for no other reason because of the unsurpassable obstacles it is bound to run against, as long as the civilizational paradigm remains the same. This explains why some major movements have been able to combine in their overall strategies the immediate and the civilizational. This is the case of the MST (Movement of the landless rural workers in Brazil), which combines illegal land occupation to feed hungry peasants with massive actions of popular political education aiming at a much broader transformation of the Brazilian state and society. The final reason for the coexistence of contradictory temporalities is that the WSF does not set priorities between them; it just opens the space for discussions and coalition building among the movements and organizations, the outcomes of which can be the most diverse. An overriding sense of a common purpose, however vaguely defined, to build another possible world tends to deemphasize polarizations among the movements and invite the latter to concentrate on building more intense coalitions with the movements with which they have more affinities. Selectivity in coalition building becomes a way of avoiding unnecessary polarization.

A GHOSTLY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CRITICAL THEORY AND LEFTIST PRACTICES

Yet another strength of the WSF lies in the way it deals with the gap between left practices and classical theories of the left. The gap has produced a kind of mutual blindness between theory and practice. The blindness of the theory results in the invisibility of the practice, hence it is undertheorized, whereas the blindness of the practice results in the irrelevance of the theory. The blindness of the theory can be seen in the way the conventional left parties and the intellectuals at their service have stubbornly not paid any attention to the WSF or have minimized its significance. The blindness of the practice, in turn, is glaringly present in the contempt shown by the great majority of the activists of the WSF for the

rich left theoretical tradition, and their militant disregard for its renewal. This reciprocal blindness yields, on the practice side, an extreme oscillation between revolutionary spontaneity and innocuous, self-censured possibilism, and, on the theory side, an equally extreme oscillation between reconstructive zeal and arrogant indifference to what is not included in such reconstruction.

In such conditions, the relation between theory and practice assumes strange characteristics. On the one hand, the theory is no longer at the service of the future practices it potentially contains, and rather serves to legitimate (or not) the past practices that have emerged in spite of itself. Thus, avant-garde thought tends to tag along the rear-guard of practice. On the other hand, the practice justifies itself resorting to a theoretical *bricolage* stuck to the needs of the moment, made up of heterogeneous concepts and languages which, from the point of view of the theory, are no more than opportunistic rationalizations or rhetorical exercises. From the point of view of the theory, theoretical *bricolage* never qualifies as theory. From the point of view of the practice, *a posteriori* theorization is mere parasitism.

This mutual blindness has occurred because critical thinking and left theory were historically developed in the global North, indeed in only five or six countries of the global North. However, the most innovative and effective transformative left practices of recent decades have been occurring in the global South. To be sure, the anti-colonial struggles and the movement of the non-aligned countries, founded in Bandung in 1955, also contributed important new concepts and ideas to the hegemonic Northern left script. But today, a wide variety of new left practices occur in unfamiliar places carried out by strange people; they also speak very strange non-colonial languages (aymara, quechua, guarani, indi, urdu, isiZulu, kikongo or kiswahili) or less hegemonic colonial languages such as Spanish and Portuguese, and their cultural and political references are non-Western.

Moreover, when we translate these left discourses into a colonial language, there is often no trace of the familiar concepts with which Western-based left politics was historically built, such as revolution, socialism, working class, capital, democracy, or human rights, etc. Instead, we encounter land, water, territory, self-determination, racism, dignity, respect, cultural and sexual oppression, *pachamama* (an Incan fertility goddess), *ubuntu* (the individual defined in terms of his/her solidarity relationships with others: "a person is a person through other persons"), control of natural resources, poverty and starvation, pandemics such as HIV/AIDS, cultural identity, violence.

The left thinking generated in the global North gets provincialized by the emergence of critical understandings and practices of the world that do not fit its framework.⁹ It is therefore not surprising that the conventional left thinking does not recognize some of the critical understandings and practices emerging in the global South. Moreover, movements in the South often refuse to include their experiences in what they see as the unproductive Northern binary of left or right.

In this context, the experience of the WSF has helped to create a healthier relationship between theory and practice. First, it has made clear that the discrepancy between the left in books and the left in practice is more of a Western problem. In other parts of the world and even in the West among non-Western populations, such as indigenous peoples, there are other understandings of collective action for which such discrepancy doesn't make sense. The world at large is full of transformative experiences and actors that are not educated in the Western left. Moreover, scientific knowledge, which has always been granted absolute priority in the Western left books, is in the WSF's open space just one form of knowledge among many others. It is more important for certain movements and causes than for others, and in many instances it is resorted to in articulation with other knowledges—lay, popular, urban, peasant, indigenous, women's, and religious, to name some.

The WSF originated in the global South based on cultural and political premises that defied all the hegemonic traditions of the left. Its novelty, which was strengthened as the WSF moved from Porto Alegre to Mumbai and later to Nairobi, lay in inviting these left traditions to be present, but not as the sole legitimate traditions. They were invited along with many other traditions of critical knowledge, transformative practices, and conceptions of a better society. That movements and organizations coming from disparate critical traditions that were united only by a very broadly defined purpose to fight against neoliberal globalization for an even more broadly defined aspiration to that "another world" could interact during several days and plan for collaborative actions had a profound and multifaceted impact on the relationship between theory and practice.

In this way, the WSF posed a new epistemological question: if social practices and collective actors resort to different kinds of knowledge, an adequate evaluation of their worth for social emancipation is premised upon an epistemology, which, contrary to hegemonic epistemologies in the West, does not grant a priori supremacy to scientific knowledge (heavily produced in the North), thus allowing for a more just relationship among different kinds of knowledge. In other words, there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice.¹⁰ Therefore, in order to capture the immense variety of critical discourses and practices and to valorize and maximize their transformative potential, an epistemological reconstruction is needed. This means that we need not so much alternatives as we need an alternative thinking of alternatives.

Such epistemological reconstruction must start from the idea that hegemonic left thinking and the hegemonic critical tradition, in addition to being North-centric, are colonialist, imperialist, racist, and sexist as well. To overcome this epistemological condition and thereby decolonize left thinking and practice, it is imperative to go South and learn from the South, but not from the imperial South (which reproduces in the South the logic of the North taken as universal), rather from the anti-imperial South. Such an epistemology in no way suggests that North-centric critical thinking and left politics must be discarded and

thrown into the dustbin of history. Its past is in many respects an honorable past and has significantly contributed to the liberation of the global South. What is imperative, rather, is to start an intercultural dialogue and translation among different critical knowledges and practices: South-centric and North-centric, popular and scientific, religious and secular, female and male, urban and rural, and so forth. This intercultural translation I call the ecology of knowledges.¹¹

The second impact of the WSF on the relationship between theory and practice is the way it has refused to reduce its openness for the sake of efficacy or political coherence. While there is an intense debate inside the WSF about this issue, I am convinced that the idea that there is no general theory of social transformation capable of capturing and classifying the immense diversity of oppositional ideas and practices present in the WSF has been one of its most innovative and productive principles. This potentially unconditional inclusiveness has contributed to the creation of a new political culture that privileges commonalities to the detriment of differences, and fosters common action even in the presence of deep ideological differences once the objectives are clear and adopted by consensus.

The coalitions and articulations made possible among the social movements are generated from bottom-up, and they tend to be pragmatic and to last as long as they are viewed to further each movement's objectives. While in the tradition of the conventional left, particularly in the global North, politicizing an issue tends to polarize it, often leading to factionalism, in the WSF another political culture seems to be emerging in which politicization goes hand in hand with depolarization, with the search for common grounds and agreed-upon limits of ideological purity or of ideological messiness.

This new political culture represents a radical break with the ghostly relationship between theory and action of recent decades. As a result of a virulent, theoretical extremism that dominated the conventional left through much of the twentieth century, left politics gradually lost contact with the practical aspirations and options of the activists engaged in concrete political action. Between concrete political action and theoretical extremism, a vacuum was formed.

The WSF has responded to this unproductive *Zeitgeist* of the left. It has mobilized pragmatism in combination with the reconceptualization of diversity as a strength to produce energy and political creativity. The WSF showed eloquently that no totality can contain the inexhaustible diversity of the theories and practices of the world left today. Therefore, diversity, rather than an obstacle to unity, becomes the condition for unity. In view of the heavy weight of the past, this is no easy task and demands continuous vigilance and reinforcement. It will be based on two pillars: depolarized pluralities and intercultural translation. Given their novelty and counter-factuality, they can be easily perverted into their opposites, new polarizations and new monocultural impositions. Though there is no guarantee that this may not occur within the WSF, without it or without some other entity with a similar profile, this will most certainly occur.

Depolarized Pluralities

The WSF has created a political environment in which politicization may occur by means of depolarization. This is particularly crucial in the case of global or transnational collective action. The WSF prioritizes constructing coalitions and articulations for concrete collective *practices* and discussing the theoretical differences exclusively in the ambit of such constructing. The goal is to turn the acknowledgment of differences into a factor of aggregation and inclusion, by depriving differences of the conspicuous capacity for thwarting collective actions. In other words, the point is to create contexts for debate, in which the drive for union and similarity may have at least the same intensity as the drive for separation and difference. Collective actions ruled by depolarised pluralities stir up a new conception of “unity in action,” to the extent that unity stops being the expression of a monolithic will to become the more or less vast and lasting meeting point of a plurality of wills. It amounts to a new paradigm of transformative and progressive action.

The construction of depolarized pluralities can only take place in the process of deciding about concrete collective actions. The priority conferred to participation in collective actions, by means of articulation or coalition, has a first effect, which is precious in light of the factionalist heritage of the left: it allows for the suspension of the question of the political subject in the abstract. In this sense, if there are only concrete actions in progress, there are only concrete subjects in progress as well. The presence of concrete subjects does not annul the issue of the abstract subject, be it the working class, the party, the people, or humanity, but it prevents this issue from interfering decisively with the conception or unfolding of the collective action. Indeed the latter can never be the result of abstract subjects. Giving priority to participation in concrete collective actions means the following:

1. Theoretical disputes must take place in the context of concrete collective actions.
2. Each participant—movement, organization, or campaign—stops claiming that the only important or correct collective actions are the ones exclusively conceived or organized by it. In a context in which the mechanisms of exploitation, exclusion, and oppression multiply and intensify, it is particularly important not to squander any social experience of resistance on the part of the exploited, excluded, or oppressed, and their allies.
3. When a given collective subject has to withdraw from a particular action, it does so in a way that least damages the position of those still involved in the action.
4. Transformative collective actions tend to begin on the ground and in the terms set up by the oppressors. The success of the collective actions is measured by their ability to change the ground and terms of the conflict during the struggle. Success is measured not by the correctness of the theoretical positions assumed, but by the extent of concrete transformation of unequal

power relations into shared authority relations in the specific social field in which the collective action takes place.

Intercultural Translation

The depolarized pluralities is one side of reinvention of the relationship between theory and practice. The other side is intercultural translation. This refers to the methodology to maximize the consistency and the strength of depolarized pluralities. With the WSF, it became clear that the global left is intercultural. This means that the differences that divide the left are different from the categories used in the past. An emergent global left must acknowledge some of these cultural differences since it would make no sense to fight for the recognition and respect of cultural differences “outside,” in society, and not to recognize or respect them “at home,” inside the organizations and movements. Since these differences cannot be erased by means of political resolutions, it is better to live with them and turn them into a factor of collective strength and enrichment.

But the political theory of Western modernity, whether in its liberal or Marxist version, constructed diversity as an obstacle to unity and assumed the unity of action required the agent’s unity. According to this view, the coherence and meaning of social change was always based on the capacity of the privileged agent of change, be it the bourgeoisie or the working classes, to represent the totality from which the coherence and meaning derived. The theory of social change rested on this unitary capacity of representation. The utopia and epistemology underlying the WSF is the exact negation of this political theory.

The extraordinary energy of attraction and aggregation revealed by the WSF resides precisely in refusing the idea of a general theory. The diversity that finds a haven in the WSF is free from the fear of being cannibalized by false universalisms or false single strategies propounded by any general theory. The WSF underwrites the idea that the world is an inexhaustible totality, as it holds many totalities, all of them partial. Accordingly, there is no sense in attempting to grasp the world by any single general theory, because any such theory will always falsely assume the unity of a given totality and the homogeneity of its parts. The time we live in is a time of transition that needs not a general theory, but a theory of the impossibility of a general theory. In other words, we need a negative universalism: a general agreement on the fact that no individual, no single theory, or no single practice has the infallible recipe to conceive of another possible world and to bring it about.

To my mind, instead of a general theory, what we need is the work of translation. Translation is the procedure that allows for mutual intelligibility among different experiences of the world without jeopardizing their identity and autonomy, without reducing them to homogeneous entities. The WSF exhibits the wide multiplicity and variety of social practices of counter-hegemony that occur all over the

world. Its strength derives from having corresponded or given expression to the aspiration of aggregation and articulation of the different social movements and NGOs, an aspiration that up until then was only latent. The movements and the NGOs constitute themselves around a number of more or less confined goals, create their own forms and styles of resistance, and specialize in certain kinds of practice and discourse that distinguish them from the others. Their identity is thereby created on the basis of what separates them from all the others. The feminist movement sees itself as very distinct from the labor movement, and vice versa; both distinguish themselves from the indigenous movement or the ecological movement; and so on and so forth. All these distinctions and separations have actually translated themselves into practical differences, and even contradictions push movements apart and foster rivalries and factionalisms.

The dark side of diversity and multiplicity is fragmentation and atomization. This dark side has lately been pointedly acknowledged by the movements and NGOs. The truth is, however, that none of them individually has had the capacity or credibility to confront it. This is the source of the great value of the WSF's contribution. Yet, the aggregation and articulation made possible by the WSF is still of low intensity. The goals are limited, very often circumscribed to mutual knowledge or, at the most, to recognize differences and make them more explicit and better known. Under these circumstances, the possibilities for joint action remain limited.¹²

This is the challenge that counter-hegemonic globalization faces now. The forms of aggregation and articulation made possible by the WSF were sufficient to achieve the goals of the phase that may be now coming to an end. Deepening the WSF's goals in a new phase requires higher intensity forms of aggregation and articulation. Such a process includes articulating struggles and resistances, as well as promoting ever more comprehensive and consistent alternatives. Such articulations presuppose combinations among the different social movements and NGOs that are bound to call into question their very identity and autonomy as they have been conceived of so far. If the project is to promote counter-hegemonic practices that combine ecological, pacifist, indigenous, feminist, workers', and other movements, and to do so in an horizontal way and with respect for the identity of every movement, an enormous effort of mutual recognition, dialogue, and debate will be required to carry out the task.

This is the only way to identify more rigorously what divides and unites the movements, so as to base the articulations of practices and knowledges on what unites them, rather than on what divides them. Such a task entails a wide exercise in translation to expand reciprocal intelligibility without destroying the identity of the partners of translation. The point is to create, in every movement or NGO, in every practice or strategy, in every discourse or knowledge, a *contact zone* that renders it permeable to other NGOs, practices, strategies, discourses, and knowledges. The exercise of translation aims to identify and reinforce what is common in the diversity of counter-hegemonic drives.

Cancelling out what separates these movements is out of the question. The goal is to replace differences as barrier with differences as opportunities for connection. Through translation work, diversity is celebrated, not as a factor of fragmentation and isolationism, but rather as a condition of sharing and solidarity. The work of translation concerns both knowledges and actions—strategic goals, organization, styles of struggle and agency. Of course, in the practice of the movements, knowledges and actions are inseparable. However, for the purposes of translation, it is important to distinguish between contact zones in which the interactions focus mainly on knowledges, and contact zones in which interactions focus mainly on actions.¹³

The work of intercultural and interpolitical translation has just started among some movements participating in the WSF. Practice has shown that such work is needed not only to make the network of transformative practices across movements more dense but also this must occur inside the same movements, in their different national or regional expressions. In this regard, the feminist movement is probably the most advanced. It is imperative that the WSF grants more priority in the future to the work of mutual translation among and within movements.

COMPULSIVE SELF-REFLEXIVITY AND THE UNFINISHED TASKS OF THE WSF

Since its beginning, the WSF has been intensely debated both inside, among its participants, and outside, mostly among members of the conventional left. The themes of the debate are numerous: the political nature of the WSF; its relationship with the national struggles historically conducted by the left; goals, both hidden and explicit; ideological makeup; internal democracy; limits of its globalness; sociological base in light of the profile of participants; exclusions; financial dependency; transparency of decisions by organs with apparently no decision power; relationships between NGOs and social movements; organizational and political autonomy vis-à-vis particular states and left parties; representativeness; efficacy in changing the power structures in the world; the role of intellectuals; and so on. Along the way, such debates and the evaluations they gave rise to led to important organizational changes. I have argued elsewhere that, contrary to the opinion of its critics, the WSF has shown a remarkable capacity to reform itself.¹⁴ The debates became particularly intense after the WSF 2005 and were a conspicuous presence in the WSF 2007, in Nairobi. From 2005 onwards the debates started to focus on the future of the WSF. Two different debates can be identified. One debate focused on the profound changes the WSF should undergo in order to keep up with the transformative energies it has unleashed. Should it shift from an open space to a movement of movements, from talk shop to collective action or global political party? Should there be deep changes in the Charter of Principles in order to allow for political positions on major global concerns, such as the invasion of Iraq, the reform of the United Nations, or the Israel/Palestine conflict?

Should it change from consensus to voting? The other debate focused on whether the WSF has a future at all, whether it has exhausted its potential, whether it should come to an end, opening space for other types of global aggregation of resistance and alternative. This second debate won particular notoriety with a recent paper by Walden Bello,¹⁵ in which he asks:

Having fulfilled its historic function of aggregating and linking the diverse counter-movements spawned by global capitalism, is it time for the WSF to fold up its tent and give way to new modes of global organization of resistance and transformation?

After acknowledging all the accomplishments of the WSF, very much in line with my analysis above, Bello argues that one of the criticisms against the WSF has become particularly relevant: “This is the charge that the WSF as an institution is unanchored in actual global political struggles, and this is turning it into an annual festival with limited social impact.” He agrees with those for whom the liberal conception of the “open space” defended by many founders of the WSF—the idea that the WSF cannot endorse any political position or particular struggle, though its constituent groups are free to do so—has created the illusion that the WSF can stand above the fray, turning the WSF into some sort of neutral forum, where discussion will increasingly be isolated from action, draining “the energy of civil society networks [which] derives from their being engaged in political struggles.”

This criticism has been addressed to the WSF since the very beginning, and I have myself subscribed to it.¹⁶ But while I see in it just another opportunity for self-reform, Bello considers it as dictating the death sentence of the WSF. The core argument is that the WSF corresponded to a stage of anti-capitalist struggle that is over. Its historical task consisted in bringing together old and new movements and leading them to

the realization that they needed one another in the struggle against global capitalism and that the strength of the fledgling global movement lay in a strategy of decentralized networking that rested not on the doctrinal belief that one class was destined to lead the struggle but on the reality of the common marginalization of practically all subordinate classes, strata, and groups under the reign of global capital.¹⁷

This has now been accomplished, and indeed the WSF has been left behind by more advanced struggles. Implied in the argument is the idea that the continuation of the WSF may even become an obstacle to the success of these struggles. Bello’s example of such a struggle is Hugo Chavez and the Bolivarian revolution. According to him, the polycentric WSF of 2006 in Caracas was so “bracing and reinvigorating” because

it inserted some 50,000 delegates into the storm center of an ongoing struggle against empire, where they mingled with militant Venezuelans, mostly the poor, engaged in a process of social transformation, while observing other Venezuelans, mostly the elite and middle class, engaged in bitter opposition.¹⁸

Therefore, “Caracas was an exhilarating reality check,” that is, it showed that “the WSF is at a crossroads.” To make his argument even more explicit, Bello argues:

Hugo Chavez captured the essence of the conjuncture when he warned delegates in January 2006 about the danger of the WSF becoming simply a forum of ideas with no agenda for action. He told participants that they had no choice but to address the question of power: “We must have a strategy of ‘counter-power.’ We, the social movements and political movements, must be able to move into spaces of power at the local, national, and regional level.”¹⁹

For Bello, the historical accomplishment of the WSF lies in having created the conditions for such struggles to have now better chances of succeeding. While I fully share Bello’s enthusiasm for the more advanced struggles of Latin America today, two questions still need to be asked. Does the continuation of the WSF interfere negatively with the future outcomes of these struggles? Second, are the transformations of left politics brought about by the WSF so widespread that they are certain to be sustained? The WSF has never claimed that the correction of the errors of the past would imply the acceptance of a single alternative path. Indeed, the core idea underlying the WSF is the celebration of the diversity of the struggles against exclusion and oppression in order to draw from such celebration additional energy and strength for the existing struggles and additional creativity to develop new ones. To assume that the WSF may become detrimental to the success of the most advanced struggles presupposes that there is a single and unequivocal criterion to establish what is more and what is less advanced. It also requires the belief that the coexistence of struggles of different types, scales, and degrees of advancement is detrimental to the overall objective of building another possible world. In my view, none of these presuppositions are based in reality.

It is my view that the success of the WSF has resulted from doubts about adopting any such single criterion, and the frustration with the historical record of some candidates to such a privileged status. Moreover, even assuming that a general agreement is possible within the global left about what is more or less advanced, it is not possible to progress at exactly the same pace in all the different struggles against different kinds of oppression in the different parts of the world. On the contrary, the uneven and combined development of the different anti-capitalist struggles—probably, more evident now thanks to the WSF—will always mirror the uneven and combined development of global capitalism.

In the words of Whitaker,²⁰ in response to Bello, the WSF’s crossroads are in fact two parallel paths that can co-exist, as mutual sources of inspiration. Even assuming that the WSF has been outpaced by other conceptions and practices of resistance and alternative, it is important that the WSF continues to provide an anchor for the struggles that still need it. Moreover, its continued existence will reduce the negative impact and the frustration caused by the possible defeat of some of those advanced struggles.

In a recent evaluation of the U.S. Social Forum, Ponniah recognizes that the richness of the idea of the WSF as an open space received a robust confirmation in the USSF. According to him,

The U.S. Social Forum created an open space that allowed different people's movements to come together from around the United States. For the first time diverse activists from around the country were able to collectively interact in a non-hierarchical, horizontal manner that emphasized mutual understanding. The Open Space infrastructure facilitated the possibility for a variety of movements to meet. If the space had been dominated by one ideology, for example socialism, or if it had been dominated by one strategy, for example, statism, then it would not have attracted so many movements. . . The Open Space permitted activists to move away from focusing on the differences between social movements and instead focusing on commonalities.²¹

Even if we think that it was not so much the multiculturalism, but the weakness or backwardness of the United States left that made the format of the WSF fit so well, the observation confirms the continuing usefulness of the WSF. This is particularly true given the importance of strengthening the U.S. left's capacity to challenge U.S. imperialism.

THE WSF AND THE GLOBAL LEFT

The second question that Bello's intervention provokes is whether the WSF has produced a durable transformation in left theory and practices. By its very nature, the WSF does not have an official line on its own impact on the left's future, and I suspect that many of the movements and organizations involved are not even concerned with this question. What I present next is a personal reflection drawn from my own experience of the WSF.

In my view, the most salient features of the WSF's contribution are the following, without any criterion of precedence: the passage from a movement politics to an inter-movement politics, that is, to a politics run by the idea that no single issue social movement can succeed in carrying out its agenda without the cooperation of other movements; broad conception of power and oppression; network politics based on horizontal relations and on combining autonomy with aggregation; intercultural nature of the left and of the very concept of what is considered to be "left" and, following from this, the idea of cognitive justice functioning as an important political criterion; a new political culture around diversity; different conceptions of democracy (demodiversity) and their evaluation according to transnational and transcultural criteria of radical democracy conceived of as the transformation of unequal power relations into shared authority relations in all fields of social life; combined struggle for the principle of equality and for the principle of recognition of difference; privileging rebellion, non-conformism, and insurgency vis-à-vis reform and revolution; sustained effort not to convert militants into functionaries; pragmatic combination

of short-term and long-term agendas; articulation between different scales of struggle, local, national, and global, together with an intensified awareness of the need to match global capitalism with global anti-capitalism; focus on transversality both in terms of themes and processes; broad conception of means of struggle with the coexistence of legal and illegal action (barring illegal violence against people), direct and institutional action, action inside and outside the capitalist state; pragmatic conception of differences and commonalities, with emphasis on the latter; refusal of correct lines, general theories, and central commands in favor of agreed upon aggregations and depolarized pluralities.

The last contribution is probably the most crucial and needs some elaboration. But before doing that and assuming that these different contributions to the reinvention of the left in the twenty-first century are important, one should realize that the end of the WSF would be fully justified if and when such contributions had been fully internalized by the left throughout the world, and particularly by the left involved in the more advanced struggles. If this is accepted as the criterion to decide whether or not the WSF has a future, I think that it is obvious that the historical task of the WSF has not been completed. It would be indeed overly optimistic to think that the transformations on the left under the impact of the WSF are widespread and are fully present in the more advanced struggles. Much less can it be argued that the internalized contributions so far are internalized in a sustainable way. On the contrary, I think that, in light of this criterion, the task of the WSF is far from being completed.

I think that the continuation of the WSF with changes to improve its workings will become more crucial in the coming years for two main reasons. First, globalization is now assuming the form of regionalization. In the Americas, in Africa, in Asia, and, of course, in Europe, new kinds of regional pacts are emerging and, in some instances, they assume the form of a new kind of nationalism—transnational nationalism. Just like globalization, regionalization may be hegemonic and counter-hegemonic. But in both cases, and for different reasons, it may isolate the progressive movements and organizations of one region from those of other regions.

This reciprocal isolation could strengthen coalition building inside the same region, contributing to more advanced struggles at the regional level. However, as long as capitalism remains global in its reach, regionalism will be in the end instrumental to deepen its global nature. If so, it would be disastrous for the construction of that other world that is possible if transregional linkages and collective action—such as those offered by the WSF—were diminished.

Second, the bellicose ideology that is taking hold of both internal and international politics is going to make it more difficult for activists to cross borders and to organize transnationally. The criminalization of social protest is under way.²² The WSF will be all the more needed as it becomes crucial to denounce the restrictions on organizations and mobilizations being implemented on a global scale.

Ultimately, the sustainability of the WSF's impact on global left politics is an open question that will depend on the ways the WSF will reform and reinvent itself as new conditions and new challenges arise. But I would insist that the claim that the WSF has already outlived its usefulness is seriously premature.

CONCLUSION

It is still too early to say that after the WSF the global left will not be the same. Ultimately, this is why the WSF must continue and explains why the most radical debates, those that call for a radical transformation of the WSF or for its extinction, have had, so far, very little consequences and rarely leave the rooms or sites in which they take place to become topics of conversation among the activists that have been joining the WSF process. This was most notably the case of the seventh WSF held in Nairobi, in January 2007, the meeting in which more panels were organized to discuss the future of the WSF. While in these panels very vehement debates took place, outside peasants from Tanzania and Uganda met their comrades from Kenya for the first time, under the auspices of the Via Campesina, and celebrated the "surprising" fact that they shared the same problems caused by the same factors; women from all over the world were busy preparing the second draft of the Manifesto on reproductive and sexual rights, trying to overcome last minute difficulties deriving from differences in the feminist consciousness and culture across continents, in this case most particularly focused on the "sensibility" of African feminists; urban dwellers from different cities of the planet were planning collective actions against forcible evictions and the privatization of water supply; community leaders from all over Africa were setting up the Africa Water Network and, together with NGOs and human rights and health movements and organizations from all over the world, were planning the most comprehensive campaign against HIV/AIDS.

There is something in the structure and practice of the WSF that makes it immune to radical questioning. Or better, the WSF is not an entity that fits the capacity for radical questioning to have real consequences. The open space and process put in march by the WSF tends to depolarize differences, to reform itself in light of constructive criticisms, and to ignore those that are identified as potentially destructive. This resilience is, in my view, a sign that the WSF has not yet fulfilled its "historical task," has not yet exhausted its potential.

NOTES

1. For a better understanding of the political character and goals of the World Social Forum, see the Charter of Principles, available at <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br>.

2. One of the most paradigmatic examples is the poverty—conceptual hubris coupled with bloodless narrow positivism—of the mainstream U.S. sociology of social movements. Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, eds., *Comparative*

Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

3. On the concern with global cognitive justice, see most recently Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "Beyond Abyssal Thinking: From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges," *Review Fernand Braudel Center* XXX, no. 1 (2007): 45–89; Boaventura de Sousa Santos, ed., *Cognitive Justice in a Global World: Prudent Knowledges for a Decent Life* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007); and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, ed., *Another Knowledge is Possible* (London, UK: Verso, 2007).

4. This position is a direct critique of Jurgen Habermas, *Die Moderne, ein unvollendetes Projekt: philosophisch-politische Aufsätze* (Leipzig, Germany: Reclam, 1990). On this subject see Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Toward a New Common Sense: Law, Science and Politics in the Paradigmatic Transition* (London, UK: Routledge, 1995).

5. Paraphrasing Lucien Goldmann, weak-strong answers represent the maximum possible consciousness of a given epoch, *Sciences Humaines et Philosophie. Suivi de Structuralisme Génétique et Création Littéraire* (Paris, France: Gonthier, 1966); and Lucien Goldmann, *Structures Mentales et Création Culturelle* (Paris, France: 10/18 Union Générale d'Éditions, 1970).

6. By "utopia," I mean the exploration of new modes of human possibility and styles of will, and the use of the imagination to confront the apparent inevitability of whatever exists with something radically better that is worth fighting for, and to which humankind is fully entitled (Santos, *Toward a New Common Sense*, 479).

7. On the concept of conservative utopias, see Franz Hinkelammert, *Crítica de la Razón Utópica* (Bilbao, Spain: Desclée de Brouwer, 2002).

8. John Holloway, *Change the World without Taking the Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today* (London, UK: Pluto Press, 2002).

9. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

10. On this topic see note 3 and the bibliography cited there.

11. See Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "A Critique of Lazy Reason: Against the Waste of Experience," in *The Modern World-System in the Longue Durée*, ed. I. Wallerstein (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2004), 157–97; Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The Rise of the Global Left: The World Social Forum and Beyond* (London, UK: Zed Books, 2006); and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "The World Social Forum: Where Do We Stand and Where Are We Going?" in *Global Civil Society 2005/6*, eds. M. Glasius, M. Kaldor, and H. Anheier (London, UK: Sage, 2006), 73–78.

12. A good example was the first European Social Forum (ESF) held in Florence in November of 2002. The differences, rivalries, and factionalisms that divide the various movements and NGOs that organized it are well known and have a history that is impossible to erase. This is why, in their positive response to the WSF's request to organize the ESF, the movements and NGOs that took up the task felt the need to assert that the differences among them were as sharp as ever and that they were coming together only with a very limited objective in mind: to organize the Forum and a Peace March. The Forum was indeed organized in such a way that the differences could be made very explicit.

13. I deal with this issue in greater detail in Santos, *The Rise of the Global Left*.

14. See Santos, *The Rise of the Global Left*; and Santos, "The World Social Forum."

15. Walden Bello, "The Forum at the Crossroads," *Foreign Policy in Focus* 19, no. 2 (2007). At <http://www.fpf.org/fpiftxt/4196> (accessed on May 10, 2007).

16. Santos, "The World Social Forum."
17. Bello, "The Forum at the Crossroads."
18. Bello, "The Forum at the Crossroads."
19. Bello, "The Forum at the Crossroads."
20. See source at Chico Whitaker, *Crossroads Do Not Always Close Roads (Reflection in continuity to Walden Bello)*. At http://www.wsflibrary.org/index.php/Crossroads_do_not_always_close_roads (accessed on June 10, 2007).
21. Thomas Ponniah, *The Contribution of the U.S. Social Forum: A Reply to Whitaker and Bello's Debate on the Open Space*. At http://www.lfsc.org/wsf/ussf_contribution_thomas.pdf (accessed on May 4, 2007).
22. As an example, Llancaqueo has compiled the most recent chronology of criminal repression targeting social protest by the mapuches (the main indigenous group in Chile—see Victor Toledo Llancaqueo, "Cronología de los Principales Hechos en Relación a la Represión de la Protesta Social Mapuche—Chile 2000–2007," *Revista del Observatorio Social de América Latina* 22 (2007): 277–93).

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (bsantos@wisc.edu) is professor of sociology, University of Coimbra (Portugal), Distinguished Legal Scholar at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and Global Legal Scholar at the University of Warwick. He earned an LLM and JSD. from Yale University. He is director of the Center for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra. He is editor as well as an author for *Democratizing Democracy. Beyond the Liberal Democratic Canon* (London: Verso, 2005), *Another Production is Possible: Beyond the Capitalist Canon* (London: Verso, 2006), *Another Knowledge is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies* (London: Verso, 2007). His most recent books in English include *The Rise of the Global Left: The World Social Forum and Beyond* (London: Zed Books, 2006); *Cognitive Justice in a Global World: Prudent Knowledges for a Decent Life* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007); (co-editor with Cesar Rodriguez-Gavarito) *Law and Globalization from Below: Towards a Cosmopolitan Legality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).